

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Brian MacLaren is founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, author of numerous books including *A Generous Orthodoxy* and a contributing editor of *Leadership Journal*. In a recent article he made the point that, “*Too many “educated” Christians have gotten lots of information but are the least Christ-like.*” **Too many Christians are informed but not transformed.** In describing the growing trend toward using the term “Spiritual Transformation” instead of the term “Christian Education,” Brian says “the shift in language reveals a profound shift in values, from teaching about God to teaching people God, from teaching about the Christian life to teaching people to live it, enjoy it, practice it. At its best, the change in language signals a shift in priority **from transferring information to training for transformation.**

This flows from a reality many pastors secretly acknowledge but seldom verbalize: that too many of our most “educated” Christians are some of the meanest. They may know the most information about the Bible but are the least Christ-like. Too often there seems to be a direct correlation between knowledge about theology on the one hand and arrogance, contentiousness, and an uncharitable spirit on the other.”

We witnessed a sad example of this lack of transformation this week when Pat Robertson embarrassed himself and the Christian faith when he made the statement on Monday that the United States should assassinate Hugo Chavez, the President of Venezuela, a democratically elected leader in no less than three internationally certified votes. It should go without saying that Christians should be much more concerned with **what Jesus would do** rather than **who they think Jesus should assassinate**. The very idea of a Christian calling for a murder is absurd and is a violation of the prohibition in the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not kill,” which would seem to rule out the assassination of foreign leaders. It is also a direct repudiation of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:44) to “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” It also should be painfully obvious that Jesus was executed by the Romans a foreign government that was the world’s reigning superpower who saw Jesus as a threat to stability in the region.

Reading the Gospels we see Jesus being a spiritual mentor and trainer who first and foremost practiced a transforming relationship with God as a way of life himself, and who had effective ways of bringing others onto a transforming path, too. **Jesus’ manner**

of teaching was not about conveying information, so much as training for transformation. The Sermon on the Mount is about this kind of spiritual transformation. This leads us to today's passage from Matthew 5:17-20, where Jesus says,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to **fulfill**.

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, **whoever breaks** one of the least of these commandments, and **teaches** others to do the same, will be called least in **the kingdom of heaven**; But whoever **does them and teaches them** will be called great in **the kingdom of heaven**.

For I tell you, **unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees**, you will never enter **the kingdom of heaven**.”

This passage is the introduction to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and after this week we will be talking about some very specific, personal issues. **Today begins with one of the purposes of Jesus - fulfilling the law and the prophets.** Jesus came not only as the answer to many prophecies but to show how it looked when someone lived from his heart the intent and spirit of the law and the prophets. Clearly there were religious people who thought Jesus was trying to tear down, diminish, or abolish the law and the prophets because of his willingness to seemingly disregard some regulations in order to renew, restore, and heal broken lives who came to him for help - like those listening to the Sermon on the Mount. This is because Jesus gave more weight to what was most important in the law and the prophets and not as much weight to what was of lesser importance. Jesus' views on washing hands, eating certain foods or with people who were sinners, or what he did on the Sabbath, regularly got him in trouble with the Pharisees for whom these were all-important issues. When it comes to fulfilling or neglecting the law and prophets, Jesus describes the failure of the scribes and Pharisees saying they (Matthew 23:23-28), *“have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faith**. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! You clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean. You also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”*

Jesus is drawing a clear line between those who fail to live out righteousness, justice, mercy, and faith from inside their hearts and who teach others to do the same, with those who are being transformed and renewed from the inside out and as a result are doing righteousness, justice, mercy, and faith and from their experience are able to lead others to live in a similar way. Sometimes people, especially parents, will say, “*Do as I say, not as I do.*” Jesus’ approach to spiritual training is, “*Only those who do, should be teaching or will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus not only studied the law and taught the law – the scribes and Pharisees did that, and it wasn’t enough. Jesus lived them.

D. L. Moody understood this process of inside out transformation when he said, “*The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.*”

We are not to worship the Bible, but to use it; not to treasure it; but to live it. There was an interesting story in yesterday’s Cape Cod Times about a Christian construction company that puts a Bible into the foundation of each house they build. That is a nice thought and it is even better that they try to run the company on biblical principles and better still is when the principles of the Bible about goodness and righteousness are lived among the people within a house.

Jesus was very concerned about righteousness (Greek word “dikaiosune”), an inner quality that makes a person really good and right.

Righteousness is one of the primary concerns of the Bible. When the Queen of Sheba came to visit king Solomon, she blessed the Lord and she described why a leader is given leadership when she said the Lord (1 Kings 10:9), “*has made you king to execute justice and righteousness.*”

Jesus came to fulfill the law and prophets. The prophets have a great deal to say about righteousness but I can only mention a couple verses. There are dozens of them.

The Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to the King of Judah (Jeremiah 22:3), “*Thus says the Lord, ‘**Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.**’*” The king Jeremiah was speaking to was the son of King Josiah who was one of the best at fulfilling the Lord’s desires, the son unfortunately was not. The Lord said of Josiah (Jeremiah 22:15-16), “*Did not your father eat and drink and **do justice and righteousness?***”

Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord."

Amos 5:24 says, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." **Jesus is not "watering" down the law and prophets as some of the Pharisees were suggesting, he is advocating a righteousness that comes from a changed heart.**

Let me give you a little background on the Pharisees. The word itself is generally interpreted to mean, "*the separated ones.*" In describing the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees we can begin with a statement from the historian Josephus: "The Pharisees are a group of Jews who have the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observance of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws (*Jewish War*, I.v.2). It was this accurate interpretation of the Mosaic Law, and scrupulous adherence to it, that characterized the religiosity of the average Pharisee."¹

So the scribes and Pharisees were dedicated, committed people, and their devotion is held up by Jesus as a goal to be surpassed which probably would have elicited a groan from those listening to the Sermon on the Mount. You can almost hear folks turning to each other and saying, "*Surpass the Pharisees? Those guys are fanatics about not breaking the law of God or sinning. If that's what it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven, I'm never going to make it.*"

However, Jesus is making a distinction between the legalistic righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, which was largely about not doing things, not breaking the laws of Moses, and avoiding certain things and certain people. Kingdom goodness, in contrast, is generated from a changed heart that is all about fulfilling God's will, doing acts of compassion and mercy and engaging all kinds of people with the love of God. The righteousness of the Pharisees was externally focused, the righteousness Jesus spoke of, **true goodness, flows from the heart and results in action.** The kingdom of heaven is not about sitting on a cloud with a harp or a trumpet for the rest of whatever. The kingdom of heaven is not something far away in the sky for after we die, but a present possibility and reality that can be entered here and now.

To know how to enter your house, car, or office is an important piece of information. The more important the place, the more security, codes, passwords, and keys one needs in order to get in. When it comes to entering God's kingdom, Jesus

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content, third edition*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003), page 49.

gave us several keys. Jesus said, “You will never enter the kingdom unless...” Unless what? Unless you are “*born from above*” meaning that you repent or turn from your old way of being and enable God to make you a new creation (John 3:3); unless “*you become like children,*” meaning you exercise the trust, dependence, and confidence of a child (Matt. 18:3); and “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,*” meaning that you realize holiness is not different action, but different being (Matt. 5:20).

The kingdom is not something to be “accepted” now and enjoyed later, but something to be *entered* now when we recognize both our need and our opportunity to do so. Jesus is the key to open the door to the kingdom of God. We will see as we move through Matthew 5,6, and 7, we all need the Lord’s help to be who God intends us to be.

Rick Ezell in his soon to be released book, *Seven Sins of Highly Defective People* writes, “Recently I received in the mail a recall notice. It looked like a recall notice regarding my automobile. This one was different, much more personal. Stamped in big red letters were the words *IMPORTANT RECALL*, under which was written the following: The maker of all human beings is recalling all units manufactured, regardless of make or year, **due to the serious defect in the primary and central component, the heart.** This is due to a malfunction in the original prototype units, resulting in the reproduction of the same defect in all subsequent units. This defect has been technically termed *Subsequential internal non-morality*, or more commonly known as *SIN*, and its primary symptom is a lapse of moral judgment. If one is susceptible to loss of direction, foul vocal emissions, lack of peace and joy, or selfish behavior, then one is inflicted with the defect. The manufacturer, who is neither liable nor at fault for this defect, is providing factory authorized repair and service, free of charge, to correct this SIN defect, at numerous locations throughout the world.”²

I am pleased to tell you BBC is one of those locations. The beauty of the kingdom life is that we can truly become different from the inside out. **Jesus describes and offers a different kind of heart that can be birthed only by entering the kingdom of heaven.**

I began by talking about a Christian leader and I want to close by sharing about another Christian leader. Sixty-five years ago, when Roger Schutz founded the Taizé community in France, divisions among Christians were as formidable as the Iron Curtain.

² Rick Ezell, *Seven Sins of Highly Defective People* (Kregel, to be released), p. 5.

Catholics took pride in not being Protestant while Protestants rejoiced in not being Catholic. As for Orthodox Christians, they weren't even on most people's radar screens. Brother Roger, a young Swiss Protestant pastor, dared to imagine Christianity's healing. The ecumenical monastic community he founded became a center for intimate encounter between Christians from every confession and continent. Few people in the past century have done so much to inspire a thirst for unity among Christians.

The death of Taizé founder Brother Roger happened as he might have wished, while he was at prayer in the midst of his community. It's not surprising to die when one is 90 years old, but it was a death neither from illness nor accident. He was assassinated, stabbed in the throat by a 36-year-old Romanian woman who had seemed to be just one more of the thousands of visitors to Taizé each month. Had he survived the attack, it's likely he would have been more concerned about his assailant than he was for himself.³

That's the kind of man he was.

You know what folks often say about a movie when they contrast how close or far a film is from the book it is based on? *"It was different than the book."*

How close or far is our life from the book of the law, prophets, and gospel?

Brother Roger's was pretty close, he was a true follower of Christ, he didn't just know about Jesus, he knew Jesus, and like the Lord he taught people how to live, practice, and enjoy the Christian life. We too can live, practice, and enjoy the Christian life, as we live from the heart that Jesus gives to those who will enter the kingdom.

Blessing:

Refusing to look back, and joyful with infinite gratitude,
never fear to rise to meet the dawn
praising blessing and singing: Christ your Lord.

The life profession of the Taize Community

"Always do right, this will gratify some people and astonish the rest." Mark Twain.

³ The healing life of Taizé's Brother Roger by Jim Forest, in Sojourner's, August, 2005.