

Why Did Jesus Say, “But I Tell You”?

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The Bible records that Jesus many times used the words, "But I tell you," or, as the King James Version puts it, "But I say unto you." He did this after first either quoting the Old Testament or stating a principle from the Old Testament. Then He used what He said from the Old Testament as a springboard to teach a moral principle that sounded even stricter than the Old Testament.

Why did Jesus do this? Was it, as some claim, that Jesus was refuting or correcting Old Testament laws? (See, for example, "Jesus Refuted Old Testament Laws" [<https://reknew.org/2017/01/jesus-refuted-old-testament-laws/>] and "6 Times Jesus Contradicted the Old Testament." [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/keithgiles/2018/02/6_times_jesus_contradicted_ot/]) Or was He merely correcting misinterpretations of the scribes and Pharisees? (For example, see "How to Avoid the Folly of the Pharisees." [<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/pharisees-how-to-avoid-law-gospel-theology.html>]) On the other hand, perhaps He was raising the standard of the law and in so doing, He was teaching that we Christians must obey the law more than the scribes and Pharisees (See "What does Jesus mean when He says, 'Except your righteousness shall exceed...?'" [<http://www.pilgrim-covenant.com/q-a/what-does-jesus-mean-when-he-says-except-your-righteousness-shall-exceed-the-righteousness-of-the-scribes-and-pharisees-ye-shall-in-no-case-enter-into-the-kingdom-of-heaven-matthew-5-20>]), and, ("More Righteous Than The Pharisees?" [<https://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Audio.details/ID/2142/More-Righteous-Than-Pharisees.htm>]) There are many opinions, but I want to show you from the Bible the plain and simple answer to why Jesus said, "But I tell you."

A Prophet of Grace and Life

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Moses prophesied of the coming of the Christ, whom he referred to as a prophet.

The LORD your God will raise up to you a prophet from amongst you, of your brothers, like me. You shall listen to him. This is according to all that you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, "Let me not hear again the LORD my God's voice, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I not die." The LORD said to me, "They have well said that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a prophet from amongst their brothers,

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like you. I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him....”

Deuteronomy 18:15-18

Notice these points: God would raise up this prophet—Jesus Christ—in response to the terror the people expressed at the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The people rightly associated the giving of the Law with death. The prophet God would send them was the remedy. The implication was that, instead of speaking the fierce words of the law and death, the prophet would tell them of a way that they could live. We understand that Jesus did this by bringing grace: “For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

If this is the case and Jesus brought the words of eternal life (John 6:68), why would Jesus, who was that prophet, have spoken commands that are even harder to keep than the Ten Commandments? Why, for example, would He have said that merely being angry with your brother without cause put one in danger of the judgment? This wasn't relief from law and death; it was a greater burden even than the Law of Moses! What was Jesus doing?

Jesus Gave Us Rest

In Matthew 11, we read that after telling of the condemnation that will come upon those who don't repent, Jesus said,

Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Verses 28-30

Are commands that regulate and punish me for even my angry or lustful thoughts or for not demonstrating love for my enemy or for not allowing him to hurt me a light burden? Do they give me rest? No! They're very burdensome.

Some teach that Jesus was able to make these demands of us because they are based, these people say, entirely on grace instead of the Old Covenant law, and grace will empower us to keep these commands. But notice these Scriptures: “For he who has died has been freed from sin.

But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.... Thus consider yourselves also to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.... For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:7-8, 11, 14). Read the entire context for yourself. Paul is clearly drawing a dichotomy between law and grace. We are either under law and under the dominion of sin, or we are under grace and free from law and sin. Romans 7 again clearly shows that Christians have been delivered from the law and that the commandment causes sin to become exceedingly sinful (see verse 13). In 1 Corinthians 15:56, Paul plainly states that "the power of sin is the law."

Read Galatians 3:21: "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could make alive, most certainly righteousness would have been of the law." The law wasn't a mistake. It was part of God's plan. But its purpose was not to create righteousness. I could cite dozens more verses, but the second half of Galatians 3:21 should settle the question. Paul directly states that if a law could give life, then righteousness would have been of the law. The implication is that it is impossible for a law to be given that would impart life and that it is impossible for any law to be given that would create righteousness.

If, as some teach, Christ has laid commands upon us as a new law, it would be impossible for that new law to create righteousness in us. It would, in fact, only add to our knowledge of sin, excite the passions of our flesh, and further ensnare us in sin. To label a new law as being grace is nothing but confusion. To teach as a new law the revelations of God's righteous standards that Jesus gave as warnings against law-keeping for righteousness is directly contrary to our Lord's purposes.

Commands that increase the demands upon us make for a heavier yoke, not a lighter one. Even works that God empowers us to perform are still works and not grace. Grace and works are as far apart as east and west, and never the twain shall meet: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6).

Grace is free, unmerited favor. Paul taught, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God not of works, that no one would boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus was not following Rehoboam's example. He did not say, "Now Moses burdened you with a heavy yoke, but I will add to your yoke.

Moses chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions” (adapted from 1 Kings 12:11). Jesus gave His “But I tell you” demands as part of His loving, gracious plan that lifted our burdens and gave us rest. How?

Where did Jesus say the following? “Don’t you remember what I said in the Sermon on the Mount? Do you recall that I gave you plenty of new commandments? Now, obey them.” Nowhere! Jesus left us with one, simple commandment: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also love one another” (John 13:34).

When Jesus spoke those “But I tell you” things, He wasn’t giving us new commandments that we had to obey. He wasn’t saying that under the New Covenant we would have to reach these standards by our works. He was warning us against trying to use our works to attain righteousness. Our Savior was giving us a taste of God’s true moral standard so we would see how impossible it is to achieve it with our works. But it was also as if He were saying, Don’t worry. I’ll do it for you if you’ll just trust in me.

Why was Moses’ Law given? “Now the law came in to increase the trespass” (Romans 5:20a, *English Standard Version*). The law increased sin by defining it and by inciting temptation in our sinful flesh. By doing this, it displayed the desperate plight of all who are under law. Yet, of course, as we see in the Gospels, many Jews were so blinded that they self-righteously thought they were fully keeping the Law and, by doing so, meeting God’s righteous standards. They believed they were earning the kingdom of heaven by their law-keeping.

The Law Saved No One

The Old Testament law never promised the Jewish people that by keeping the law, they would be spiritually saved. The rewards for law-keeping were always physical—physical life and physical blessings in the land (e.g. Deuteronomy 28).

In Leviticus 18:5, God said, “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances; which if a man does, he shall live in them. I am the LORD.” But he was not referring to spiritual salvation. As John Gill says in his commentary on this verse, it means, “live a long life in the land of Canaan, in great happiness and prosperity, see Deu 30:20; for as for eternal life, that was never intended to be had, nor was it possible it could be had and enjoyed by obedience to the law.”

It is in the Old Testament that we first read, "the righteous will live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). Thus, Paul quotes both Leviticus 18:5 and Habakkuk 2:4 when he says, "Now that no man is justified by the law before God is evident, for, 'The righteous will live by faith.' The law is not of faith, but, 'The man who does them will live by them'" (Galatians 3:11-12). Someone could lose his or her life for breaking the Law, but no one could gain eternal life by keeping it. Even if someone kept the law perfectly, that person would not enter the kingdom of heaven. The law never promised the kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus' point was not that the scribes and Pharisees weren't keeping the law perfectly (though He did expose their hypocrisy elsewhere). He was saying that even if they were keeping the law perfectly—even if they attained perfect righteousness according to the Old Testament standards—it would not be enough to attain to the kingdom of heaven. The Old Covenant laws were merely shadows of God's true standards of righteousness, and those who kept the law could only attain physical blessings which were only shadows of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant. To attain to the kingdom of heaven, one's righteousness must exceed the righteousness possible under the Old Covenant.

Is the Old Testament Wrong?

Were, then, the Old Testament and the Law of Moses wrong and in need of correction? Not at all. The Old Testament is part of the Word of God, and it is inerrant and infallible. The Law of Moses was precisely the law God intended for the Old Covenant. It served its purpose under that shadowy dispensation. The Old Covenant was a covenant of works and mere physical promises. The Law of Moses was merely a type of God's righteousness, and keeping it could, at best, earn those physical blessings.

God is a perfectly righteous God. His standards are perfect and are absolutes. Under the Old Covenant, God gave laws that were shadows of His righteous standard. The people agreed and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). But God's purpose in it all was to teach that people are inherently sinful and cannot keep even the shadows of His righteous standards. Sinners need a Savior. Many of the Jews, especially the leaders, never understood that lesson, and they became self-righteous in thinking they were keeping the law.

When Jesus came, He dealt with that self-righteousness by revealing some of God's true standards. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, "You have heard it said...but I say to you." It was as if He were saying, So, you think you are righteous by keeping the Mosaic shadows? You are not. To really be righteous, you would have to be perfect in your actions and even your thoughts.

In John 10:35, Jesus said, "Scripture cannot be broken." Jesus did not contradict the Old Testament or say it was wrong. He was only pointing out that it had a limited use—it pointed to Him—and that use was ending because He was going to fulfill the law and end it. Entering the kingdom of heaven required, not the keeping of the shadow, but meeting God's perfect standards of righteousness.

Jesus never intended that we earn our own righteousness, however. Instead of our having to keep the law or the perfect standards to be righteous, we could just trust Him as our Savior. He would then rescue us from our hopeless situation. By paying the penalty for our sins and putting us into the New Covenant under which there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1), Jesus gives us the freedom to grow in love as He empowers us through the Holy Spirit. We don't have to worry about failing because we cannot be condemned under the New Covenant. That way, we can keep trying and growing in love. Love perfectly expressed is God's holy and righteous standard. We won't reach that standard in this life. But we can have fun trying while we rest in the knowledge that Jesus has kept the standard for us.

We Must Keep Our Eyes on Christ

There are many today who believe that Christians are obligated to keep Jesus' higher standards of the law. The reasons they give include the notion that this is necessary for what they call our "progressive sanctification," or because they believe we are *under* the law of Christ and that these standards are that law, or that this is how we earn rewards.

(Further reading: "[What Is the Law of Christ?](https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/law-of-christ/)" [<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/law-of-christ/>]) and "[Are We Under the Law of Christ?](https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/under-law-of-christ/)" [<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/under-law-of-christ/>])

Sadly, many of these people think they are truly attaining God's standard of righteousness. They apparently believe they are perfect even in their thinking. Others, perhaps the majority, realize that they are not attaining perfection. Yet, they still think that they are achieving

much of their righteousness or sanctification and Jesus merely covers the parts where they fall short. This is far from the teaching of the Bible (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus had said that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. But in verse 48, He sets an even higher standard: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). "Perfect" is from the Greek word *teleios*, which here means "nothing missing to make it complete." If the Jews who heard Jesus were shocked to hear that they had to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, imagine how they felt when Jesus told them they had to be as perfect as God. How is it possible for us to produce such perfection? It's not! That's why I say that we must not make the mistake of thinking that Jesus was giving us a law that we must actually keep by our works. It's simply not possible for us to reach this standard! We can reach God's perfection only by having the Son of God's righteousness imputed to us. Period.

As an example of what can happen to our thinking when we take our eyes off of Christ and put them on ourselves and our works, I will quote theologian John Murray: "The criterion of our standing in the kingdom of God and of reward in the age to come is nothing else than meticulous observance of the commandments of God in the minutial details of their prescription and the earnest inculcation of such observance on the part of others," (John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*) Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957). Where does Christ's substitutionary atonement and the imputation of His righteousness fit in with Murray's belief that our standing in the kingdom of God is based on our meticulous observance of commandments? Murray's claim is so contrary to the Bible's teaching on grace that I find it utterly abhorrent.

Trying to attain to these standards by our works is contrary to the Gospel. Don't the basics of the Gospel include the message that Jesus died for our sins and that His righteousness is imputed to us because we sinners can't keep the law? Of course. Then we must not distort the Gospel by saying that, under the New Covenant, Jesus raised the moral standards that we are to attain, albeit by being empowered by grace.

Jesus wasn't raising any standards. He was revealing the true standards that God has had from eternity. He wasn't saying that this is what we must now do. He was saying this is what must be done, but since we can't do it, He will do it for us. Yes, as we live our Christian lives, we will, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, want to do these things,

and we will, to one extent or another, do them from our hearts out of love. That is, being branches abiding in the True Vine, we will produce fruit (John 15:4; see also Galatians 5:22-25). We will, however, never achieve God's perfect standard in our thoughts and actions in this life. While we walk in this flesh, we will never live up to the standards Jesus gave when He said, "But I tell you." He never expected that we would. He wants us to see the impossibility and turn to Him as our Savior.

Allow me to repeat that: *If we say that Jesus was raising the standard of how we are to live, we are missing Jesus' real point in giving these "But I tell you" statements.* Jesus wasn't refuting Old Testament laws. Jesus wasn't correcting misinterpretations of Moses' Law. Jesus wasn't giving us a new law to live by. He was giving us a sampling of God's true standards of righteousness and showing us how impossible it is for us to achieve those standards by our works. He did this so that we would look to Him as our atoning sacrifice for sins (Romans 3:25-26), so that we would look to Him to be raised for our justification (Romans 4:25), so that we would look to Him as our righteousness and sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30).

We must not try to add to the perfect and complete righteousness Jesus has already given us if we trust in Him. Viewing Jesus' "But I tell you" revelation of God's standard of righteousness as a new law that we are under and which we are obligated to obey is a sadly mistaken notion. It turns our attention from Jesus, who is our Righteousness. It puts our focus on ourselves as we attempt to keep this so-called "new law." It engages us in a futile attempt to try to add to the righteousness Jesus has already given us. "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely. This is his name by which he shall be called: the LORD our righteousness.

Jeremiah 23:6