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WESLEY ON THE LAW.

The subject of these pages is an extract from John Wesley's excellent discourse on our Lord's Sermon on the mount. May his words of wisdom and truth lead the reader to love and obey the Law of God. J. W.

"THINK not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. 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. 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." Matt. v, 17-20.

Among the multitude of reproaches which fell upon Him who was despised and rejected of men, it could not fail to be one, that he was a teacher of novelties, an introducer of a *new religion*. This might be affirmed with the more color, because many of the expressions he had used, were not common among the Jews; either they did not use them at all, or not in the same sense, not in so full and strong a meaning. Add to this, that the worshiping God *in spirit and in truth*, must always appear a new religion, to those who have hitherto known nothing but outside worship, nothing but the *form of godliness*.

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And it is not improbable, some might hope it was so; that he was abolishing the old religion, and bringing in another; one which they might flatter themselves, would be an easier way to heaven. But our Lord refutes in these words both the vain hopes of the one, and the groundless calumnies of the other.

I shall consider them in the same order as they lie, taking each verse for a distinct head of discourse.

And, first, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."

The ritual or ceremonial law, delivered by Moses to the children of Israel, containing all the injunctions and ordinances which related to the old sacrifices and service of the temple, our Lord indeed did come to destroy, to dissolve and utterly abolish. To this bear all the apostles witness: not only Barnabas and Paul, who so vehemently withstood those who taught, that christians ought to keep the law of Moses: not only St. Peter, who termed the insisting on this, on the observance of the ritual law, a tempting God, and putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers, saith he, nor we were able to bear: but all the apostles, elders and brethren being assembled with one accord, declared, that to command them to keep this law, was to subvert their souls; and that it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to them, to lay no such burthens upon them. This hand-writing of ordinances our Lord did blot out, take away, and nail to his cross.

But the moral law, contained in the ten commandments, and enforced by the prophets, he did

not take away. It was not the design of his coming, to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven. The moral stands on an entirely different foundation, from the ceremonial or ritual law; which was only designed for a temporary restraint upon a disobedient and stiff-necked people: whereas this was from the beginning of the world: being written not on tables of stone, but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator. And however the letters once wrote by the finger of God, are now in a great measure defaced by sin, yet can they not be wholly blotted out, while we have any consciousness of good and evil. Every part of this law must remain in force, upon all mankind, and in all ages: as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change; but on the nature of God, and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.

"I am not come to destroy but to fulfill." Some have conceived our Lord to mean, I am come to fulfill this, by my entire and perfect obedience to it. And it cannot be doubted but he did, in this sense, fulfill every part of it. But this does not appear to be what he intends here, being foreign to the scope of his present discourse. Without question his meaning in this place is (consistent with all that goes before and follows after) *I am come* to establish it in its fullness, in spite of all the glosses of men. I am come to place in a full and clear view, whatsoever was dark or obscure therein. I am come to declare the full and true import of every part of it: to show the length and breadth the

entire extent of every commandment contained therein; and the height and depth, the inconceivable purity and spirituality of it in all its branches.

And this our Lord has abundantly performed in the preceding and subsequent parts of the discourse before us: in which he has not introduced a new religion into the world, but the same which was from the beginning: a religion, the substance of which is without question, as old as the creation; being coeval with man, and having proceeded from God, at the very time when man became a living soul (the substance, I say, for some circumstances of it, now relate to man as a fallen creature.) A religion witnessed to, both by the law, and by the prophets in all succeeding generations. Yet was it never so fully explained, nor so thoroughly understood, till the Great Author of it, himself condescended to give mankind this authentic comment on all the essential branches of it: at the same time declaring it should never be changed, but remain in force to the end of the world.

“For verily I say unto you (a solemn preface, which denotes both the importance and certainty of what is spoken) till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled.”

One jot—it is literally, *not one Iota*, not the most inconsiderable vowel, or one tittle, *MIAKERATA*, one corner, or point of a consonant. It is a proverbial expression, which signifies that no one commandment contained in the moral law, nor the least part of one, however inconsiderable it might seem, should ever be annulled.

“Shall in no wise pass from the law:” ΟΥ ΜΕ

PARELTHE APO TOU NOMOU. The double negative here used, strengthens the sense, so as to admit of no contradiction. And the word PARELTHE, it may be observed, is not barely *future*; declaring what *will* be; but has likewise the force of an *imperative*; ordering what *shall* be. It is a word of authority, expressing the sovereign will and power of him that spake: of him whose word is the law of heaven and earth, and stands fast for ever and ever.

“One jot or tittle shall in no wise pass, till heaven and earth pass;” or as it is expressed immediately after, ΕΟΣ ΑΝ ΠΑΝΤΑ ΓΕΝΕΤΑΙ, till all (or rather all things) be fulfilled, till the consummation of all things. Here is therefore no room for that poor evasion (with which some have delighted themselves greatly) that no part of the law was to pass away, till *all the law* was fulfilled: but it has been by Christ; and therefore now must pass, for the gospel to be established. Not so; the word *all* does not mean all the law, but all things in the universe; as neither has the term *fulfilled*, any reference to the law, but to all things in heaven and earth.

From all this we may learn, that there is no contrariety at all, between the law and the gospel: that there is no need for the law to pass away, in order to the establishing the gospel. Indeed, neither of them supersedes the other, but they agree perfectly well together.

There is therefore the closest connection that can be conceived, between the law and the gospel. On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to the gospel: on the other, the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of

the law. The law, for instance, requires us to love God, to love our neighbor, to be meek, humble or holy; we feel that we are not sufficient for these things; yea, that *with man this is impossible*. But we see a promise of God to give us that love, and to make us humble, meek and holy. We lay hold of this gospel, of these glad tidings; it is done unto us according to our faith; and *the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us*, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

But if these things are so, we cannot be at a loss what to think of those who in all ages of the church, have undertaken to change or supersede some commands of God, as they professed, by the peculiar direction of his Spirit. Christ has here given us an infallible rule, whereby to judge of all such pretensions. Christianity, as it includes the whole moral law of God, both by way of injurction and of promise, if we will hear him, is designed of God, to be the last of all his dispensations. There is no other to come after this. This is to endure till the consummation of all things. Of consequence all such new revelations, are of Satan, and not of God; and all pretenses to another more perfect dispensation, fall to the ground, of course. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but this word shall not pass away.

“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.”

Who, what are they, that make “the preaching

of the law” a character of reproach? Do they not see on whom the reproach must fall? on whose head it must light at last? Whosoever on this ground despiseth us, despiseth him that sent us. For did any man ever preach the law like him? even when he came not to condemn but to save the world; when he came purposely to bring life and immortality to light through the gospel? Can any preach the law more expressly, more rigorously, than Christ does in these words? And who is he that shall amend them? Who is he that shall instruct the Son of God how to preach? Who will teach him a better way of delivering the message which he hath received of the Father?

“Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments,” or one of the least of these commandments—*These commandments*, we may observe, is a term used by our Lord as equivalent with the *law*, or the *law and the prophets*, which is the same thing, seeing the prophets added nothing to the law; but only declared, explained, or enforced it, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

“Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments”—especially if it be done wilfully or presumptuously: *one*:—for he that keepeth the whole law and thus offends in one point, is guilty of all. The wrath of God abideth on him, as surely as if he had broken every one. So that no allowance is made of one darling lust; no reserve for one idol; no excuse for refraining from all besides, and only giving way to one bosom sin. What God demands, is an entire obedience; we are to have an eye to all his commandments; otherwise we lose all the labor we take in keeping some, and our poor souls for ever and ever.

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“One of these least.” or one of the least of these commandments. Here is another excuse cut off, whereby many, who cannot deceive God, miserably deceive their own souls. “This sin, saith the sinner, is it not a little one? Will not the Lord spare me in this thing? Surely he will not be extreme to mark this, since I do not offend in the greatest matters of the law.” Vain hope! speaking after the manner of men, we may term these great and those little commandments. But in reality, they are not so. If we use propriety of speech, there is no such thing as a little sin; every sin being a transgression of the holy and perfect law, and an affront of the great majesty of heaven.

“And shall teach men so”—In some sense it may be said, that whosoever openly breaks any commandment, teaches others to do the same; for example speaks louder than precept. . . .

But if those who even thus break and teach others to break, “one of the least of these commandments, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven,” shall have no part in the kingdom of Christ and of God; if even these shall be cast into outer darkness, where is wailing and gnashing of teeth; then where will they appear whom our Lord chiefly and primarily intends in these words? They who bearing the character of teachers sent from God, do nevertheless themselves break his commandments, and openly teach others so to do; being corrupt both in life and doctrine.

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(J.N.)