

## Matthew 5:33-48 – “Loving Your Enemies” – Dec. 18, 2022

1. Two weeks ago we looked at the topic of divorce, and I had planned to speak on oaths that same Sunday as there's a natural connection
  - a. Between the difficult nature of the topic as well as time for communion, the piece on oaths was left for today
2. Husband with marriage trouble
  - a. Bible says to love your wife
  - b. Bible says to love your neighbour
  - c. Bible says to love your enemy
3. VV.33-37 – *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*
  - a. Lest we think that Christ is just arbitrarily jumping from topic to topic, notice that all these specific applications – anger, lust, divorce, and now oaths are in the context of His teaching that He came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.
  - b. In many ways, what he's doing here is a more in-depth teaching on the law of Moses – He's showing the root of the matter that was the foundation of the law God gave to Moses
    - i. Many of these things are tied to the 10 Commandments – murder, adultery, and now bearing false witness

- c. Jesus starts by the simple truth that we ought not to bear false witness
  - i. He's repeating the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 5:5, that it is "*Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.*"
- d. Here too we may run into difficulty if we consider what the Bible elsewhere says about oaths
  - i. Jesus Himself speaks under oath (Matthew 26:63)
  - ii. Paul invokes a kind of oath, calling God as his witness (Romans 1:9)
  - iii. God Himself confirms His promise with an oath (Hebrews 6:13-18; Acts 2:30)
  - iv. Some places in the law prescribe oaths under certain circumstances (Numbers 5:19, 21; 30:2, 3)
- e. So, taking the whole of Scripture, this seems less like a categorical forbidding of oaths under all circumstances and more like an opportunity to consider how our words should always be honest and truthful
- f. Part of the problem of the customs of the day was that people would have a scale of how serious they took their oaths
- g. Jesus mentions some of the things that people swear by – heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one's own head
- h. The problem with legalism and gnat straining is that it's often looking for a way out, a loophole
- i. If your heart's desire is to be honest, then why would a graded system of oaths be necessary?

- j. The reason the Pharisees had all these different things to swear by was because some of their oaths were taken more seriously than others – it became a game of swearing by something lesser so you had an out if needed
- k. Kids do this on the playground – maybe others also remember “*cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye*” could get escalated to “*I swear on my Mother’s grave*”
  - i. These kinds of things show how vain many of our words are
  - ii. To swear on your mother’s grave is a silly prospect – in the grave your mother has no means to hold you accountable
- l. Ultimately it is God who hears all our words and all the commitments we make, and so all our pledges, oaths, commitments and promises have God as their witness
- m. Our word should mean what we say it means at all times, because in one sense we are always speaking before the face of God
  - i. We should speak the truth even in the absence of an oath
  - ii. An oath has the weight of public witnesses, of ceremony, and of clear threats if we break them, but this should serve as a reminder to us of the weight of things that we do, like getting married in front of witnesses or keeping our word to a customer or a business partner
    - 1. A boy can promise whatever he likes in the heat of the moment in the back of a car, but the public ceremony of going to the front of a church and making vows in front of God and witnesses puts the proper weight and perspective on his words

2. The owner of a business upstart can make all kinds of commitments to get his first sale, but a written contract should cause him to think about what he's doing
  3. This isn't an excuse to be careless in other circumstances however
- n. When I served on one farm board, one of our key employees left to take a job on a farm where he was promised an ownership stake and an opportunity to take over with time
    - i. As time went on, it became clear that some of these promises were made to attract a talented individual and there was no intention for the owners to follow through
    - ii. Nothing was in writing, so there wasn't anything illegal that happened, but the morality of saying one thing and doing another doesn't change based on whether there's a formal oath
    - iii. The farm owners did not let their yes mean yes and their no mean no
  - o. We are to be people of the truth, and this means keeping our word even when it's not under oath
  - p. This has a practical application in everyday life with our families
  - q. If we tell our children we'll do something, we need to
    - i. It's easy when kids are pestering to say "yes" in order to get the pestering to stop, but if we say yes, we're obligated
    - ii. If you have no intention, then don't say it
  - r. The same goes the other way too when we threaten discipline
    - i. If discipline is promised, then follow through

- ii. Kids learn very fast that empty threats erode authority and they will adjust their behaviour accordingly
- iii. I often think of this when I see parents counting to 3 with a disobedient young child
  - 1. First off, why are they allowed to defy their parents for a set amount of time?
  - 2. Second, counting to 3 generally ends in the parents slowly stepping away
    - a. 1..2.....2.5.....
    - b. The countdown slows as the child calls the parents on the bluff – he already knows that the words are empty, so why bother with quick obedience?
- 4. We can see the connection between divorce and oaths in this way – when we make a commitment, it is to mean something
  - a. In all our actions, we are reflecting the image of God, and God is a covenant keeping God
- 5. VV.38-42 – *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”*

- a. Jesus here is examining what is called the *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation) which is an ancient legal code found not only in Scripture, but in other traditions as well
- b. These other traditions themselves are most likely rooted in the OT law, but what we have is the principle of penalties fitting the crime
- c. This principle is outlined in Deuteronomy 19:20-21
- d. While many people wrongly assume that the OT was harsh and heavy handed, and the NT is soft and gracious, we need to always remember that the undeserved grace of God is all the time present in the OT, and that Jesus is the One who not only teaches us nearly everything we know about hell, but He is also the one who seemingly raises the bar on God's law, showing that it is far more difficult than the scribes and the Pharisees ever thought it was
- e. What the *lex talionis*, or the eye for eye, tooth for tooth principle did was not establish heavy-handed law, but introduced principles which kept things from escalating
  - i. Left to ourselves, we enjoy revenge
  - ii. We enjoy exacting interest when we clean up debts
  - iii. Left to ourselves, we may take two eyes for an eye, or a jaw for a tooth
  - iv. The law of God limits this to taking what is right and just and fair however
- f. The eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth principle establishes just weights and measures – it's part of the biblical system of justice

- i. Where other societies had designated avengers in the clan, the OT legal code set up a system of justice that required witnesses, proper authorities to carry out punishments, and punishments that fit the crime
- g. Christ goes on further to explain that so far from escalating repayment, Christians are often called to turn the other cheek
  - i. We are so familiar with this phrase that we may lose sight of it
  - ii. Most people are right-handed, which means that if two people are facing each other, being struck on the right cheek means the other party has struck you with the back of their hand
    - 1. What is being described here is a serious insult or indignity
    - 2. It is in this context of being insulted and disrespected that we turn the other cheek rather than upping the ante and striking our opponent back twice as bad as he struck us
- h. Roman law allowed the authorities to demand someone to transport good for up to one mile, and here Christ is instructing us to go a second mile
  - i. This is what happened when Simon of Cyrene
- i. Some have used passages like this to advance ideas like pacifism, or a view which has the state moving to 'restorative justice', that is trying to rehabilitate criminals instead of delivering a punishment that fits the crime
  - i. I don't think that's what's in view here
  - ii. These are instructions for our personal conduct, and not instructions about civil government

- iii. Despite all the abuse its suffered in the last few years, Romans 13 is clear that the state is God's deacon, given the sword in order to punish evil and to reward good
  - 1. A sword isn't a picture of re-education or community service, but of a just penalty
- iv. Is it hypocritical then for a Christian to be involved in civil justice when we are commanded to turn the other cheek in our personal affairs?
  - 1. NO! A distinction is to be made regarding which sphere we're operating in. The state is God's agent to administer justice, and the church is God's agent to administer grace
  - 2. We operate according to the instructions God has given in each sphere
  - 3. For example, let's all assume that I have no authority to go into Ty and Jenny's house and spank their children
    - a. That's not my place in that sphere
    - b. But this doesn't mean spanking is ruled out entirely
    - c. It's not at all hypocritical of me to say that I still have the duty to spank my own children if they would need it
- v. There is no ultimate conflict here with God demanding a man act according to justice in one sphere while demanding he act according to grace in another



1. If someone commits a crime against you, there is no conflict in getting the authorities to do their job *and* forgiving the person who has committed the crime
  - a. Dobson's interview of Bundy who converted before his death sentence but remained convinced of the justness of his penalty
- j. The instructions that we are given for our own lives here are clear – Christians need to be those who de-escalate situations instead of escalating them
  - i. The cycle of revenge and of never-ending conflict has to come to an end eventually, and we are instructed to be the ones who bring it to an end by absorbing the cost on ourselves
  - ii. This can be very difficult because it frequently appears that those of us who are living godly lives end up being the ones who pay the price for the destructive and undisciplined behaviour of others
    1. This is a real injustice
    2. But we need to also remember that as Christians, we never want 'fair'
    3. Moments like these are when it's important to remember that God will settle every score perfectly at the final judgement
      - a. As we have drifted from a biblical worldview, it's inevitable that the revolutionaries want mob justice
        - i. No trial, no presumption of innocence, just accusation, anger, and instant penalties

- ii. This makes sense, because for the unbelieving mindset, there is no final justice – it’s all riding on the here and now
    - b. For those who want mob justice now, or for those who push the concept of turning the other cheek all the way into absolute pacifism, it’s important also to remember that God doesn’t say ‘*vengeance is bad*’, but rather that ‘*vengeance is mine*’
6. VV.43-48 – “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”
- a. The command to love one’s neighbour is found in Leviticus 19:18, and is not a new teaching that Jesus established
  - b. What the people misunderstood though, is that there was no command to “*hate your enemy*”
    - i. This was a false conclusion drawn from the fact that we are to love our neighbours

- ii. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us who our neighbour really is – it's anyone that God puts in our path, regardless of family or national connection
- c. Loving our enemies isn't necessarily an emotional reaction filled with warm and fuzzy feelings, but is a commitment to treat them in a loving manner
- d. Again, this is the correct course of action for image bearers of God
  - i. God is patient with the ungodly all day long, even though it is not deserved
  - ii. In the beatitudes we were told that the peacemakers were blessed because they would be called 'sons of God'
    - 1. Here we are given instructions on how to be peacemakers – to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors
- e. V.45 – *“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”*
  - i. This statement shows God's love and good will even towards unbelievers
  - ii. Here again, we need to be careful to make distinctions so we don't end up with simplistic or lopsided ideas
  - iii. It is clear that even unbelievers receive many gifts from God, and that there is a sense in which God loves all men
  - iv. But we sometimes hear imprecise or careless talk that doesn't help us think clearly
    - 1. We talk about God forgiving everyone unconditionally
      - a. Is this true?

- b. Repentance is a condition of forgiveness
2. Does God love everyone unconditionally?
- a. It's clear here that there is a way in which God loves the unrepentant
  - b. But this clearly doesn't mean that these unrepentant people are loved and accepted in the same way that God's children are
    - i. Psalm 5:5 says that God hates all evildoers
    - ii. Psalm 11:5 says His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence
    - iii. Psalm 7:11 we read that God is angry with the wicked every day
  - c. How do we put this together?
3. God's *love of benevolence*
- a. God's general good will towards His creation, even after the Fall
4. God's *love of beneficence*
- a. This is God's giving of gifts to people, even those who are not saved
  - b. Unbelievers can enjoy a delicious meal or know the joy of bringing a new baby home
  - c. God makes His sun to rise on them just as much as on the just

d. Sometimes this is called ‘*common grace*’

i. It is God’s gifts to creation generally, and this is enjoyed by the just and the unjust alike

5. God’s *love of complacency*

a. This is His special love which is unique to His children

b. This is a discriminating love; a love which is fully satisfied in His Son, but which by adoption also extends to all those who are “in Christ”

v. So we can and should affirm common grace, or a kind of God’s love that applies across the board, but we should do this in a way that doesn’t blur the very real distinction between those who are in Christ and those who are not

f. The logic of v.46 & 47 is plain – if a holy God is able to lovingly give gifts and grace even to those who are at war with Him, we should also show a grace and a patience and a love to those who make our lives difficult

i. Think of the significance of God’s holy character being offended, and then what a small trifle it is when others annoy us

ii. God is patient despite the insult to His holiness, how much more should we be patient when we have no holiness of our own to be insulted?

g. The instruction to model our own lives after God is evident again at the very end of this chapter in v.48

h. The standard is perfection.

- i. God is perfect. Our purpose for existence is to be image bearers of God, therefore we must also be perfect.
- ii. How can we do this? After all, isn't it true that "*to err is human*"?
- iii. If God graded us on the curve because He understands that we're all imperfect, He would have negotiated His holiness, and we know that this is impossible.
- iv. There are some things that God absolutely cannot do, and negotiating His holiness is one of them
- v. To get into heaven, to be in God's presence, we need to be perfect.
- vi. When we've listened to Jesus preaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we are listening to the law of God, and if we are honest, we see how far short we fall
  1. Trying harder may result in improvement, but it will never result in perfection
- vii. The perfection that comes to us is the perfection of Christ
  1. He has fulfilled the law perfectly, and then as we are adopted into God's family, we become united to Him
    - a. We are "in Christ"
  2. If we are "in Christ", we are covered by His righteousness
    - a. God accepts us because we are perfect – we have all the perfection of Christ covering us like a cloak
  3. Look at the very real way in which Christ quite literally does *for us* the things He's here commanding *from us*

- a. He keeps His covenant
  - b. In His death, He keeps the *lex talionis*, the just punishment for sin
  - c. He turned the other cheek when being beaten and insulted
  - d. He offers the cloak of His righteousness as His clothes are torn off of Him
  - e. He carries His literal cross at the command of the military
  - f. He gives gifts of grace to friend and enemy alike
  - g. He keeps God's law perfectly
4. This perfection stands up in God's court of law in a legal sense, but it also works itself out in our experience
  5. We are provided with a new nature at our rebirth, and this new nature slowly but surely grows us in obedience in our subjective experience
  6. Legally, we are perfect at the moment of conversion.  
Experientially, our conduct moves from the old reality to the new reality over time, and it is finally made perfect all the way as we graduate to glory.
  7. In the area of keeping our oaths, of de-escalating retaliation, establishing justice, and of loving our enemies, Christ has laid out a clear standard for our actions. We are to model God.

8. We can't even get started down this path unless we are right with God, and once we are right with God, the Spirit will ensure that we do move down this path, even amidst setback and struggle.

9. CHARGE

a. *In His conduct and in His preaching, Christ has shown us perfectly what a life of glorifying the Father looks like. Christ always keeps His word, Christ never judges more harshly than the situation calls for, Christ happily went the extra mile for us. He demonstrates what we ought to do when someone asks for our tunic, for when we demanded signs and wonders and gifts from Him, He went to the additional step of covering us with the cloak of His righteousness, giving us more than we knew we needed. He's patiently returning good for evil, blessing His whole creation with common grace gifts for all to enjoy, but also praying and interceding specially for His brothers and sisters. In the week ahead, let's recall the character of God despite our sin and rebellion, and commit to treating others in the same way He has treated us.*

10. BENEDICTION

a. Numbers 6:22-26 – *“The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD lift up his countenance<sup>3</sup> upon you and give you peace.”*