

Oaths, Retaliation, and Loving Our Enemies (Matt 5.33-48)

I. REVIEW

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is inviting his disciples into a greater experience of the blessed life (whole, complete, fulfilled, satisfied). This is centered around the eight beatitudes (Matt 5.3-12), which are the most succinct portrait of the values of the kingdom of heaven. The presence and growth of these virtues are the mark of our discipleship (Matt 5.13-16) and the measure of true and lasting greatness (Matt 5.17-20).
- B. In Matthew 5.21-48, Jesus outlines six areas that must be *actively resisted* as we seek to walk in wholehearted obedience to his ways. His call is for us to be perfect (whole, complete) as the Father in heaven, and embody an internal righteousness that surpasses the outward righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees (5.20).
- C. These six commandments of Jesus are intended to *demonstrate the severity of sin* (like a spiritual cancer) and *maximize our joy* (what it means to be fully alive). To miss this important element of Jesus' words will distort our desire to pursue obedience in accordance with his grace.
- D. This morning, we will cover the final three temptations that Jesus invites us to resist.
 - 1. The temptation to not keep our word and break our commitments (5.33-37)
 - 2. The temptation to retaliate with vengeance when dishonored or wronged (5.38-42)
 - 3. The temptation to excuse and harbor hate in our hearts (5.43-48)

II. OATHS AND MAKING FALSE COMMITMENTS (5.33-37)

- A. The fourth temptation that Jesus addresses in this section has to deal with our propensity to not keep our word or our agreements. In this statement, Jesus does not quote a specific law from the Old Testament, but gives a summary teaching that would have likely been understood by many in his day (cf. Exod 20.7; Lev 19.12; Num 30.2; Deut 23.21).
- B. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees had misapplied the meaning of the third commandment (not taking the Lord's name in vain). In its context, this was a prohibition against swearing an oath (calling upon the name of the Lord as solemn witness to hold you to your word).
- C. The Pharisees seemed to have shifted the emphasis away from the vow itself (and the need to follow through on it) to the formula for making the vow. In this sense, to "swear falsely" meant to them that they could not profane God's name, not that they could not perjure the name of God. Rather than standing as a commandment against breaking our oaths, they believed that only oaths made in the Lord's name were binding.

¹⁶Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by an oath.' (Matt 23.16)
- D. Jesus is intent to show his disciples that the point of not swearing falsely is not concerned with the formula used in making a vow (external in nature), but rather has to do with the heart reality of not breaking our commitments. Jesus' injunction to his disciples is to *not swear at all*. This is not speaking of legal contexts, but to our conversations with others. Jesus is stating that our word should be truthful, whether or not we make a specific oath or not.
- E. Similar to Jesus' teaching on divorce, the issue was not about letting a lack of fidelity and follow through be permitted as long as you went through the proper external process.
- F. The purpose of oaths, made in God's name, was always intended to restrict the tendency within us to lie and present ourselves as something we are not.

- G. Jesus invites his followers to live in a different manner. He exhorts us to let our *yes be yes*, and our *no be no*. This is speaking of having integrity with our word and following through on our commitments. In other words, we are to be people who keep our promises and people of our word.
- H. When we do not follow through with our commitments, integrity requires that we acknowledge this to others. There is a spirit of grace that can abound when we fall short, but we must be committed to confessing this and acknowledging it to those whom it affects. This can be applied in marriages, families, vocations, among friends, etc.
- I. The essence of this commandment is that we are not to manipulate by promoting ourselves in a false way. This is what is meant by *hypocrisy* throughout the teachings of Jesus. We are not to present ourselves as one thing without the intention, the commitment, or the heart reality of *seeking* to follow through.

III. RETALIATION (MATT 5.38-42)

- A. In this fifth temptation, Jesus invites us to resist a spirit of retaliation and defensiveness toward others who insult us or take advantage of us.
- B. The images that Jesus uses to demonstrate and instruct his disciples in this section are well known to most Christians. However, their meanings are often misunderstood. Because of this, many Christians do not know how to rightly apply these principles in their lives with wisdom.
- C. There have been many streams throughout the church's history that have used these verses to promote some type of Christian pacifism. These streams (i.e., Anabaptist, Quaker, etc.) have seen these verses as teaching against utilizing any type of force in resistance of evil (state, police, soldiers, political, legal, etc.). However, this is not what Jesus is attempting to teach in this statement.
- D. The basic thrust of Jesus' teaching is demonstrating that his followers are called to not participate in a spirit of vengeance, defensiveness, and retaliation in the face of being dishonored or taken advantage of.
- E. The command to take "eye for an eye" and a "tooth for a tooth" was given to provide *legal parameters* to justice within civil courts. It was not intended to provide justification for *personal retaliation*. Jesus understands that we do not have the *wisdom* to seek out vindication for ourselves — we lack the right spirit, the right measure, and the right process to do this ourselves.
- F. Jesus uses four images to demonstrate one central point. Understanding each of these images allows us to derive the *principles* from Jesus' teaching, without seeing them as unrealistic or utopian in a way that is not attainable.
 1. ***Turning the other cheek***: This image is not primarily used to speak of suffering physical injury (like hitting or beating), but rather of being insulted. To be hit on the *right* cheek by someone (presuming they are right-handed) shows that this is a backhanded slap, intended to insult and dishonor the person (belittling them) more than attempting to injure them. In our present context, this would be similar to someone spitting in your face, or dishonoring your name (verbal, technological, etc.).
 2. ***Being sued for your shirt***: This speaks of an opponent using legal means to extract "small claims" from us. The picture here is of someone's pettiness and using legal measures to extract it from you. Here Jesus is not telling his followers to never seek to protect their livelihood or ability to provide for/protect others.
 3. ***Being forced to go on mile***: In Jesus' day, Roman soldiers had the legal authority to require a man to carry his gear for up to one mile. This was something that fostered deep-seated measures of spite, disdain, and hatred for the Romans among those they oppressed. This is a type of inconvenience and humiliation that requires time and energy.

4. **Generosity and borrowing:** Here Jesus is calling his disciples to walk with a generous spirit, particularly in the face of those who are adversarial or disposed toward us in evil. He wants his people to walk with a free spirit that does not resent or become embittered toward those who trouble us. This is not Jesus' teaching that his disciples give in every circumstance to any who asks (cf. 2 Thes 3.10).

G. The main thrust of Jesus' teaching here is to invite his disciples to *resist* the temptation to retaliate and take up their own cause with a spirit of defensiveness.

H. Jesus understands that resentment, vindictiveness, and retaliation will keep our hearts in bondage as we fight to bring vindication and justice to our own name. He wants us to walk with a free heart, trusting that he will ultimately bring true justice and vindication *in his time*.

¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom 12.19)

I. Paul encourages believers to walk with a posture of allowing themselves to *be wronged*.

¹When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare to go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ...⁶brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Cor 6.1, 6-7)

J. Peter encourages Christians to walk in a spirit of love that covers a multitude of wrongdoings.

⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4.8)

K. In a sermon based on these verses, Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that "hate multiplies hate... in a descending spiral of violence."

L. This invitation by Jesus is to actively resist using our power (strength, gifts, resources, etc.) to vindicate ourselves and fight for our own rights and, at times, even our own well-being. This is a *means* through which we will operate in greater levels of meekness, mercy, and peacemaking —thus cultivating the values of the kingdom in deeper ways in our lives by God's grace.

IV. LOVING OUR ENEMIES (MATT 5.43-47)

A. The final of the six temptations is an active call to not harbor hatred in our hearts toward even our enemies. It would be easy to believe in the commandment as Jesus' hearers had come to understand it, that if we love our neighbors, we are free to hate (at worse) or be passively indifferent (at best) toward our enemies.

B. However, Jesus declares that the people of his new covenant family, people who embody the **greater righteousness** of his kingdom, will not only love their neighbors, but will love even their enemies.

C. It is remarkable to not retaliate and take matters into our own hands when faced with difficulty and hardship. This alone takes the grace of God. However, Jesus does not simply leave it at indifference by not reacting. Jesus invites his hearers to step toward their enemies through **active expressions of love**.

D. In Luke's version of this teaching, Jesus lays out the practical activities that demonstrate a call to love our enemies.

²⁷But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6.27-28)

1. **Do good:** Jesus invites his hearers to look for active and practical ways to do good toward those who hate them. This means that we use our time, energy, and resources to meet their needs if we see them.

2. **Bless:** This demonstrates that we are to speak words of blessing both *to* our enemies and *about* our enemies. Often times we seek to use our words to garner support or sympathy for ourselves when we have been wronged or opposed. Jesus declares that we are to not use our words to tear down others in order to bring vindication to ourselves. Rather, we are to actively bless them as far as possible.
 3. **Pray:** The final way we are invited to show active *love* for our enemies is to pray for those who oppose us. We are to stand before God on their behalf and ask that they receive his grace, forgiveness, are enlightened to his truth, and (when they are not his followers) that they would turn and be saved.
- E. Jesus earlier declared that one of the most potent ways this is expressed is through slander and reviling (Matt 5.11). To slander or revile is when people share negative reports about someone to others without walking out the biblical process. Jesus' call to his disciples is to not respond in kind, but to respond in the *opposite spirit*.
- F. Jesus wants us to respond in this way because in doing so (enabled by his grace) we act like our Father who is in heaven (5.45). God is long-suffering toward those who hate him, who accuse him, and who are his enemies. Although there will be a day when he brings ultimate justice, he is still patient and slow to anger toward them. Jesus demonstrates this by evidence from the created order — God's enemies do not deserve the rain, the sun, or the natural order to continue to work for them to be provided for.
- G. God ultimately demonstrated his love toward his enemies by giving of his Son *while* we were yet his enemies. This marks the standard of love that we are to seek to represent in this world. This means that we seek to love without self-concern or self-interest, even when others are unthankful and evil toward us.

³⁵Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. (Luke 6.35)

⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... ¹⁰For while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. (Rom 5.8, 10)

V. BE PERFECT (MATT 5.48)

- A. Jesus concludes this section (Matt 5.21-48) outlining six areas of temptation that we are to actively resist by exhorting his hearers to embody a greater righteousness than was being taught by the Scribes and Pharisees (cf. Matt 5.20). Rather than simply enacting an external righteousness, Jesus is inviting his disciples to be cleansed in the depths of their hearts by his forgiving power, and to walk in obedience and purity in the secret and hidden places of the heart by his grace.
- B. The call to *be perfect* is not, in this context, Jesus outlining a new law, or a new measuring stick by which his disciples were to gain relationship with God. The Greek word (*teleios*) speaks of wholeness, uprightness, and completeness, not an idea of sinless perfection.
- C. Jesus invites his disciples to pursue ***wholehearted obedience*** to God in every area of their lives — thought, word, and deed.
- D. To be wholehearted means that there are not areas of sin that we are complacent with. We cannot live in compromise in any area of our lives and presume upon God's future grace.
- E. This does not mean that we necessarily have victory over every area of sin in our lives, simply that we are giving Jesus our "all" in every area he has illuminated to us by his Spirit. To give our "all" means we pursue obedience with a posture of ***repentance*** (naming sin as sin), ***confidence*** (receiving God's free gift of righteousness in Christ Jesus), and ***actively waging war*** (setting our hearts to obey empowered by his grace).
- F. To pursue this heart posture is to pursue a life of true "blessedness" (i.e., satisfaction, joy, wholeness). Walking in a spirit of obedience leads to a vibrant heart and true joy in the grace of God.