

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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Fulfilling The Law - Part 1

Matthew 5:17

by Maurice Barratt

A doctor of the law once asked Jesus, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus, as always, had a ready answer: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

"Think not", said Jesus. Why would he say that? Why would he tell us to not think in a certain way? Because our natural tendency would be to think that way. It is natural to think that Jesus came to destroy the law and the prophets, that love and grace are contradictory to legality, that law and grace cannot exist side by side. The law demands punishment; grace shows mercy instead. The law demands an eye for an eye: Jesus says, "Love your enemies", and "Resist not evil".

Is The Law Finished?

Marcion, a second century Christian, thought that Matthew, or the Scribes who wrote out his gospel, had made a mistake, and that Jesus had really said, "Think not that I am come to fulfil the law, or the prophets: I am not come to fulfil, but to destroy". The heretical sect of the Marcionites resulted, and their legacy is with us today. Many Christians still think that the law is finished, that it is replaced by love and grace. But Jesus says that this is certainly not the case!

What is Jesus talking about when he says "the law"? One thing is clear: what we call the "ceremonial law" is finished, rituals to do with hand washing, feast days, and the temple sacrifices. These were temporary ordinances, "which stood only in meats and drinks in divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation" (Hebrews 9:10). These were types and shadows of Christ, and when he came as our sacrifice and our cleansing, he fulfilled those types (Hebrews 9:11-12). No one would disagree that the ceremonial law is finished. The law that Jesus is talking about is the moral law, exemplified in the ten commandments. This is the law that Jesus came to fulfil.

All laws, however, have a problem. They always need qualification. New circumstances demand new interpretations and new clauses. English law has been around for hundreds of years; but the laws are still being written and modified and qualified because of different new cases. Look for example at one of the basic commandments of the Bible: "Thou shalt not kill". That seems fine on its own, very clear and "cut and dried", but actually it's not strictly true! The same law of the Bible allows animals to be killed for sacrifice and for food, and people to be killed for breaking the

commandments or in war. “Thou shalt not kill” needs qualification. In fact it takes five whole books of the bible to explain and qualify ten simple commandments. And the Jews have written many more books explaining the practical details of every law — how many yards you are allowed to walk on the Sabbath, and so on. Even the five books of the law in the Bible are not nearly enough to qualify and explain the law satisfactorily.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. The law needs more than explanation and qualification — it needs fulfilment. And that cannot be achieved by the letter of the law. Five thousand books would not fulfil the law, because the law is spiritual. It is the essence of God’s character. That’s why it cannot be destroyed. God’s character is still the same. But it takes spiritual qualities to fulfil it, because it is a spiritual matter.

The Law Is Good!

Paul makes the point over and over again that the law is good and righteous. It is sin, not the law, that is the problem. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, just and good” (Romans 7:12). “The law is spiritual” (Romans 7:14). The problem is that we are not holy, righteous, good and spiritual! “The Law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin ... I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revival, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me” (Romans 7:14, 9-11). The law condemns us, but it is us who need to change, not the law! It is very plain here that sin, not the law, is the problem. Sin is powerless without the law, because it is the law that enforces punishment for sin; but that does not mean the law is the problem. It simply highlights sin as the problem. “The law of the Lord is perfect” says Psalm 19:7. But it is the spirit of the law, the character of God, which is perfect. The letter of the law, as we have seen, is very imperfect. That’s why it is fulfilling the law, not following the letter of the law, which is important.

Free From The Law?

“But” you say, “doesn’t Paul say we are now free from the law?” No, he doesn’t say that anywhere! He does say two things which are mistaken for that. Firstly, he says “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13). “The curse of the law” is the consequences of breaking the law — the punishment. We are freed from that punishment because Christ took it himself. Christ became a curse for us, thereby proving that both the law and it’s curse are still alive and active, not abolished at all.

Paul also says that we are “Free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2). “The law of sin and death” does not mean the law of God. The law of sin and death refers to the consequences of breaking the law of God. The word “law” here means fixed rules and principles, things that will always happen (like the law of gravity — things always drop towards the earth). Whenever we break one of God’s laws there is a fixed principle — we come under the law of sin and death; we are branded sinners and spiritually dead. But Christ, by his substitutionary sacrifice for us, has freed us from that law, those consequences, by the intervention of another law — “the law of the spirit of life

in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:2). Once again in Romans 8 we see Paul proving that the law is good. It is the flesh, not the law, that is weak; and it is sin, not the law “that is condemned; and the whole purpose of it all is “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Romans 8:3-4). The message could not be clearer — it is the same as Jesus’ message — we are to fulfil the law.

Why then are we so eager to be free from the law? Is it that the law exposes us and makes us feel uncomfortable? That’s certainly the purpose of the law: “that all the world may become guilty before God” (Romans 3:19). It seems we would rather forget about the law, the holy character of God; then we can feel free under grace to do pretty much what we want. But this is not what Christianity is about at all. King David loved God’s law (Psalm 119:97). Why should we do anything less? To love God’s law is to love God. His law is only His character. To despise God’s law or want to be free from it is to despise God’s character. It may seem a strange thing for David to say that he loved the law. That’s because we are so used to thinking of love and law as opposites. But whoever has the spirit of the law, like David, fulfils it perfectly, and loves it. Love was always a major part of the law, as the quote from Matthew 22 at the beginning of this article shows.

Love Fulfils The Law

In conclusion, I have six points to show how love fulfills the law.

1. If love fulfils the law, then sin is basically just lack of love. Lawbreaking is lack of love. “He that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8).
2. “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The commandments of the law and love are again linked here. The “great commandments” of love are in an important order: Love God, first, and your neighbour, second. Keeping the commandments is to do primarily with loving God; only secondarily, and as a consequence, with loving your neighbour.
3. “If you fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’, ye do well” (James 2:8). The “royal law” is the law of love. James also calls it the law of liberty: “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty” (James 2:12).
4. Fulfilling the law is costly. It’s relatively easy to keep the “dead letter” of the law. The rich young ruler who came to Jesus had kept the letter of the law (or at least he’d kept the ones which Jesus quoted to him. Jesus told him all the strictly legal ones, not the ones which involve the word love). But the young man couldn’t fulfil the law, he could only keep the outward regulations, the dead letter. Fulfilling it would have meant changing his lifestyle — selling all in exchange for treasure in heaven. That’s the challenge Jesus brought to him; and he couldn’t let go of his possessions. The Sermon on the Mount brings us all the same challenges; it’s all fulfilling the law.
5. “Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty: only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Galatians 5:13-14). We can’t use grace to get round the law or to avoid keeping it. A true understanding of grace sees it as what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “costly grace” - the grace that demands all our love. Such grace “demands my soul, my life, my all”, as the hymnwriter says.

6. "Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law" (Romans 9:31-32). Israel failed on this very point of fulfilling the law. Can you see what Paul is saying here? Israel strove to keep the law, and they did keep all the dead letter, but never fulfilled it! They only looked to obedience to the letter of the law, "the works of the law". They didn't see past the "letters" to the "weightier matters": judgement (discernment), mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23).

History Repeats Itself

But history repeats itself. Israel's failure is, sadly, repeated by the Church. The cost of loving and following God with our whole heart, and the commitment of fulfilling the spirit of the law, are too much for us. We take refuge behind legalism, behind our moral codes, behind the letter of the law. We think we've fulfilled the law if we keep the letter of it. We, too, forget about judgement, mercy and faith. Or we take the opposite line and say it's all grace and that the law is finished; we hate legalism, we want freedom. But by saying this, we confess that we don't want to pay the price of love. The freedom of wholehearted love is intolerable to us.

It's impossible to fulfil the law if you don't love — love God with all your heart and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself. Love of neighbour flows out of love for God. If you love in this way, you can't help fulfilling the law. It's impossible not to. That is the challenge Jesus presents to us — the challenge of the immense freedom, and the immense cost, of love.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

If You Can't Change Your Circumstances, Change Your Attitude!

I was 19 and already losing track of the number of times I had been sacked from my employment. The first couple of weeks of every job I'd had were always exciting - there were new faces and new challenges to meet, and because of people's natural curiosity, lots of opportunity to witness which I found truly fulfilling. My problems usually arose when someone in a senior position told me to do something which I felt was outside my job description and I would automatically think that they were trying to get at me in some way. I felt duty bound not to let them get away with this state of affairs and would "righteously" refuse to be put on. Obviously, my behaviour wasn't tolerated, and with some snide remark like, "I thought you were a Christian" or "So that's what Christianity is", I would be handed my cards with a pay packet and shown the door. I couldn't carry on living like this. I had a flat to run, bills to pay and needed the security of a steady income. I scoured the "Situations Vacant" in the clerical columns yet again and came across an advert for the SOS Temporary Services

Bureau who promised to pay excellent rates for clerical staff. I called in at the bureau and was accepted as an audio typist.

A Temporary Solution

My assignments would usually be to replace somebody who had gone on holiday or was sick, and because of this I would not normally be required for more than two weeks, in many cases I would only be required for one particular day when somebody hadn't turned in to work. I would be paid high rates for the hours I worked, but would not receive any payment for holidays or sickness. They were not prepared to guarantee that I would get a job every week but assured me that if I earned a good reputation I would be placed on a priority list and given preferential treatment. This job was ideal. Work was never a problem, I always enjoyed new challenges and because I never stayed longer than two weeks in any firm it was too short a time to be bored so I was always enthusiastic and hard working. I very quickly earned a good reputation and was placed on the priority list, and out of all the years that I worked for the bureau I was kept in employment every single week that I was available for service.

In many of the firms I worked I was asked to stay permanently but, even though I knew this meant security where sickness and holidays were concerned, I never trusted that I would be able to cope with authority, so I opted to remain on the bureau. Then one week I was asked to go to an insurance company. I'd never worked in a typing pool before, so this was novel. I was seated in what looked like a classroom filled with desks bearing typewriters and dictaphone machines. All the desks faced the same way except the one at the head of the room where the supervisor sat. Each girl was expected to churn out 60 letters per day, and if that quota was not met she would be expected to remain after working hours until she had completed the quota. Most of the girls found the work gruelling, and hated working here. I, on the other hand, found this quota a great challenge and each day would have races with myself to see if I could beat my previous day's record. I never failed to meet the quota and some days was able to churn out over 100 letters, as I looked on my time here as a great opportunity to work on both speed and accuracy. The boss was pleased with me and often requested that I became a permanent member of his staff. But the female supervisor was continually looking for ways to get at me, as being a temp I received far more attention and wages than she did. If I had been permanent, this situation would have really got to me, but every time I felt anger rise I would continually tell myself that I didn't work for this insurance company, I worked for the bureau, and they would probably place me somewhere else next week. I am constantly amazed at the way this job offered me the opportunity to brainwash myself with this type of thinking.

For what seemed like an eternity, the bureau would ring me each Friday, and ask if I would be prepared to stay with this insurance company for another week as the job I had been covering wasn't yet filled. Each Friday I would consent, thinking that this would be the last week I would be here. My altered mentality allowed me to remain untouched by all this supervisor's provocation, and because I wasn't so sensitive, I could understand her feelings. Throughout the whole 9 months the bureau kept me at this company I was able to maintain my Christian witness purely because my change of attitude stopped me feeling touchy and defensive. Never before had I felt so free or held a job down for so long.

Girl Friday

At the age of 30, after a number of years of working for the church on a voluntary basis, I once again found it necessary to job hunt. I scoured the secretarial "Situations Vacant" column in the newspaper and wrote off for interviews enclosing my CV. I must have made a tremendous impression as not one of the firms I wrote to invited me to attend an interview! I resorted to "Plan B" and registered with a bureau as a temp whilst looking for a permanent position. It amused me therefore, to be given an assignment at one of the firms I had written to for an interview and been refused. AMEC Properties, the big construction company, were setting up a new branch in Manchester and were looking for staff. Whilst they were interviewing people, temporary aid was sought and I was brought in as a "girl Friday" which meant that I mucked in and did everything from running errands to the sandwich shop at lunch time, to taking shorthand notes in board meetings.

I attacked every new challenge with gusto and enthusiasm and thoroughly enjoyed the variety offered me. And it wasn't long before the manager asked if I would stay on as a permanent member of staff. Recruitments to the firm meant that jobs began to be more defined and to my surprise I found that I had been promoted to the top secretarial position, second only to the manager's secretary who had worked at another branch and been brought in with her boss to establish this new company. At first she had been very friendly and jovial with me but, maybe because she was an older woman, she now began to see me as a threat and made life exceedingly difficult for me. The company was not yet established, and refurbishment was still going on in the offices, which meant that until the work was completed me had to work together in a very limited area. Brenda, the manager's secretary, never bothered to hide her feelings towards me and did her best to belittle and embarrass me. I didn't have it in me to retaliate, I enjoyed my job and certainly didn't want to make an enemy of Brenda, but she saw my attitude of "sweetness and innocence" as cunning and deceitful. During one particular period she managed to get almost the whole firm to "send me to Coventry" .If people wanted to speak to me they left curt little notes on my desk; they would talk and laugh with each other but totally ignore me. I can't tell you how awful the experience was and often in prayer I was reduced to tears whilst begging God to sort out the situation.

Beyond The Call Of Duty

On one of these cold, crusty days it was obvious to me that Brenda was in pain. Months before she'd noticed a little clicking noise in her knee and had gone to the doctors to have it examined. The click hadn't caused her any pain, it had just been an annoyance which she wanted to get rid of. After much probing and examination she ended up going to hospital for an operation on her knee which resulted in her being on crutches, unable to walk, and in constant pain. I felt really sorry for her as I realised she wasn't putting the agony on. The weather outside was bleak and I knew that she would have a ten minute walk at least to pick up her car from a car park. She wasn't supposed to be talking to me, but the pain on her face made me ask her if she would like me to fetch her car to the front door. My question astonished her and it took a minute before she could reply, when she said "Yes please, if you don't mind", I could see her eyes had filled up with tears. I told her that I understood the pain she was in because I had once suffered from rheumatism before God had healed me. I took her keys and braved the weather to get her car. She gratefully got in and said a genuine "Thank you" before she drove home.

That night I couldn't get Brenda out of my mind and decided to take a little peace offering the next morning. Before she arrived I placed a gift on her desk with a flower on top, and as she started to open it I told her that I'd felt so sorry for her the previous day and this little gift was meant to cheer her up. Softness spread over her face and she was genuinely pleased that I'd bothered. Over the next few days she really tried to be nice, but the deep-rooted feelings that she had for me went a little further than the "sweetness and innocence" which she had branded me with, and it wasn't long before we were back to normal. This woman's attitude towards me was so bad that my boss decided to do something about it, and he physically removed me from this general office and put my desk in his own office so that I could have his protection and be away from that cold, chilly environment. This of course made Brenda worse, but she was no longer able to affect me. God had seen my heart and was working for me. But it was only when my inward attitude changed that God was able to change the outward circumstances for me.