

SUPERIOR OBLIGATIONS OF CHRISTIANS

"What more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles the same?" (Mt. 5:47).

All our lives we have heard that Christians should go far beyond the normal obligations of others. Our Christian parents have taught us that there are some cases when they say, "others may; you may not." Where does this idea come from? Is it a proper part of our Christian heritage? And How does it apply in our life in practical ways? These are some of the questions we want to think about now.

In the first place, let me say that this is indeed a biblical concept. It comes right out of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:43-48. Christian believers really do have superior obligations far above the normal moral code of others who are not Christians. Jesus said so.

I. First of all, we have superior obligations toward Mankind.

A. We are to love more than others, vs. 43-46.

1. Others are permitted under some moral codes to hate their enemies, provided they love their neighbors.

2. Christian maturity is maturity in love (note meaning of the Gr. word in vs. 48; "teleios" = "complete, mature").

3. Do you speak only to your friends? This is suggested from the first part of vs. 47, "And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?" The word salute means "to greet with politeness or respect, to welcome or visit briefly and pay your respects."

You do this to your friends, don't you?

I wonder what would happen if every member of this church visited all their neighbors on your street, people whom you don't know well or perhaps not at all, and say, "We just wanted to come by and pay our respects."

Some of them probably would be so "shook up" they would feel certain that you were up to something, that you wanted something out of them, or that you might be "casing their place" for a possible break-in, or that you were certainly too "nosey" and were going to take advantage of them in some way. But just reassure them that you don't want anything from them, not even to get them to go to your church with you, but just to express your concern about their welfare, and see if there is anything you can do for them to show your respects to them. Talk about changing society! Such a change in our social patterns in this country would be more far-reaching than we can imagine!

4. Do you sacrifice only for yourself or for your friends?

5. Do you love only those that love you? Christians are expected to love everyone, whether or not they love you. During wartime we are taught the hate psychology toward our enemies, and it is suspected that governments do whatever they can to get patriotic citizens to hate their enemies; but Christians should resist such propaganda on the basis of what Jesus taught in this passage.

B. Do you go the Second Mile? (vs. 41)

1. This indicates a mature attitude.

2. The Old Law was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," vs. 38 (from Exod. 21:23-24: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe"). This is a rather harsh law, isn't it? But Jesus said it is not binding now. When Jesus said, "But I say unto you..." he was announcing a superior obligation of Christians. We are not under the old Law, but under Grace, and grace calls not for retaliation but for forgiveness. When the Pope forgives his attacker, he is showing more of a spirit of Christ than certain Fundamentalists show who clamor loudly for capital punishment for every major crime!

3. The New Law of Christ is the Law of Love, and not just love for those who love you, but also for those who hate you.

The New Law of Christ held not only the sacredness of human life, but also the sacredness of human personality, feelings, and relationships. There is such a thing as murder by anger, contempt, and insult, all of which are condemned in the N.T.

C. Do you insist on your personal rights, and do you show only the minimum customary, necessary, and deserved reciprocation in ethical and moral actions?

1. Kingdom ethics demand:

a. Turning the other cheek

b. Giving away your coat

c. Giving to those who would borrow from you

2. Some have a difficult time understanding such ethical standards.

a. Are they "interim" ethics?

b. Are they "impractical" ethics?

It is true that they work better in the type of society they had then back in Palestine than they do today in our modern 20th century industrial and technological society.

c. Or are they literal and relevant?

Perhaps we have lost much by trying to explain away these old Christian principles, rather than seeking to apply as much as we can today and accept at least the central principles as Jesus taught.

It is said that it is impossible for the world to practice such a severe code of ethics until it accepts Jesus as more than a mere Teacher and Lawgiver--but as a Redeemer.

That may very well be true, and I believe it is, but this should not keep us from trying to apply as much of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to our situation today as we possibly can, and at least try to maintain the central Christian ideals expressed here, rather than to seek a hundred excuses why it will not work in our modern society.

D. Do you control your COMMUNICATIONS? (vs. 36-37)

1. For those in the Old Dispensation, it was OK to swear upon many occasions, and it was customary to swear in many ways.

Swearing oaths was an important part of Jewish life. There was nothing wrong with taking a true oath or swearing to something or someone.

But it was wrong to violate an oath, or to swear something and then not perform it, and, of course, it was always wrong to take an oath falsely, or to swear by the name of the Lord God for evil intent.

2. So the teaching of Jesus was considered somewhat radical, considering that swearing was such a large part of Jewish life that was universally practiced and taken for granted.

Jesus rejected swearing indiscriminately on ordinary occasions. He urged that all oaths be omitted (Mt. 5:34; see also James 5:12). He objected to all the swearing by the temple, the temple gold, the altar, and by heaven, as harmful rationalizing hair-splitting which attempted to classify oaths according to degrees of validity and usefulness for one's selfish purposes.

Peter's denial of Christ at the trial illustrate the most common modes of Jewish swearing. First, he simply denied; then he denied with an oath, and lastly he invoked a curse on himself and swore that he did not know Jesus. This is exactly what Jesus had forbidden in the Sermon on the Mount.

3. Certainly Christians can learn much from what Jesus said about cultivating straightforward speech and communications.

We should probably be more conservative in our speech.

Oaths should be unnecessary in the Kingdom of God, where we should always be open and truthful. An oath usually reveals or recognizes at least a possibility of deceit.

This is to say that Christians have a superior obligation to be honest and truthful always, and never need to take an oath to swear that they are not lying or covering up something.

4

E. Christians also have a superior obligation to control their desires.

1. The Old Law said not to commit adultery.
For the Jews marriage was sacred.

2. Jesus did not change this. He went beyond it. See vs. 27: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

3. Adultery was strictly prohibited by the Law (Exod. 20:14; Lev. 18:20; Deut. 5:18; John 8:2-5 [RSV margin]). Job calls adultery a "heinous crime" (Job 31:11).

4. While upholding the law against adultery, Jesus refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery (Jn. 7:58-8:11). Thus he affirmed both the sacredness of marriage and the possibility of redemption for the sinner. But to this he added the stricter moral code which demands the pure heart and mind as well as the restraint from committing the physical act.

This is another way Christians have superior obligations above and beyond those who are not Xtns. The Holy Spirit should control the believers desires as well as his acts.

F. Another superior obligation of the Christian, wherein he or she must do more than others, is the control of one's temper.

1. According to the Old Law murder brings judgment (vs. 21, "whoever kills shall be liable to judgment").

2. But according to Jesus, anger brings judgment: "But I say unto you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (vs. 22).

3. Reconciliation with a brother or sister preceeds bringing a gift to the altar, vs. 23-24.

II. Superior Obligations toward God

A. As an example, not that this is all that could be said on this subject, is the Principle of Righteousness as taught by Jesus.

B. Christian Righteousness must always exceed that kind of Righteousness as preached by the Pharisees.

1. According to the moral standards of this time their kind of righteousness was a very high moral standard. It was much higher than those of the older civilizations and those of Greece and Rome.

Their righteousness required regular attendance at the worship of God, along with regular and sincere prayer, faithful scripture study, tithing, and strict adherence to God's law.

2. See vs. 20: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Does YOUR righteousness exceed theirs?

We would have a hard time exceeding it in the outward, formal, and ceremonial respects.

One problem with their kind of righteousness was that it descended to the trivial and omitted the "weightier" matters of religion.

The difference is that our righteousness consists of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and not in our own works or merit.

Revised 5-17-87. Pasadena Bap. Ch.
D#52 "SUPERIOR"