

The Biblical Heritage Center's  
***DISCOVERING THE BIBLE***

*Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.*

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## **How & What Did Jesus Teach His Disciples?**

By Jim Myers

Jesus went throughout all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of disease and sickness among the people. So a report about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all who suffered with various illnesses and afflictions, those who had seizures, paralytics, and those possessed by demons, and he healed them. And large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan River. When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain. After he sat down his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them. (Matthew 4:23-25; 5:1-2a)

Jesus does many things in the Gospels and the focus of many Christians throughout the centuries has been on the miraculous acts attributed to him. For the original authors of the Gospels the miraculous events in the life of Jesus were recorded to prove that he was sent by God. The question that should be asked is – Why did God send him? Based on what we read above it was to teach the people.

The Jewish Jesus was a teacher and the men he called to be the apostles were called “disciples,” which means they were students. The Jesus Movement was a movement built upon an educational model. The definition of the word “teach” is “to cause to know,”<sup>1</sup> so what did Jesus want his disciples to know?

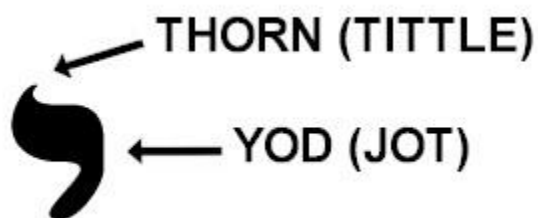
The above verses introduce one of the most famous events in the Gospels – *The Sermon on the Mount*. It followed the miraculous events that had caused large crowds to follow him to the mountain. It was at that place that he left them behind and only his disciples went up the mountain with him. After all of the things that had taken place you would think that they would have been the focus of his message that day. But, from the perspective of the author, those events were to stress the importance of what he taught that day. To be a disciple of Jesus was first and foremost to be a learner.<sup>2</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount was the textbook of the original Jesus Movement and understanding it is essential to understanding the mission of the movement. Jesus opened his lesson with an overview of the topics that he will address in more detail. Those who learn and do what he teaches will become the “blessed ones.” Pay close attention to how he describes who the “blessed” are:

- (1) the poor in spirit<sup>3</sup>
- (2) those who mourn<sup>4</sup>
- (3) the meek<sup>5</sup>
- (4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness<sup>6</sup>
- (5) the merciful<sup>7</sup>
- (6) the pure in heart<sup>8</sup>
- (7) the SHALOM makers<sup>9</sup>
- (8) those who pursue righteousness<sup>10</sup>

After the overview Jesus next uses to very well-known terms that will identify those who follow him: “You are the salt of the earth<sup>11</sup> . . . You are the light of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Salt and covenant were linked together in the minds of the ancient Jewish people and their Scriptures.<sup>13</sup> The point that Jesus made was that his disciples were to be the living embodiment of the ancient covenant God made with all mankind.<sup>14</sup> It was to that covenant that he next turned his attention.

Do not think that I have come to **abolish** the **Law** (Torah) or the **Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfill** them. Amen! I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the YOD<sup>15</sup> (jot) or the smallest decorative stroke (tittle) will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.<sup>16</sup>



The YOD (jot) is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the scribes would often add small decorative marks (tittle) to the Hebrew letters. In the case of the YOD above, the scribe added a small “thorn” to it. The point that Jesus made was that not only would the smallest letter in the Torah remain forever, but even the smallest decorative mark on the smallest letter in the Torah would remain. **He clearly had no intention of doing away with the Law!**

But, apparently some had accused Jesus of coming to abolish the Law (Torah), which is exactly what Roman Christianity would teach in the future. Jesus made it very clear that they were wrong. He had come to fulfill the Law -- *not abolish it*. The question that must be answered is what do the terms "abolish" and "fulfill" mean to Jesus? I have heard many sermons which defined them as "disobey" (abolish) and "obey" (fulfill), but those were not the meanings that Jesus had in mind. A story from the Talmud will provide cultural clues that will reveal how they would have been understood by the disciples of Jesus.

"[116a] Imma Shalom, R. Eliezer's wife, was R. Gamaliel's sister. Now, a certain philosopher lived in his vicinity, [116b] and he bore a reputation that he did not accept bribes. They wished to expose him, so she brought him a golden lamp, went before him, [and] said to him, 'I desire that a share be given men in my [deceased] father's estate.' 'Divide,' ordered he. Said he [R. Gamaliel] to him, 'It is decreed for us, Where there is a son, a daughter does not inherit.' [He replied], 'Since the day that you were exiled from your land the Law of Moses has been superseded and another book given, wherein it is written, 'A son and a daughter inherit equally.' The next day, he [R. Gamaliel] brought him a Libyan ass. Said he to them, 'Look at the end of the book, wherein it is written, **I came not to destroy the Law of Moses nor to add to the Law of Moses**, and it is written therein, A daughter does not inherit where there is a son.' . . ."17

When R. Gamaliel said, "It is decreed for us, Where there is a son, a daughter does not inherit," he was quoting Numbers 27:8 -- "And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying, If a man die, and have no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter." First he stated the law in the Torah and then he used the same term as Jesus -- "***I came not to destroy the Law of Moses nor to add to the Law of Moses.***" Once again he was quoting from the Torah:

"Whatsoever I command you, observe to do it: you shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." Deuteronomy 12:32 (13:1 in some Bibles)

The point R. Gamaliel was making is that he was not going to "**take away from**" or "**add to**" the words of the Torah by replacing them with other teachings or words from another book. The goal of the Jewish teacher was to teach the Torah in a manner that would preserve it and not destroy it by adding words to it or taking words away from it. The teachers and rabbis created a special method of teaching to accomplish this goal, but that method would not be understood by Gentile Christians and their leaders who came later.

The method that Jesus used was very well-known in the period in which Jesus and his disciples lived. The method compared a "light commandment" to a "heavy commandment" and stressed the point that a "light commandment" was just as important as a "heavy commandment." This principle is found in 4 Maccabees 5:19-21.

*"Do not suppose that it would be a petty sin if we were to eat defiled food; to transgress the law in matters either **small (light)** or **great (heavy)** is of equal seriousness, for in either case the law is equally despised."*

The point that the teacher wanted to teach his students was that the transgression of a light commandment will lead to the transgression of a heavy commandment. The transgression of a minor precept leads to the transgression of a major commandment. This idea is reflected in the Oral Law (Mishnah<sup>18</sup>) in Avot<sup>19</sup> 4:2 -- *"One good deed leads to another good deed; one sin leads to another sin. The reward for a good deed is another good deed; the reward for a sin is another sin."*

The goal of the Jewish teacher was to create a way to keep their disciples from violating the light commandments. One method they used to accomplish their goal is to "build fences;" a principle that is also found in the Oral Law.

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] would always say these three things: Be cautious in judgment. Establish many pupils. **And build a fence around the Torah.**<sup>20</sup>

Why does the Torah need a fence around it? The Torah was viewed as a garden and its precepts were the precious plants in God's garden.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, this idea was clearly linked to the Garden in Eden account. The rabbis believed a fence was needed to protect the plants from willful or unintended damage. They saw themselves as the guards and protectors of the garden. Their goal was to build the fence by adding their own commandments, which would keep their followers from breaking even the light commandments. The premise was simple – ***"If a person kept the fences created by the rabbis they would not violate the commandments of the Torah."*** Jesus was "building fences around the laws of the Torah" as he taught his disciples on the mountain that day.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subjected to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to

judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of GEHINNOM (Valley of Hinnom). (Matthew 5:21-22)

The **heavy commandment** in the opening account of Jesus' teaching is – "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subjected to judgment." Most commentaries will give Exodus 20:13 as the Scriptural reference, which is one of the Ten Commandments. But that verse says nothing about "anyone being subjected to judgment." The source of the law that Jesus had in mind is found in the covenant God made with Noah.

And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind. (Genesis 9:5b-6)

The **light commandment** is "you shall not be angry with a brother." It is found in the instructions that God gave Cain:

Why, my son, are you angry, and why do you hang your head? There is no cause for it; **you have only to do good and then you will be able to stand firmly on your feet**, with upright stature. But if you fail to do good sin will long to bring you low and cause you to couch upon the ground like itself. Nevertheless you are not delivered into its power, and if only you have the desire, you can oppose it and overcome it and free yourself from its influence (*but you will be able to master it*).<sup>22</sup>

Cain was angry at his brother Abel because God had shown favor to Abel and his gift more than He had for Cain and his gift. God had instructed Cain about how to control his anger (a light commandment) -- which he failed to do -- and that led to the breaking of the heavy commandment (murder). The message was not -- "Thou shalt not be angry." It was to be aware of the potential dangers associated with anger. So, the challenge for Jesus was to build fences that will keep his disciples from those dangers. The first fence Jesus built was this -- "Whoever says to a brother, 'Raka,' shall be answerable to the court."

What does the word RAKA mean? The English translators of most Bibles chose not to tell us. They did not translate the Greek word *ῥακά*; instead they simply transliterated it as "RAKA," which tells us what it sounds like, but not what it means. One reason is that they may not have known its meaning because the Greek word was also transliteration of the Hebrew word *רָקָא* (RAQA). In order to understand its meaning we will once again turn to the Talmud:

[20a] "Our Rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his ass by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah [20b]. There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, 'Peace be upon you, Sir.' He, however, did not return his salutation but instead said to him, '**RAQA** (you useless and empty thing), how ugly you are. Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?' The man replied: 'I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, "How ugly is the vessel which you have made.'

When R. Eleazar realized that he had done wrong he dismounted from the ass and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, 'I submit myself to you, forgive me.' The man replied: 'I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, 'How ugly is the vessel which you have made".'

He [R. Eleazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet him greeting him with the words, 'Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master,' the man asked them, 'Whom are you addressing thus?' They replied, 'The man who is walking behind you.' Thereupon he exclaimed: 'If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel!' The people then asked him: 'Why?' He replied: 'Such and such a thing has he done to me.'

They said to him: 'Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.' The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only on the condition that he does not act in the same manner in the future.' "23

The Hebrew word RAQA means "useless, empty and of no value." One of the first and "heaviest" commandments of the Torah is that "very person is made in the image of God." Calling a person RAQA is a denial of that commandment. The point Jesus was making is that since everyone is made in the "image of God," one should never call "the image of God" RAQA out of anger. One must remember this when one is angry instead of denying it by saying words that devalue the other person. This subject was so important to Jesus that he built a second fence too –

"And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of GEHINNOM (Valley of Hinnom)."

When Jesus used the word "fool" his disciples knew exactly which Scripture he had in mind (Psalm 14:1) – ***"The fool says in his heart, `There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good."*** Jesus had two points in mind here. The first was that a person should not elevate their level of anger by first saying that "the other person was useless and no value" (RAQA), and then saying that "the person's deeds revealed that he or she did not believe that God existed." The second is that Jesus also wanted to make the point that by saying the one knew what all of the other person's deeds were that he or she is putting themselves in God's place as the judge of mankind!

Jesus uses this method repeatedly to build fences around other heavy commandments including: adultery, lust, divorce, oaths, love of neighbor, prayer, forgiveness, fasting, and almsgiving. See if you can identify the fences in the Sermon on the Mount. Understanding this method will elevate your knowledge of the teachings of Jesus to a new level and make it possible to compare what he taught to what your religion's doctrines have said about him.

To wrench Jesus out of his Jewish world destroys Jesus and destroys Christianity, the religion that grew out of his teachings. Even Jesus' most familiar role as Christ is a Jewish role. If Christians leave the concrete realities of Jesus' life and of the history of Israel in favor of a mythic, universal, spiritual Jesus and an otherworldly kingdom of God, they deny their origins in Israel, their history, and the God who has loved and protected Israel and the church.<sup>24</sup>

**BHC**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teach>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.yashanet.com/studies/matstudy/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:3

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:4

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:5

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:6

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:7

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:8

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:10

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:14

<sup>13</sup> Lev. 2:11; Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:4

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 9:1-17

<sup>15</sup> Smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 5:17-18

<sup>17</sup> Talmud; Shabbat 116a-b

<sup>18</sup> Oral Law

<sup>19</sup> Sayings of the Fathers

<sup>20</sup> Avot 1:1

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.elijahnet.net/A%20FENCE%20AROUND%20THE%20TORAH.html>

<sup>22</sup> A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One From Adam to Noah by Umberto Cassuto; p. 210-212.

<sup>23</sup> Taanit 20a-b

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/was-jesus-a-jew/?mqsc=E2924375>

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*BIBLICAL HERITAGE CENTER'S*  
**September Memorials**

*In Loving Memory*

**KAREN  
LEYNOR**

March 31, 1966  
September 9, 2004

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

*May the memories of our loved ones  
inspire us to seek in our lives  
those qualities of mind and heart  
which we recall with special gratitude.*

*May we help to bring closer to  
fulfillment*

*Their highest ideals and noblest  
strivings.*

*May the memories of our loved ones  
deepen our loyalty  
to that which cannot die --*

*Our faith, our love, and  
devotion to our heritage.*

*(Yitzhor Reflections – The New Mahzor – The  
Prayer Book Press)*

*In Loving Memory*

**JAMES  
EDGAR  
MYERS, SR.**

September 13, 1913  
September 19, 1999

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

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**Thank you!**