

St. Andrew's UMC

June 1st, 2008

Matthew 7:21-29

“Hear These Words of Mine and Act on Them?”

There is a verse in the Bible that Christians use often, when they attempt to evangelize a person. It is found in Romans 10:13: For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." A lot of Christians quote the Romans verse as the basis to their confidence of salvation. I did not think much about it, until I actually began to read the Bible myself.

Imagine my surprise, when I first discovered the verse which we have heard this morning in the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus says in Matthew:

7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Huh? Calling Jesus, “Lord, Lord” is not going to help me enter into the kingdom of Heaven ? That really confused me. And that is not all. To everyone's great consternation, Jesus says:

7:22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'

7:23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

What a bummer it must be for those overachiever Christians. So, how do we reconcile this seeming disagreement in the salvation policies between the Savior himself and the Apostle Paul? Who carries more authority on the subject of salvation: Jesus, or Paul?

The fact that Jesus said the above restrictive words way before Paul ever became a follower of Jesus should have put things to a rest. But that did not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the Christians who are confident that they are saved, based on the promise of Romans 10:13.

Jesus is concerned that not all of his followers who do great things in his name are necessarily doing the will of God, or obeying what he taught them to do. Doing great things in Jesus' name does not necessarily mean that Jesus will welcome them on the strength of their deeds. Adding further disappointment to the overachievers in Jesus' name, Jesus labels those who claim to do great deeds *evildoers*.

As for Paul, when he wrote the letter to the Romans, he assumed that those who call upon the name of the Lord would do the will of God. For Paul, it would have been unthinkable to suppose that those who call upon the name of the Lord would not do God's will.

Those who have been in the hearing of Jesus at the time were all astounded by his teaching, because of the authority in his teaching. What is this authority that was unlike the scribes?

Scribes were like the lawyers of the Scriptures. They studied the Scriptures, and were the experts in interpreting what the law had intended or said. They excelled in determining what was lawful and what was not.

For example, if one had to rescue on the Sabbath an animal that fell into the well, is it considered work, therefore breaking the law? The scribes would have the answer.

Is driving a donkey-pulled cart to the synagogue on the Sabbath work? Yes. We modern people might ask, "But isn't walking more work than riding a cart, expending more calories?" Yes. But if the scribes say so, then so it is.

So, where does this distinct authority of Jesus come from? Jesus tried hard to impart the understanding of the kingdom of Heaven in his many teachings and parables. Here are some examples about the kingdom of Heaven :

Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand;
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven ;
Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven .

Jesus was preoccupied with this "righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes, the righteousness that goes hand-in-hand with the kingdom of Heaven . This teaching must have stirred confusion in the minds of the listeners raised in the Hebrew religion: In order to enter the kingdom of Heaven , one has to be more righteous than the law observing scribes? What can be more righteous than observing the law? Who can be more righteous than the one who observes the law to the letter?

In a democratic society, the rule of the law is supremely regarded. And this rule of the law is powered by the majority decision. There is a drawback, however, to this rule of the majority. In the democratic society, even the unjust law is powered by the majority, and once enacted, it stays in force as lawful.

We could have a law that even protects criminals and awards behaviors destructive to the society and the environment. As long as the law is found in the

confines of what is considered “legal,” anything goes. Isn’t it why we are so keen about who is nominated to the Supreme Court, and about hiring lobbyists to influence the lawmakers?

This absolute reverence for the legality can come to the point that even the outcome of the popular vote may be overridden by the decision of the 9 members of The Supreme Court to elect a president.

There the authority of the scribes lies: the scribes depend on the law and its interpretation for their authority, whether the law makes practical sense or not, whether the law is righteous or not, whether the law is beneficial or not, or whether the law serves justice for all or for the few.

Jesus certainly saw through this limitation of the righteousness based on the law, and he demanded the higher form of righteousness from his followers—the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes, therefore, of the law. And the listeners perceived that the authority of Jesus’ teaching was distinct from that of the scribes, because Jesus taught the righteousness that surpassed the righteousness of the law. This is where authority of Jesus originated from: authority of Jesus’ teaching originated from the righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven .

Then what is this kingdom like? The kingdom of Heaven does not depend on the law for its authority. Its righteousness exceeds that of the law or the scribes. Its authority on earth exceeds both the law found in the Scriptures and the law enacted by any democratic society.

Even the authority of accomplishing the great deeds in Jesus’ name, of driving out demons in Jesus’ name, or of prophesying in Jesus’ name—including mere calling Jesus, “Lord, Lord,”—cannot get anyone admitted into the kingdom of Heaven. No one can enter the kingdom of Heaven by the authority of accomplishing great deeds. No authority of the law, whether found in the Scriptures or enacted by the government, can help us enter the kingdom of Heaven.

The authority and the righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven might be understood, if we understand this incident:

Exactly 5 weeks ago, a woman was invited by friends to a baseball game at Dodger stadium. The Rockies’ hitter swung the bat. The bat broke in half, and the broken piece flew through the air, and hit the woman in the jaw, shattering it.

Being a single mother of two teenagers, and not being sure if her insurance will cover the bill that amounted more than \$7,000, she asked her lawyer to talk to Dodgers, if they would help cover the cost. The lawyer got the answer: “No way,

no how, no way would they cover it, He said. "It's tough luck, and you assumed the risk" they said

There is an "assumption of risk" doctrine that every team announces before the game that teams are not responsible for flying bats and balls. Every team that sees an injury at its stadium fights helping with medical costs because of the implications throughout the rest of the industry.

Almost all the lawsuits brought against the baseball teams for injuries for the above reasons were dropped, based on the authority of the law. Even if the team did not do anything to help with the medical cost, they are deemed righteous, by the authority of the law.

The authority on which the baseball team depends is that of the law. The team is hiding behind this authority of the law, in order to protect their profits, while ignoring the human pain and suffering. That sort of righteousness will never satisfy the kingdom of Heaven.

The righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven consists of compassion and justice, and far exceeds that of the one guaranteed by the law. Those who serve mammon can never understand this righteousness, or uphold the authority of the Lord.

There is another example we could use, in order to understand the righteousness of the kingdom. The State of California finally decided to recognize the same-sex marriage. All it needs now is the ruling from the California Supreme Court. But the attorneys general from 10 states are seeking a delay in the ruling, at least until November.

They are afraid that there would be a flood of lawsuits in their states by the couples who traveled to CA to get married, in order to force their home states to recognize their marriages performed in CA. The Utah Attorney General was concerned with these issues, for example: whether the couple could file a joint state tax return, whether one spouse could refuse to testify against another, or whether one could sue over the other's wrongful death.

If you understand the authority and the righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven, these issues are moot points. The righteousness of the law falls short of the needs of the gay and lesbian couples. But the righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven, far exceeding the righteousness of the law, would easily apply the Golden Rule to this situation: do unto others, as you would have them do unto you—equal protection and rights for all, of course. It is so easy to see what is needed to be done, if you understand the authority and the righteousness of the kingdom.

The law is the limit of the authority of the scribes. The Christian disciples must, however, go beyond the authority of the law, and seek to satisfy the righteousness of the kingdom. The Christian disciples do recognize the authority of Jesus that is above the authority of the law, and they fulfill the righteousness that is consistent with the kingdom. It is precisely this authority that the crowd who heard Jesus' teaching perceived: authority unlike that of the scribes.

Ask any real estate agent what matters most to the worth of a house. They will say in unison: location, location, location. Indeed it is. And that is exactly what Jesus is saying:

7:24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 7:25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock."

You are that house, and may God bless you with the righteousness of the kingdom, as you hear Jesus' words and act on them.
