

LESSON 6

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR THE DOCTRINE OF VERBAL PLENARY PRESERVATION (IV) -- Matthew 5:17-19 (Jesus Assures Preservation of the Bible)

I. INTRODUCTION

No Christian should hold on to any view that contradicts what Jesus has taught. Today, there is much confusion and contention among “Christian” teachers and leaders on the subject of the infallibility and preservation of the Scripture. But as committed Christians, we cannot afford to be confused or misled by false views concerning the Scripture, especially when Christ has unequivocally stated His view for us to hold on to. Jesus affirmed the infallibility and preservation of the Scripture by saying: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled...” (Matthew 5:17-19). To understand Jesus’ teaching on the infallibility and preservation of the Scripture, we shall study His words found in Matthew 5:17-19.

Matthew records these words of Christ as part of the Sermon on the Mount. In verse 18, for the first time in His sermon, Jesus used the authoritative and dogmatic formula “I say unto you;” and He repeats it again in verse 20: “For I say unto you ...” This suggests to us that Jesus really expects our total attention on the words that follow so that we may study them and observe them as cardinal doctrine and practice. There should be no contention about these explicit words of Jesus about the Scripture. His view about the Scripture, expressed in Matthew 5:17-19, should be our view always.

It would be very helpful if we can recollect the historical and scriptural background of the passage under our consideration to get the real feel of its emphasis.

II. HISTORICAL AND SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

A. Historical Background

Since John the Baptist introduced Christ to the world, the eyes of everyone in Israel were upon Him. He appeared to be very different from the scribes and Pharisees. He did not follow the prevailing theology of His day and refused to identify Himself with any of the sects of His time. He disregarded their traditions as well as their extraneous and legalistic rules. As a friend of publicans and sinners, He proclaimed love and grace. His meekness and humility made Him distinguishable from all other religious teachers who were proud, boastful and hypocritical. He preached forgiveness of sins and dispensed mercy. Consequently, the people and the Jewish leaders wondered if He was destroying all the absolutes of the Old Testament Scripture for some new teaching. Many were inclined to think that He intended to subvert the authority of God's Word.

So Jesus came forward to remove their doubts and said, in effect, “What you see and hear is nothing new at all. I did not come to remove the Old Testament law but to reiterate and fulfil it.” So His amazing manifesto is in direct harmony with the Old Testament, though it was in direct confrontation with their thinking. When the scribes

and Pharisees were making the traditions binding upon people, Jesus was talking about grace and mercy. But Jesus told them that they had dragged the divine standard so low that it was necessary to raise it again. Having a greater commitment to the law than the most scrupulous scribe or Pharisee, Jesus proceeded to support the unfailing and lasting authority of the Scripture.

B. Scriptural Context

In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus gives a list of the characteristics of a true Christian. Then, in verses 13 and 16, He emphasised what a true believer ought to be and how he should act. From verses 17 to 20, Jesus shows how it is possible to be like what He taught us to be. Here He shows us how to live out the Beatitudes and be the salt and light in a decaying and darkened world; certainly not by lowering God's standard that is written, but by striving to live in complete obedience to all that God has revealed, even to the jot and tittle. This was, obviously, a shocking appeal to the society of Jesus' day, which obeyed only what it wanted to.

Jesus introduces the key to a righteous life as nothing else but keeping of God's law. The only way to have true righteousness is to go beyond the phoney externalism of the scribes and Pharisees, to the inward righteousness that is only wrought by the power and authority of God's Word. Therefore, when Jesus came, He did not abolish the Old Testament but He reinforced it.

III. JESUS ADHERES HIMSELF TO THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE

To understand how extensive and emphatic Jesus' declaration of His view of the Scripture is, the words He used must be carefully considered. First of all, what did Jesus mean when He referred to the law or the prophets? The term "law" can be a reference to the Ten Commandments or the first five books of Moses, or to the whole Old Testament. But usually, the Jews used the word when they were talking about the oral scribal traditions that they had been receiving from various rabbis.

Now when Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law..." He was not talking about the traditions of men. By using the definite article "the law," the multitude should have understood that Jesus was talking about the law of God. But how do we know whether Jesus was referring to the Ten Commandments or the Pentateuch or the whole Old Testament? Verse 17 settles it, when it says: "the law, or the prophets." In the Gospel of Matthew, "the law and the prophets" is used four times (Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40), with reference to the whole of the Old Testament. Therefore, we can confidently say that "the law" in this passage in Matthew 5 refers to the whole Old Testament.

Interestingly, in 5:17 "the law" and "prophets" are not connected by the conjunction "and" (Greek *kai*) as in the other three places mentioned above. Here instead of *kai*, Matthew uses the adversative "or" (Greek *e*). Lenski comments: The "adversative" divides the Old Testament into two parts: "The law" or Pentateuch; "the prophets" or all the rest of the Old Testament. In other words, the word "or" implies that the attitude taken by Christ is the same towards both. Thus, Jesus most emphatically proclaims His full adherence to the whole of the Old Testament.

Another term that stresses His total adherence to the Scripture is "fulfil," when He said: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (5:17). Now the question before us is – In what way

did Christ fulfil “the law” and “the prophets?” Many commentators argue that Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets in two different ways. The prophets are fulfilled in a predictive fashion: what they predict comes to pass and is thereby fulfilled. The law, some say, is fulfilled by confirming the law in its deeper meaning while others say Jesus fulfilled the law by dying on the cross, thus satisfying the demands of the law against all who would believe in Him. Though these ideas are established elsewhere in the New Testament, the emphasis that Matthew conveys is more extensive. Elsewhere, Matthew records Jesus as saying, “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John” (Matthew 11:13). Not only do the prophets prophesy, but the law also prophesies. In other words, the entire Old Testament has a prophetic function and Jesus came to fulfil the Old Testament. In Matthew 5:17, therefore, we must rid ourselves of conceptions of fulfilment which are too narrow. Jesus fulfilled the entire Old Testament – the law and the prophets, in many ways. Because they point towards Him, He had certainly not come to abolish them, but rather, to fulfil them in a rich diversity of ways. In summary, we can say that Jesus’ life and ministry were not in opposition to the Old Testament, but in fulfilment of all that it says.

IV. JESUS AFFIRMS THAT EVERY LETTER OF THE SCRIPTURE WILL BE PRESERVED

Thus, after declaring His total adherence to the Scripture, He states His view of the Scripture: “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (verse 18). As we noticed before, “the law” in this verse also refers to the entire Old Testament. It would be unwarranted if we say “the law” refers only to the legal requirements, especially when we study verse 18 in the light of verse 17. Thus, referring to the entire Old Testament, He wishes to make a strong assertion when He says, “For verily I say unto you.” The word “verily” is a translation of the Greek term “amen” which is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for “truth.” Therefore, it generally identifies something true, faithful or absolute. This expression, thus, explains to us how highly Jesus regards the Scripture, and how important the following statement is of His view of the Scripture - “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”

Jesus then tells us how long the Scripture will continue to be unerring and authoritative - “till heaven and earth pass.” In other words, Jesus was emphasizing the relative imperishability of God's Word, by saying that it would be here even when the universe passed out of its present existence.

Then He continues to express His view in the most exhaustive way by saying, “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” A “jot” (or *yodh*) refers to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is very similar to an apostrophe. A “tittle” is an appendage or portion of the letter, a mark by which one letter is distinguished from another. So what Jesus is saying is that not even the tiniest Hebrew letter shall pass from this law until all would be fulfilled.

If God does not preserve every letter of the Scripture, then the truth of God’s Word would be lost. The purity and authority of the whole Scripture are dependent on every section of the Scripture, every book, every chapter, every word, and every letter. Even the smallest letter or a portion of a letter cannot be lost, if the authority and infallibility of the Scripture have to remain unaffected all through time. The Lord Jesus assures us that His Word will be preserved true to every letter. We may have difficulty in understanding how

the Lord could speak of absolutely perfect preservation of the Scripture in its originals, when there were cases of scribal errors in manuscripts. Though scribal errors have occurred in some copies, the Lord promises to keep His Word free from all such human errors for His people to believe and obey.

Today, we have no need to approach the Scripture with doubt. It is divinely preserved from all impurity. Through the history of the church, we can see how God providentially guided godly men not only to determine the books of the canon of the Scripture, but also to recognise the exact original words of those books for an obedient life. In the Hebrew and Greek texts underlying the King James Bible, we have these perfectly preserved texts through the ages, recognised by godly men during the days of the Reformation, and continued to be used by the church for the past 400 years approximately. A perfectly preserved Bible to the end of times – that is what the Lord Jesus promised in Matthew 5:18, and that is what we have today.

V. JESUS WARNS US NOT TO DISREGARD EVEN THE LEAST COMMANDMENT OF THE SCRIPTURE

Because every letter of the Scripture will be preserved to the end of days, Jesus warns us about setting aside or disannulling any portion of the Scripture. “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (verse 19). The word “therefore” takes our attention backward, and gives us one reason why we should not disregard the Scripture. The reason is, as we found earlier, that God’s Word is imperishable.

Then Jesus forewarns us of the consequences, if we disregard even a smallest portion of His Word – “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.” The word “break” (Greek *luo*) means “to loose, release, nullify or destroy.” Therefore, the idea conveyed is if anyone releases himself from an obligation to obey or to teach exactly what it says, even the least of it, he will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. This suggests that such men will face the Lord’s judgment for unbelief and loss of reward.

Another significant phrase that should be noticed is “these commandments.” The expression “these commandments” must be understood within the context since any expressed antecedent for the term “these” is absent. In the previous verses, Jesus referred to the whole Old Testament and claimed that He came not to destroy but to fulfil them. Since Jesus is the fulfilment of “the law” and “the prophets” (or the whole Old Testament points to Him), our responsibility is not only to obey the commandments of the Old Testament but also His teachings as found in the New Testament. We must also take heed of the words of the New Testament writers for they were written as inspired by His Spirit.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this passage, we have seen how our Lord promises to preserve all the letters of His Word that His people may have an infallible, everlasting Scripture. As disciples of Jesus, we must also hold the same view of the Scripture, which Jesus proclaimed. To doubt the perfect preservation of the Bible, as many have done, is to simply deny Jesus’ promise. That would also mean to drift away from the perfect standard of righteousness. The message the Lord gives in Matthew 5:17-19 is: Fulfil God’s law, and do not break even

the least of His commandments, because His Word is pre-eminent, permanent and pertinent till the end of days. All Christians must affirm their allegiance to the Word of God. If anyone, therefore, questions its perfect preservation, infallibility and authority, he cannot be considered a faithful Christian, let alone a faithful Bible teacher. Dear reader, it is time for us to take heed of our Saviour's words more than ever before, and uphold His perfect Word by believing, obeying and proclaiming all of its words.

VII. IF WE REJECT THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRESERVATION OF THE BIBLE

Rejecting the Doctrine of the Perfect Preservation of the Bible will lead to many severe spiritual dangers. It will undermine the very foundation of the Christian faith. The following are the dangerous outcomes of not believing in the Perfect Preservation of the Bible.

If we reject the Perfect Preservation of the Bible, then we concede that:

1. We don't have the inspired Word of God intact, as the words of the originals are not kept pure (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16).
2. We don't have an absolutely infallible, inerrant Word of God, even though the Lord promises a perfect Word of God forever (cf. Psalm 19:7-9).
3. God is unfaithful in keeping His repeated promise that He will preserve His Word forever (cf. Psalm 12:6-7; Psalm 111:7-8; Psalm 119:89, 152, 160).
4. Jesus' promises, such as, "my words shall not pass away," are unreliable (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).
5. Jesus did not mean what He said, because the Bible is not preserved as He uttered - "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18; cf. Luke 16:17).
6. God was so incapacitated by the errors of man and dark events of history that He failed to keep His promises concerning the Preservation of His Word. (It also casts doubt on God's sovereignty, providence, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.)
7. The faith of the Old Testament prophets and saints that God's Word will be kept intact forever is a false faith. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (Isaiah 40:8). "The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:9).
8. The affirmation of the apostles of Christ and the New Testament writers that God's Word will be kept intact forever is false. (Matthew, Mark and Luke quoted Jesus' affirmation of the Preservation of God's Word, cf. 1 Peter 1:25).
9. Our forefathers' faith that the Word of God "by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages" is not acceptable (Westminster Confession of Faith I.VIII).
10. Anyone can question the authenticity and authority of the words in the Bible (cf. John 17:17).
11. Some parts of the Bible must be subjected to the "scholarly opinion" of certain individuals. When those intellectuals point to us where the Bible is allegedly wrong, we should believe them more than the Bible itself (cf. Matthew 5:17-19).
12. It is wrong to have the presupposition that believers have an absolutely trustworthy, perfect Bible (cf. Psalm 18:30; Psalm 111:7-8; Psalm 119:128).

Denying the Perfect Preservation of the Bible will harm and hurt the Church. It will open the door for anyone to criticise the text of the Bible according to his personal thinking or opinion. This will further lead to doubting the absolute accuracy and authority of the Bible. Thus the very foundation of the church, the absolute sufficiency, trustworthiness and authority of the Bible will be weakened and destroyed. If we preachers do not have a perfectly preserved Bible, what assurance can the hearers have in our preaching of the Word? If we do not have a perfectly preserved Bible, our preaching is vain.