

Sermon on the Mount

June 1, 2014

## **Title: Woolly Bear Theology**

Text: Matthew 5:17-20

Summary: What can the Woolly Bear teach us about how we can enter God's Kingdom? It turns out that the caterpillar's journey from inching across the pavement to flying above the trees as a Tiger Moth is a wonderful picture of the deep change that God works in us, if we will trust Him enough to let it happen.

### **Law: Abolished or Fulfilled?**

**The Lawgiver:**

**Matthew 5:17-18 NIV**

**"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."**

The Law, known by Jews from Jesus' day to our own as *Torah*, was cherished as God's supreme gift to His people. It told them who they were; it told them how to live. It marked them out as a unique people among all the peoples of the earth. In fact, by Jesus' time many Jewish people had come to see that "if the Temple was the place where...Torah had made its home, any place in which Torah was studied might become an alternative Temple." (Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, p. 107)

Now a new teacher had come on the scene, announcing that God had at long last come back to dwell with His people. And before He describes what it means to live as God's child in God's Kingdom, He anchors Himself and everything He has to say in Torah.

So what would that look like: not abolishing the ancient Law, but *fulfilling it*? Jesus, after all, was a very different kind of teacher with a very different kind of message. The typical teacher of Torah -- from village rabbi to the scholars in Jerusalem -- spent most of their time debating how the laws fit their current situation. One would propose a particular application; another would challenge him. The argument stretched out over generations, each one poring over the ancient scrolls, connecting the present with the past.

And then here was a rabbi saying:

**"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."**

## **Woolly Bears:**

So what was the difference between adding a new paragraph to the generations of Torah interpretation on the one hand, and *fulfilling* the Torah on the other?

We might find an answer in a little creature that we often see crawling across the pavement on a warm autumn day: the woolly bear caterpillar. Woolly bears are those fuzzy caterpillars that are black at both ends and rust red in the middle.

Folklore says that you can predict the severity of the winter by looking at how wide or narrow the red band is on the caterpillar. In any event, woolly bears are well equipped for the harshest of winters. They crawl around in the fall looking for a place to hide. Once they find it, their bodies produce an antifreeze that keeps them from freezing to death all the way down to -90 degrees F. Then in the spring they wake up, spin a cocoon, and two weeks later they emerge as a Tiger Moth.

Look at a woolly bear and you would never know that it was destined to be a beautiful moth. But the woolly bear was never intended to only every be a woolly bear. The woolly bear was always intended to be a tiger moth. When the woolly bear spins its cocoon and stops being a caterpillar it isn't *abolishing* itself. It is just doing what has to happen if it is to *fulfill* its destiny.

## **Torah fulfilled:**

And this is precisely what Jesus was saying when He explained that He didn't come to abolish the Law, but rather to fulfill it.

He was saying that God's Torah, God's gift, God's Word that had sustained and defined the Jewish people for so many centuries and through so many hardships, was itself about to *change*. The change would not be through another rabbi adding another footnote of interpretation here and there. The change would be as profound as the difference between a caterpillar creeping across the ground and a moth fluttering through the air.

Therefore, no matter how alarming the change might seem to be -- no matter how much it might look like Jesus was going against the ancient laws -- the reality was that Torah was about to become something even more wonderful. God's rescue of the human race that had begun in one small exclusive people, would soon embrace all the peoples of the world.

## **Different form/same DNA**

### **The divine constant:**

Jesus goes on to reinforce the continuity -- the "divine constant" -- in a fulfilled Torah:

### **Matthew 5:19 NIV**

**"Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."**

He is about to issue a renewed statement of Torah -- God's Law for God's Rule in God's Kingdom. This Kingdom will not look like the expectation of a renewed King David kingdom made up of loyal and observant Jews. But make no mistake: it is the Kingdom of the same God, just in its fulfilled form.

### **Woolly Bear DNA:**

Again, the little woolly bear can help us understand what Jesus was saying. The woolly bear began as an egg laid by an adult tiger moth. Inside that egg was the DNA that would make the fuzzy black and red caterpillar. That same DNA would reorganize the caterpillar into a tiger moth. And then the tiger moth would pass along its DNA to the next generation.

In other words, regardless of the stage of metamorphosis, the DNA is always the same. A woolly bear doesn't spin its cocoon and come out a frog or a robin. It always and only emerges as the adult form of its species, a tiger moth. Change the DNA and you don't get a healthy adult tiger moth; you get a mutation. At every stage along the way it is essential that the DNA be passed along, replicated in the birthing of every cell, in its original condition. Otherwise, no tiger moth.

### **Kingdom of Heaven DNA:**

What's true of the woolly bear/tiger moth is equally true of God's Kingdom. Jesus warns that the true deep DNA of the Kingdom never changes. That's why He says:

**"Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."**

To "set aside one of the least of these commands" is like "setting aside" some of the DNA of the woolly bear. Corrupted woolly bear DNA results in a dead or mutated tiger moth. Likewise, if we corrupt the DNA of God's Kingdom, we miss out on God's Kingdom. We may create something interesting or popular. We may be very proud of our creation. But it will not be God's Kingdom.

On the other hand, when we fully embrace the deep DNA of God's Kingdom, we experience God's transforming power. Like the little woolly bear, we discover that God

has something far greater than the life we've ever known. We become "great in the kingdom of heaven."

## **A Greater "Righteousness"**

### **Greater righteousness:**

Jesus has one more thing to say about Torah before He begins to spell out what it means in daily life:

#### **Matthew 5:20 NIV**

**"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."**

The Pharisees were a religious movement within the Judaism of Jesus' time that sought to bring about God's Rule through the strict observance of Torah, right down to the most minute details of daily life. They were not trying to earn God's favor. They already knew themselves to be God's Chosen People. Rather, they were anxious to demonstrate this identity by doing things God's Chosen People were commanded to do. Doing what Torah required was like a badge that identified them as God's People and announced to God that finally He had faithful people on this earth.

So when Jesus speaks of the "righteousness" of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, He is talking about this intense effort to live out Torah in real life. But this effort was ultimately self-defeating. God's rescue mission, after all, was for the whole human race! Their intensification of Torah created an insurmountable barrier between them and the world that God wanted to rescue through them. Their efforts guaranteed that they would not associate with pagans, much less welcome them into God's family. The end result was that they closed the door to the kingdom instead of opening it. As Jesus would put it on another day in Jerusalem:

#### **Matthew 23:13 NIV**

**"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."**

### **Woolly Bear Wings:**

In a way, their quest was like that of a misguided woolly bear that might think being a better caterpillar was the fulfillment of its destiny. Woolly Bear "Righteousness" would mean being the biggest, woolliest, most impressive Woolly Bear. But that kind of "righteousness" would never earn it wings. Instead, the Woolly Bear has to trade in its

caterpillar identity for something brand new -- that of a Tiger Moth. It needs to achieve "Tiger Moth Righteousness" if it is to truly become what it was meant to be.

Jesus said that the same distinction applied to God's Chosen People. They were now faced with the "cocoon moment" -- the need to be reconfigured around Him as the King. Only then could they discover a "greater righteousness" than they could ever define or attempt on their own.

### **Woolly Bear Theology:**

So, when Jesus says that our rightness or "righteousness" must exceed that of the most strict adherents of the ancient Law, you might think that He was saying everyone would have to try even harder than the Pharisees -- an impossible task, like asking a Woolly Bear to fly.

But Jesus had something far more powerful in mind. The prophet Jeremiah -- one of the prophets whose message He had come to fulfill -- wrote:

### **Jeremiah 31:33-34 NIV**

**"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord.**

**"I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.**

**"No longer will they teach their neighbor,  
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"  
declares the Lord.**

**"For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more."**

Jeremiah is saying that God would change His people from the inside out. Instead of merely giving them more rules to follow, He would change their hearts and minds -- write His Law on their hearts. Then, and only then, would human beings be able to truly reflect their Creator.

Call it Woolly Bear Theology: something that only happens by letting God transform, *metamorphose*, us.

So what stage are you at when it comes to Woolly Bear Theology?

- Are you crawling along, trying to be a better person, comparing yourself to those who seem to soar above you, wondering how you'll ever get your wings?
- Are you bumping into the same old, same old? Anger, lust, fear, self in its various forms?
- Are you unsure of how God sees you, if He sees you at all?

Maybe it's "cocoon time." Maybe it's time to stop trying to make caterpillars fly. Maybe it's time to let God do the writing of His Law deep inside you. Maybe it's time to be born all over again -- this time with wings.

That's Woolly Bear Theology!