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Point 4: Jesus— The Time Is Fulfilled

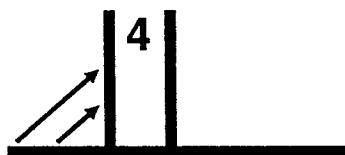
THE CLIMACTIC TIME BEGINS

Under the Law the covenant people of God were 'holding' a position, living in separation from the world while remaining in the midst of it. But this situation was not static.

Throughout the Old Testament period, an attitude of expectation built up. It became very clear that the history of God's people was pointing forward towards a special time—what the prophets called 'the Day of the Lord'. This expectant waiting period, as the Old Testament increasingly emphasizes, is associated with a Person—the Messiah. He is seen as an anointed, kingly figure who will bring in and establish God's rule on the earth. The 'Day of the Lord' is the time of His coming.

Point 4 on our diagram represents the time Jesus of Nazareth was on earth. It is bounded by His coming and His going (the two upright lines in the diagram indicate this). This period of history—which includes Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven—we may call, as a whole, the 'Christ event'. Although we may focus our atten-

tion on any one of these aspects, we can think of Jesus' time on earth as a unit.



When Jesus of Nazareth was born, it was not an event disconnected from the whole plan of God. It was the culmination and fulfilment of that plan. In His Person, God came in the flesh to His creation and His rule came to earth. This fact is constantly expressed in Jesus' own teaching about the kingdom (or rule) of God.

So God's 'gospel'—His 'good news'—is first a statement about a change of scene on the stage of history. The period of waiting for the Messiah has finished. The time of God's promised age has come—and men need to perceive the change in the times.

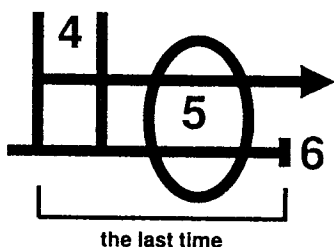
Second, this change of scene means the coming of God's rule. It is not simply the end of a time of waiting; God is about to deliver the promise His people have been waiting for! This promise has to do with a Person—the One God has chosen to do His great rescuing work.

Third, God requires a particular response to this scene-change. The rescue to establish a basis for reconciliation with God has begun, so it is appropriate for people to actively turn away from their life of rebellion against Him. It follows they should believe that the Person confronting them in Jesus of Nazareth is God's only Son and bow to His authority to rule their life.

THE TIME IS FULFILLED

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God. He said, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15, RSV).

This statement points us back to what had been happening on stage up to this point. Jesus did not just imply in a general sense that time had passed; He said a *particular* time had come to its fruition. It was the time of the kingdom, the final time which the Old Testament prophets promised. Their vision was centred on the arrival of the Messiah, who would be a Person of God's choice and who would carry out God's redemptive purposes for His people. He would bring judgement on His enemies after being given dominion over all the nations.



In all this Person did, He was the real agent of God Himself. As our diagram shows, the final accomplishment of God's purpose is still future and will be achieved only when the Lord returns for judgement (Point 6). But Jesus' announcement that 'the time is fulfilled' meant God's final purpose had begun with Jesus' coming. The new day had dawned; the climactic time of all history had commenced.

We are still in that climactic time, in what the Bible calls 'the last days'. The Old Testament saw the last days as the final and catastrophic time. They included the coming of the Messiah, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, a final judgement, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. All

these elements are in the Old Testament. This climactic time includes everything between Point 4 and Point 6 in our diagram.

ACTION

Understand that the time in which we live is primarily controlled by two realities: what God has already done in Christ, and what He is about to do in the events of Point 6. We live in a place of tension between Jesus' first and second comings.

SCRIBES AND PHARISEES: TRADITIONALISTS WHO MISSED THE CHANGE OF SCENE

It was at the point of Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God had come that Jewish reaction set in.

Jesus' great objection to the rabbis and the Pharisees was that they failed to recognize what God was doing among them. They missed the change of scene. They wanted God to stay at Point 3. They insisted that Jesus' disciples should fast (Mk 2:18–20) and not pluck ears of grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23–28). In the first instance, Jesus reminded them that the Bridegroom had come and it was therefore time for feasting. But the scribes and Pharisees could not perform their part in God's play faithfully because they had not discerned it was party time. On the second occasion, He stated that the Law was God's gift to serve Man (a fact He showed that King David appreciated), and that now the Lord of the Sabbath law was present. But the scribes and Pharisees had become slaves to the Law in a way God never intended.

As we shall see, this failure to recognize that 'the time is fulfilled' was the underlying problem in all the hostile encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees' basic starting point was the position at Point 3. They were very serious and zealous people. Their commitment to the Law and the Prophets was of a high order. Jesus' criticisms of them, which came to light in the many tests the Pharisees set for Him, involved three main ideas.

THE PROBLEMS OF TIME AND CHANGE

The first problem area for these traditionalists was their reading of the Old Testament—and behind this, their basic commitment to God Himself.

They began with the presupposition that what God required of them was the fulfilling of the Law. This attention to what God wanted was right; however, they failed to pay sufficient attention to *who* required it, *why*, and *when*.

Their mistake was to focus on the externals of law-keeping and by so doing forget the 'Who' behind the Law. They forgot that the Law was really a relationship with a Person and consequently failed to understand the mind of the One behind it.

They looked for their security in law-keeping—a security based on their own performance. Their concern was to hedge themselves around with the surety of not breaking any of the laws, even by accident, so they attempted to legislate for every possible situation. The legislations accumulated through the many judgements handed down by the scribes who came before them. These 'traditions' of the elders came to be considered so authoritative that Jesus perceived they detracted from what God Himself had said. They became confused with the words of God.

TRADITION: WHAT IS 'OF MAN' AND WHAT IS 'OF GOD'?

This confusion was the real problem in their system and the basis of Jesus' second criticism. The constant need to supplement what God had said with the judgements of the scribes was effectively an admission that the Law was not exhaustive. Moreover, the fact that such additions arose when the Law was applied to particular situations meant the scribes were aware of the need to adapt the external doing of the Law to changing contexts. But by recording these specific adaptations they actually added to the Law, and consequently confused people about what was 'of man' and what was 'of God'.

Deep within the pharisaical system were these warnings of

the need to grapple with the change which accompanies the passing of time. Faithful living means watching the times in which one lives. Only God is unchanging; He, not a petrified legal system, is the rock-like Person who provides the stability in a life of flux. They knew that, but they did not live it.

At one time the Pharisees, accompanied by some scribes from Jerusalem, tackled Jesus about His disciples' failure to wash their hands before eating. The point involved the kind of ritual purification the Pharisees used. Jesus had these incisive words for them.

He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men' (Mark 7:6-8).

Our practice can involve us in the same problems. Too often we have adopted solutions we have been taught from the past, rather than thinking things through for ourselves. In fact, because of our reliance on tradition, we have never developed the framework to do our own thinking. This does not mean older solutions are always suspect—quite the reverse. But time is always moving, and we are never living where our forefathers were. We would do well to examine the Christian behaviour we have been taught and uncover the confusion between the 'words of God' and the 'traditions of man' in our own generation.

ACTION

1 It is really important to watch what God is doing at any given moment. Often we ask God for guidance, by which we mean some kind of divine information about what we should do; but rather than promising guidance, God promises to be

a Guide. He will personally walk with us. This means we need to find out what God is doing so we can move with Him. Be a careful, prayerful observer of the times. Ask God to show you His mind about things—then pray it back to Him and watch what He will do.

2 Read your Bible very carefully *for yourself*. Do not accept old solutions to practical problems too readily—God can, and often does, do a new thing. Consult Him about what you should do now.

3 Sort out in your life what is from Man and what is from God. Beware of the pragmatic kind of theology which repeats things simply because they ‘work’. No two situations are ever really the same.

4 Rely constantly on the Holy Spirit. Honour His work in you, for He is the Guide. Do not confuse Scripture with His work—many Christians today do. The Bible teaches us the mind of God and what He has done in history; it also teaches us to rely on the Holy Spirit in the present. To do so is to walk by faith. Trust the guidance of the Spirit, and then, if you are not sure you have heard Him, check with the Bible. But do not confuse the two. Hear Him first.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ‘LEGAL’ SINNER

Jesus’ statement about ‘Corban’ in Mark 7:9–13 illustrates the third problem in the Pharisees’ approach. If a man declared that the support his parents might have counted on was Corban—that is, dedicated to God or the subject of an oath—then, in spite of the fifth commandment, his parents would lose their means of support. In this way, the Mishnah (the traditions built on rabbinic judgements) could be used to actually *avoid* doing what God intended when He gave the Law. This made it possible to sin ‘legally’.

This is the difficulty with law—faithfulness to it can be gauged only by checking external acts. It does not deal with motive. Under the Law, no one can be hanged for thinking.

Constant preoccupation with external acts alone leads to a mentality which never looks within, to the person.

Jesus' diagnosis was that the centre of the problem was not the doing of acts. Actions were only a symptom of the sickness within the man. Jesus corrected the Pharisees' emphasis by pointing to the problem of the heart. Actions expose the appalling condition of rebellious man.

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him "unclean" by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean" ' (Mark 7:14-15).

Later, when His disciples questioned Him further, He went on:

'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean"? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'.)

He went on: 'What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean." For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean" ' (Mark 7:18b-23).

What this says, in practical terms, is that our motivation for doing things is fundamental. Jesus' radical requirements went to the very heart. A man can sin in what he thinks. That this corruption is deep within man was also taught by the Old Testament. (See the large number of Old Testament quotations which Paul heaps up in Romans 3:1-18, and carefully read Ezekiel 36:22-28.)

Through His teaching, Jesus continually undercut the

statements of those who trusted in Man's performance. Such people are deceived because they have forgotten their basic powerlessness to do good—an inability which arises out of their rebellion. What Jesus anticipated was the need for the regeneration of a man's spirit (John 3:3) and the need to inwardly receive God's Spirit (John 14:16) as a solution to this inability.

THE NEED TO GO BACK TO POINT 1

The fundamental problem with the Pharisees' system was that it failed to properly discern that the meaning of the Law was inextricably linked to its historical context. As we saw in Chapter 5, the Law was given after the Fall, and its primary meaning is found by asking two questions: Who gave it? When, and to what situation, was it given? The Pharisees did not pay sufficient attention to the second question. Our analogies of the classroom detention and martial law at a time of rebellion illustrate the basic New Testament answer.

This perspective is used by Jesus in a radical way with the question thrown to Him about divorce.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'

'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female", and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.'

'Why, then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a

man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’

Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.’

The disciples said to him, ‘If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry’ (Matthew 19:1–10).

This encounter is typical of Jesus’ conversations with the Pharisees. In it all the large themes we have noted are exposed.

The Pharisees begin their questioning with the presupposition that ‘what is lawful’ is the issue that should be at the forefront of any rabbi’s mind. This preoccupation with law determines their basic attitude to others: when they encounter their neighbour they legalistically check him out. They are always watching to see how he handles himself in practice in the crucial decisions of life. It is essentially a judging attitude; in fact, a man preoccupied with the question ‘what is lawful?’ has no option but to relate to his neighbour (to say nothing of himself) as a judge. This, however, is a dangerous position. Only God has the right to judge His creatures.

Significantly, Jesus refuses to conduct a discussion about marriage on the basis of Point 3 (the Law for a fallen world). He radically pushes the Pharisees back to Point 1: ‘But it was not this way from the beginning.’ If we want to know the meaning of marriage, we must go back to the beginning. We must see what God wanted it to be in the first place. In this way, Jesus forces the Pharisees to acknowledge that the Mosaic Law was not the place where God began—and neither should they.

This perspective is not confined to marriage. Behind it is the basic principle of how Point 1 is juxtaposed with Point 3. Jesus insists that Point 3 is fundamentally to be understood in

the light of what has already been revealed at Point 1. The radical statement 'it was not this way from the beginning' lays bare His questioners' ignorance of the great movements in God's programme in history.

To their counter-question about the purpose of the Mosaic divorce law (v 7), Jesus answers that this law was given 'because your hearts were hard'. He clearly sees that the backdrop to the Mosaic provision was the presumption of Man's disorientation from God's intended relation. The Law was a provision for rebels. It assumed Man was naturally lawless.

Jesus applies this answer to the fallen world of the present. His words are really a call for repentance. He is not just giving a lesson in theology; He is outlining the appropriate response for His listeners. He is not suggesting we can return to Point 1, as if we could live in the garden again. Rather, He is calling for repentance at two levels.

First, He is reminding those who, like the Pharisees, have confused God's emergency provisions with his original intention that their starting point is fundamentally wrong. By their use of Law, they have adapted to the Rebellion rather than stood firmly against it. He calls them to turn away from this attitude. They will then discover that doing what God wants in a fallen world always involves freedom from the Law, in the sense that the Law is no longer our basic starting point. Rather, we start with the saving acts of a gracious God.

Second, Jesus is insisting that, although all life is lived under the shadow of the Fall, the gospel of the kingdom of God (Himself) announces a radically new way to live, with a new power. Jesus calls His hearers to return to God *Himself*, not to His Law, and to a living relationship with Him as the basis for doing His will.

ACTION

1 We need to look very carefully at our lives at this point. Although we do not disregard the Law of God (we will

consider our attitude to law in Chapter 12), we are careful not to be legalists. Many Christians stumble here. We must heed Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (5:1).

2 We saw in Chapter 3 that godly living in a fallen world means warfare against spiritual powers. In Chapter 7 we will see that Jesus was also involved in this warfare and that it is the central issue of the coming of God's rule on earth. However, it is possible to take refuge in law as a safe place to escape the tension of the battle. Check you are not using law in this way—to do so is to adapt to the rebellion of the world rather than fight.

3 Do not believe you can live the Christian life by keeping laws—it is not possible (study Romans 5–7). Rather, rely on God's power. We will say more about this later.

4 You may need to repent of your 'legalist' way of living and quite clearly abandon it. If so, do it today; do not put it off. God will meet you in that repentance and confession with forgiveness and with power to live the true way.

5 Read through Mark's Gospel and make a list of the encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees (and others like them). Write out their objections to Jesus and His teaching. Do the same with 'the Jews' in John's Gospel.

Before the next chapter: Read Luke 11:14–20; Romans 5:12–21 and 8:19–23.