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THE MEANING OF THE "ROYAL LAW", MATT. 5: 21-48

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In the Epistle of James, ch. 2: 8, the Levitical law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", is called the "royal law". Some interpreters have applied this title to the portion of the Sermon on the Mount contained in Matt. 5: 21-48. The designation was, in the case of Matthew, of course, not given in order to imply that it is a law for kings alone, but to indicate that it is the law laid down by the Messiah-King. However, whether one be Jew or Christian—whatever one's attitude toward the Messianic claim of Jesus—the unquestioned place held by Jesus among the greatest religious teachers of the world, as well as the nature of this law itself, makes the name appropriate. When it is understood by the intellect it commands the moral approbation of men. Kant's categorical imperative compels men to give it their admiration—to confess that among laws it holds a position truly royal—even if flesh and will be too weak to enable one to live up to its standards. The obligation to understand a law which holds such a place is great at all times; in times like the present scientific exegesis has a particular duty to perform. In the interest of clear thinking it ought, if it can, to endeavor dispassionately to determine just what the teaching of Jesus in this great passage means.

It is not necessary, and it would not be appropriate, to go into the criticism of the text of the passage. That has been done in such commentaries as those of Bernhard Weiss, W. C. Allen, and Alfred Plummer. Detailed discussion of the exact meaning of Greek words may, for the present purpose, be left for the most part to those commentators.

It must be noted, however, that the "Sermon" as it stands is a product of editorial compilation. Professor Burton¹ has

¹ *Decennial Publications of the University of Chicago*, Vol. V, 1904, p. 228 f.

made this clear for chapter 6, and one has only to compare the passages in Luke that are parallel to chapter 5, to be convinced that the same is true of this chapter also. One has to recognize that sayings of Jesus, uttered perhaps on different occasions, were brought together by the first evangelist and grouped here. It has long been recognized that at least in the first half of this Gospel a topical method is followed. Sayings of Jesus are grouped in chapters 5-7, miracles in chapters 8, 9, and parables in chapter 13. It is probable, therefore, that the sayings in the passage before us were uttered on different occasions.

The consideration is, from one point of view, of little practical value. If the sayings were all uttered by Jesus—and they certainly bear the stamp of his mint—the kinship of most of them justified the evangelist in grouping them together here as one law, though some of them are out of harmony with the context in which they stand.²

From another point of view the consideration is important. Its importance has been well expressed by Plummer: "We have to remember that we have not got the exact words that Christ said, nor all the words that he said. We must also remember that it was often his method to make wide-reaching statements, and leave his hearers to find out the limitations and qualifications by thought and experience. Ruskin has said that in teaching the principles of art he was never satisfied until he had contradicted himself several times. If verbal contradictions cannot be avoided in expounding the principles of art, is it likely that they can be avoided in setting forth for all time and all nations the principles of morality and religion?"³

The first part of this quotation from Plummer sets forth an important fact—a fact that ought to put us on our guard against taking the words of Jesus too literally. If we had all that he said, the teaching might appear in quite different perspective. This consideration ought to prevent us from taking the "Royal Law" as an external law the letter of which is to be followed, and make us gird ourselves to catch and follow its spirit. Plummer's quotation from Ruskin may, however, seem to us,

² See e.g. Plummer, *Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel ac. to St. Matthew*, p. 80 ff.

³ *Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London & New York, 1910, p. 75.

when we have finished our study, of less value than it seemed to him.

When we take Matthew 5:21-48 broadly, its general drift is that the Christian ideal is immeasurably higher than the Jewish. To say this is not to underestimate the value of the Jewish ideal. The bearing of the remark will become clear as we proceed.

Commentators have been divided as to whether the references of Jesus to the Jewish law have regard to the written law of the Old Testament, or to the current oral interpretation of that Law, which was in the time of Jesus in the early stages of its formation, and which was afterwards embodied in the Mishnah. The latter view has been held, for example by Lange, Cook, Meyer, and Zahn. It conveniently preserved for them their theory of inspiration by avoiding the necessity of supposing that the divine author of the Old Testament reversed himself in the New. The former view has been held by B. Weiss, Bruce, Bacon, Plummer, and Slater, to mention only a few. Allen belongs also apparently to this group, although he is not very specific in his words.

There seems to be general agreement among interpreters of the group last mentioned that Jesus in this discourse places *his* teaching in contrast to that of the written law, for the purpose of carrying the demand for ethical conduct to the inner life. The Pentateuch, like legal enactments the world over, deals with outward conduct. One may think what he chooses, but the law touches him only when he commits some overt act. This is in government a right principle. It is the basis in all democracies of the right of free speech. The Pentateuchal law differed from the ordinary laws of states in prohibiting coveting, but no penalties were attached to the infringement of this law, and there is no record that any Jewish government ever put a man on trial for breaking the tenth commandment. Naturally the Jewish law as the law of a state dealt in external acts.

While a state can deal with external acts only, a religion which deals with externals alone fails in the most vital office which a religion should perform. It does not cleanse the stream of life at its fountain. It is for this reason that Jesus in this "Royal Law" takes up five different instances in which religion then current failed to purify the springs of conduct. He pointed

out in each of these instances that a real sin lay securely hidden in the heart, back of the outward conduct, and that the law of the kingdom of God, as he had come to proclaim it, demands that the secret lurking places of sin in the inner life be invaded and cleansed.

Although there is general agreement that this was his purpose, there is great difference of opinion as to whether he was laying down a new law for the external conduct of life, the precepts of which his disciples should literally follow.

Among influential teachers who hold that his words must in all cases be literally followed, Tolstoy may be taken as a notable example. We are all familiar with the passage in Tolstoy's *My Religion* in which he tells how the words "But I say unto you that ye resist not evil. But whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also", became to him the key, not only to the Sermon on the Mount, but to life.⁴ It is unnecessary to go in detail over the exposition which Tolstoy proceeds to give of the Sermon on the Mount using as a key the passage quoted. It is sufficient to bear in mind how he regards these key words as a new external law to be literally followed, and how he makes of every word of the discourse a new external law. He is in this respect a noble example of a large class, people who bemoan that most of the Christian world do not know their Christ.

When, however, we face the issue raised by Tolstoy or attempt to follow in his steps, we discover that neither he nor any other pacifist ever took the words "resist not evil", or, according to another rendering, "resist not him that is evil", literally. Every man who undertakes to achieve any social reform resists him that is evil. It is impossible to champion a child labor law, a law for the limitation of the liquor traffic, or to attempt to stamp out white slavery, without resisting him that is evil. No woman can repel the advances of a lustful brute without resisting him that is evil. Men who are good enough to wish to take this word of Jesus literally are usually champions of one or more of such reforms as have just been mentioned. They work in sublime ignorance of their inconsistency. Usually, too, they lock their doors at night and avail themselves in time of danger

⁴Tolstoy, *My Religion*, ch. I. Cf. especially, Tolstoy's *Works*, New York, 1899, Vol. VI, p. 85.

of police protection, happy through the arm of organized government to "resist him that is evil." One who knows the character of Jesus and how his wrath burned against the strong when they preyed against the weak, has but to read these words and reflect upon what would happen, if they were literally obeyed by everyone, to be convinced that Jesus never meant them to be taken literally. It must be remembered that Jesus lived in the Levant, and that for many centuries forms of speech have there been of a much more graphic, picturesque, and, if you please, exaggerated character than they are either in the Occident or in the Far East. Take for an example the addresses of letters from Syrian rulers to an Egyptian king in the El-Amarna correspondence. Thus Rib-Adda of Gebal, writing to Amenophis IV, begins his letter:⁵

"To the king, my lord, my sun, say: Rib-Adda, thy servant; at the feet of my lord, my sun-god, seven times and seven times I prostrate myself."

The El-Amarna letters from Syria abound in such greetings. The habit of speaking in this extravagant fashion has persisted through the centuries. There are many examples in the Bible. Some occur readily to every one. Such are, from Jesus' own words,

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:25);

If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove (Matt. 17:20).

Such methods of expression persist in the East still. Rev. A. H. Rihbany, who now occupies the pulpit of the late James Freeman Clark in Boston, and who is a native of the Lebanon, says in his *Syrian Christ*:⁶ "A Syrian's chief purpose in a conversation is to convey an impression by whatever suitable means, and not to deliver his message in scientifically accurate terms. He expects to be judged not by what he *says*, but by what he *means*."

⁵ Cf. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna Tafeln*, No. 286 or G. A. Barton, *Archæology and the Bible*, p. 345.

⁶ *The Syrian Christ*, Boston, 1915, p. 115.

It seems clear, then, that Tolstoy and all similar interpreters go astray in attempting to take literally the words "resist not evil" and to make them the key to the interpretation of the chapter.

The duty is therefore laid upon one who would think clearly to find to the passage some other key than that which afforded Tolstoy such comfort. The Christian scholar will make this attempt with hesitation and distrust, fearful that in the attempt he shall in some way impair the high ethical standard erected by Jesus—fearful (to paraphrase a line of Lowell) lest his tender spirit flee the rude grasp of Jesus' great impulse. If, however, we find our key to the meaning in the words uttered by Jesus in the climax to the passage itself, we cannot go far astray.

Such a key is afforded in the words "That ye may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven"—"Be ye therefore perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect"; (Mt. 5: 45, 48). These words are given point by those that intervene, which appeal to God as he is revealed in nature. He makes his sun to shine on the evil and on the good. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust. No petty grudge or ignoble vengeance controls his dealings with men.

This appeal to God as he is revealed in nature and in man is one that can mean infinitely more to this scientific generation than it could mean to the first generation of Christians. God works dispassionately, but he punishes sin. He works with a desire to redeem, not to avenge, but nevertheless destroys evil and him who identifies himself with evil. He is sympathetically present with the dying sparrow, but nevertheless for the accomplishment of his beneficent purposes sacrifices many individuals that the type may persist. He gives life, but he takes life. He has brought into existence the present order of things through a process of evolution carried on by struggles in which many of his creatures have been his agents in taking life. If we believe the prophets and Jesus, we cannot believe that the process is complete; we must believe that he is working toward a goal in which all men will be controlled by the realization of their brotherhood; when each will do to the other as he would have the other do to him; when they shall beat their swords into ploughshares; when none shall hurt or destroy. That age has

not yet arrived as every thug, individual and national, and every criminal lunatic prove. Meantime, the most that Jesus asks of us is "to be as perfect as God is perfect"—to carry on the evolution toward the desired goal of brotherhood without anger, free from a spirit of vengeance, but not to shirk its tasks, even, if at times, they are gruesome.

If now we go over the five examples which Jesus takes up in Mt. 5: 21-48, applying the key that Jesus gives us at the end of the passage, we shall naturally reach quite a different conception of the "Royal Law" than that reached by Tolstoy.

Jesus takes up (Mt. 5: 21-26) the command "Thou shalt not kill." Tolstoy (*op. cit.*, ch. xi) takes this command as God's universal law, which makes it wrong for one human being to take the life of another under any circumstances. One could name many less distinguished people who conscientiously hold the same view. Doubtless when the world is filled with ideal individuals, and nations have become as ethical as Jesus demands that individuals shall be, it will be safe to make such an extension of the command not to kill. Meantime it must be noted, that neither in the Old Testament nor in the Teaching of Jesus or his Apostles is such an extension of it made. The Decalogue in Ex. 20 and Dt. 5 was addressed to Israelites only. It regulated the conduct of man to man in Israel. No pre-Christian Hebrew ever supposed, so far as we know, that it regulated his conduct toward Gentiles. Certainly it was not understood to prohibit war. The saints of the nation cheerfully fought, as they believed, at the command of Yahweh. It was not even addressed to all the individuals within the nation, but to the heads of households only. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" is addressed to a grown man. It is not applicable to children. The failure to forbid the coveting of a neighbor's husband shows that it was not addressed even to grown women. "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother" was also addressed to adults. The child honored his parents as a matter of course. If he did not, the parent by use of the rod saw to it that he did. Aged parents, however, might, in their helplessness, not be honored by grown men. So the fifth command was addressed to them. The Decalogue through the head of the family was designed to regulate the life within the nation. It prohibited killing for private ends—for the purpose of personal

revenge.⁷ It was never understood in the Old Testament period as preventing society from ridding itself of criminals who threatened its integrity. The putting of these to death by stoning was definitely provided for; cf. Dt. 13:10; 17:5; 22:21, 24.

If now we return to the words of Jesus in Matt. 5:21 ff. we find that he says nothing about the scope of the application of the law. He is interested solely in pointing out that it is not the outward act only that constitutes sin, but that hate is sin. He cites the law in order to carry the thought from the realm of law to the realm of the spirit, and to cleanse the fountain at its source. By citing the example of God at the end of the passage, he leaves the matter of such taking of life as may be necessary for the preservation of society just where it was before. This is true of such taking of life as may be necessary to restrain criminal individuals or robber nations. Whatever is necessary in such unfortunate work must be done, however, without hate in order to fulfil his law.⁸

The next section of the "Royal Law" (Mt. 5:27-32) takes up the command "Thou shalt not commit adultery". In treating this Jesus first, as in the case of murder, carries the sin back into the inner life. Not simply the act of adultery, but lust is sin. He then asserts that the marriage bond is indissoluble save by death.⁹

In the next section, Mt. 5:33-37. Jesus speaks of oaths. In the older dispensation, the law had demanded that an oath should not be broken. Jesus enunciates the command "Swear not at all; let your Yes be Yes and your No. No." What was his meaning? Did he intend to make a new external rule or to

⁷ On this whole subject see W. F. Badè, *The Old Testament in the Light of Today*, Boston, 1915, p. 94 f.

⁸ Vss. 25, 26 are probably not a part of the "Sermon," but were put here from a different context; so Plummer, Bruce, and Allen. Cf. Luke 12:58, 59, where the words appear in a different context.

⁹ This is clear when we compare an earlier Gospel, Mark 10:11. The words "saving for the cause of fornication" in Matt. 5:32 are an editorial addition by the First Evangelist; so De Wette, Weiss, H. C. Holtzman, Plummer, and Allen. It is unlikely, however, that Jesus intended here more than in other parts of the "Sermon" to lay down rigid external rules; he rather aimed to create a strong aversion to the dissolution of the marriage tie; so Bruce.

“convey an impression”? If we may extend to this section the revelation of his purpose which has been found in the study of the two preceding sections, his purpose was to carry the sin from the outward to the inner life. If this be true, his words were designed to convey that impression in a vivid manner. His meaning would then be that the real sin consists in having two standards of honor—in feeling under greater obligation to tell the truth when one has specifically prayed God to damn him if he does not than on ordinary occasions. That this was the meaning of Jesus in this section becomes clear when we remember his citation of the example of God at the end of the passage. God has but one standard of truth. One cannot suppose a divine utterance strengthened by an oath. True, the Old Testament, like other early religious literature, employs anthropomorphic terms, and speaks of God as swearing. It is also true that the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:13) quotes with approval the idea that God swore, but no modern educated man who has faith in God at all can believe in a deity whose word cannot at all times be trusted. Jesus would have men in this respect aim “to be perfect even as their Father who is in heaven is perfect.”

In the next section, Mt. 5:38-42, Jesus takes up the law of revenge, a law deeply ingrained into all Semitic life, a law that underlies many a penalty in the Old Testament, giving rise to the institution of cities of refuge, a law which underlies a large portion of the penalties imposed by the Babylonian Code of Hammurapi, and which rules in the Arabian desert to the present hour. According to this law one who injured another in any way must be compelled to suffer a like injury. It was a law that not only justified the harboring of grudges and hate, but made them a religious obligation. One has but to read in II Samuel 21:1-14 of the way the men of Gibeon nursed their hatred of the house of Saul until it could be gratified by a terrible vengeance, to be convinced of this.

Jesus evidently mentions the law here in order to teach that the desire for vengeance is a sin. His object was to impress that fact in a way so graphic that it could not be forgotten. This conviction is produced in one's mind by his treatment of murder, adultery, and swearing in the sections which precede. Analogy with those sections indicates that what he is primarily

concerned with here is the eradication of the spirit of vengeance, which sweeps men first into uncontrolled passion and then settles into abiding hate. This he did by the paradoxical statement "Resist not one that is evil"—a statement which we have already seen it is impossible for one to take literally and be a worthy citizen or a decent person. Jesus, however, adds the exegetical statement, "But whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"—a statement but little less paradoxical than the first. This statement at once raises the question: Did Jesus intend by it to lay down an outward law to be literally followed by his disciples? It seems impossible to suppose that he did, for, if we may trust the tradition in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus himself when smitten did not turn the other cheek, but demanded justice. He is reported to have said, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" (Jn. 18:25). If "Resist not evil" is not a literal rule, what then is intended? The intention seems clearly to be to convey in a striking way the lesson that, so far from being swept away by the passion that springs up when one receives an ignominious insult, one should always be master of his own spirit. He should keep himself so under control as to be able to receive the insult again without being mastered by the desire for revenge. Understood in this way, the passage falls into harmony with the purpose of Jesus in the previous sections. It is not an external law for the subversion of society, but a light from above designed to illuminate and cleanse the human heart.

The last section of the "Royal Law" deals with the question of love and hate. "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy." "Thou shalt love thy neighbor" is found in Lev. 19:18, where רֵעִי, "neighbor", probably from a root רָעָה "associate with", means naturally one's associate. In Lev. 19:34 the law provides that the resident alien shall be as the homeborn and shall be loved as one's self. The obligation to hate one's enemy is not found in the Old Testament law, but such passages as Ps. 139:21: "Do not I hate them, O Yahweh, that hate thee?" certainly gave to the Jew a sacred precedent for hating his enemies. Ben Sira, ch. 18:13, implies that the law was so interpreted. "The

mercy of man is toward his neighbor; but the mercy of the Lord is toward all flesh." The apocalyptic literature makes it clear that Israel had come to think of itself as pitted against the world, and it was but natural that hate against enemies should, in view of the precedent of the Psalter, be regarded as a sacred duty.

Again Jesus demands the cleansing of the spring of life at its source. Nothing poisons life like hate. It destroys the character and happiness of him who cherishes it. From hatred all crimes are born. Punishment of offenders that springs from hate destroys both the punished and the punisher. Jesus demands that enemies as well as friends shall be loved. The attitude toward enemies shall be one of prayer for their redemption. Such love would make all punishments redemptive in aim rather than punitive. Then as a conclusion to all the sections Jesus urges the imitation of God.

It should be noted that in none of these five sections does Jesus mention stealing or coveting, both of which are included in the Decalogue. One can see, however, that he did not need to do this, for the law itself had in the tenth commandment carried the roots of the eighth commandment back into the heart. In the five instances which Jesus treated he was but doing for the sins touched upon what the law itself had done for stealing. He did not need to mention this; he presupposes it.

According to this teaching of Jesus, then, it is wrong for an individual or a group of individuals to covet, steal, kill to gratify personal hate, or to lust, or have two standards of honor, to seek vengeance, or to hate. When his ideals control the peoples of the world, wars, oppression, crimes, and international injustice will vanish from the earth, and there will dawn an era of international, industrial, and social peace. The inner life of individuals will, under the influence of divine love, have opportunity to blossom into pure and happy character.

While this teaching of Jesus demands a type of life that would make crimes, individual and national, impossible, does it prohibit the punishment of crime in those who do not recognize his high demands? Does it demand that all instincts of self-preservation in individuals and in nations should be stifled? In reply it should be said that Jesus does brand as wrong punishment that springs from a desire for revenge; he does not prohibit

punishment that springs from loving, kindly motives of redemption, nor does he prohibit the dispassionate use of force to restrain a criminal, whether that criminal be a man or a nation. There is no word in the teaching of Jesus that indicates that a Christian is prohibited from employing force, even to the extreme, to deliver the helpless from a murderous brute, or that a Christian nation is prohibited from striking a nation that murderously strikes at the life of a weak and defenseless state.

The employment of force for these ends without hatred is most difficult—many will say, impossible. It is, however, not much more difficult than to engage in competitive business without hatred. Those who have caught the spirit of Jesus and would strive to lift the world to his ideal are faced in both fields with appalling difficulties. The difficulties are, however, no excuse for not making the attempt. That transformation which is to bring in the kingdom of God will not come by miracle or magic. It will come only by the processes of spiritual regeneration and evolution, social and international. It will not be hastened either by the withdrawal of good men from competitive business—thus leaving the helpless to the exploitation of conscienceless sharks—or by the withdrawal of Christian nations from the international vigilance committee—thus leaving small and defenseless nations to the violence of gigantic neighbors, drunk with brute power. Rather it is the duty of all who have been inspired with the ideal of Jesus to continue in the fray, and to seek to put the new wine into the old bottles until its ferment shall burst the bottles, and construct new containers more worthy of sons of God.