

Opening the Word: Biblical inconsistency?



Question: In Matthew 5:19, Jesus rails against relaxing or changing even the least of the commandments, and yet verse 19 also says that if one does, “[he] will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” It seems the consequences should be “losing” the kingdom of heaven if Jesus is consistent with what follows in verse 20. Can you explain the seeming inconsistency?

– **Jim Flynn**, via email

Answer: Two different teachings are being made here, hence it is not a matter of consistency.

In verse 19, the operative teaching is that while unrepented mortal sin excludes one from the kingdom of God, not all violations of the law are mortal. Even the Ten Commandments, while indicating grave sin in themselves admit of lighter matter.

For example, regarding the Seventh Commandment, stealing a large amount or something essential or irreplaceable is usually a mortal sin. However, taking something small or insignificant, while a sin, may not be a mortal sin that excludes one from the kingdom of God. Thus, if the Lord were to adopt your word, the condemnation might be too sweeping. It does not follow that if someone breaks the least of the commandments they necessarily lose the kingdom of God.

Further, you will note that there is a kind of parallelism or play of words at work here. The Lord is saying, in effect: “If you break even the least of my teachings, I am going to call you the least!” Preachers often use such sayings in order to be memorable.

For example, consider the following word stitch: "Say what you mean, and mean what you say. But don't say it mean." The word "mean" unites all three phrases, but in each case a slightly different sense of the word "mean" is used.

Here, the Lord is not only being careful not to imply that even small infractions would land us in hell, but he is also being artful, resourceful and memorable by his use of a parallelism.

As for verse 20, we encounter a different teaching: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Here we are dealing with the problem of minimalism. Though the Pharisees fancied themselves meticulous observers of the law, they were very minimalist in their application of it. Jesus said they were hypocrites because they followed exacting laws about small things, such as tithing, but neglected weightier matters of the law, such as justice and mercy (cf. Mt 23:23). It is one thing to pay tithes; this is good and required. But neglecting the poor and failing to feed and teach them is far more important to God.

Jesus will develop this teaching against minimalism in the verses that follow in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, he will teach that it is not enough to avoid murder; the command requires we let God banish vengeful hatred from our hearts. It is not enough to avoid acts of adultery; we must allow God to give us chaste minds and hearts. It is not enough to avoid excessive retaliation; we ought to avoid retaliation altogether.

Therefore, the message of verse 20 is a call to exceed the minimalist notions of the law. Grace equips us for more, and we are expected to attain more by that grace. The old law could not save. Only the "new law" of grace can save or make us sufficiently holy to enter heaven.

Thus verse 19 speaks of little things, verse 20 of weightier things.

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