

## What's the Message – Lesson 96

Our lesson today presents Jesus as the prophet speaking against the distortion of God's Word.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we ask today that You would guide us and give us insight to honor Your Word with our thoughts, speech, and actions. Help us to never twist Your Word or distort its intended meaning, that we may live our lives as Your faithful followers. Amen.

Two lessons ago we examined how it was necessary for Jesus to be both True God and True Man at the same time. In this lesson we see how this truth was manifested in the preaching and actions of Jesus against the distorted religion being practiced in His day.

Let's go back to the beginning. God gave Adam freedom, but even then it had limits. And the purpose of those limits, and later with Abraham and all of his descendants, was always the same: namely, to save life. This was the purpose of God's Law. As long as Israel focused on the spirit of God's Law everything was good, and the Israelites were blessed by God. But what had happened? They had turned away from God and were punished with captivity and the destruction of their kingdom. Then Ezra lashed out in righteous indignation insisting that the Law of God must be kept in every detail. In time a group of men steadily developed and grew into leadership roles, men who were dedicated to studying the Law in order to instruct the people on the proper way to live. At the time of Jesus, these men were known as the Pharisees.

And by the time of Jesus the emphasis was not on the spirit of God's Law, but upon the letter. To keep God's Law from being violated, the Pharisees added "protective fences" around it, fences that were too great a burden for the average person to bear. A full-fledged legalism had grown and consumed them. As Anthony Deane wrote in his book, The World Christ Knew, "Legalism made the Law an end, instead of a means. In the earlier stages, observance of the Law had been valued as a help to a good life, a life of inward holiness, of clean hands and a pure heart.

But when legalism prevailed, keeping the Law became, in effect, all that mattered, and those who kept it were the *righteous*.” It was into this climate that Jesus came and spoke out, echoing the message of the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus knew the necessity of restoring the real meaning of “righteousness” – and it was not the public display of the Pharisees. For example, there was the incident that is recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke about the time when Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees because His disciples were picking heads of grain as they walked through the fields on a Sabbath day. In the eyes of the Pharisees, the Disciples were doing work, and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. Dale, please read what happened next, from Luke chapter 6.

*On another Sabbath He went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched Him closely to see if He would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath; to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” He looked around at them all (but all remained silent) and then said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.*

Had the spirit of God’s Law been twisted to the point where it was practiced as the complete opposite of what had been intended? Wasn’t that the message Jesus was teaching the Pharisees? Take another example. This one from the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew chapter five, where Jesus first states what had been said in prior years in the Law concerning murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love for enemies, then draws a contrast between letter of the law and the spirit of the law.

There is a contrast between the two phrases “You have heard it said . . .” and the words of Jesus, “But I tell you . . .” (*Check this out for yourself in Matt. 5:17-48*)

It must have struck those who listened to this sermon as an impossibility when Jesus said (*Mt. 5:20*) *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.* But the intent and meaning of what Jesus was saying should have become clear with this statement: *Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

In case there is still any uncertainty about what Jesus meant, He definitely clears it up when He says they should not announce their good works with trumpets as the hypocrites do, in order to be seen by men. To behave in such a manner is to distort the meaning and purpose of God’s Law. The 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew gives a series of seven woes spoken against the Pharisees in a thorough condemnation of the behavior of hypocrites who distort the Word of God. Each of these woes begins with this phrase: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” We will conclude this study with verses 23 and 24: *You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

What’s the message for us today? The question that each of us must face is this: are we caught in the same trap with the Pharisees and no longer recognize the heresy of legalism?

Next time we will consider some more of the teaching of Jesus against the distortion of God’s Word.