

Matthew 5:33-48  
Deuteronomy 19  
Psalm 35

The Message of the King: “Be Perfect”

February 22, 2015

What does it mean: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth”?

The phrase is used three times – once in Exodus, once in Leviticus, and here in Dt.

In Exodus 21:24, the phrase “eye for an eye” is applied to the penalty

to be imposed when there is harm done to a pregnant woman or her baby.

If she or her child is harmed, then the guilty shall be punished accordingly

(though Exodus 21 also permits a “ransom” to be paid in certain circumstances).

In Leviticus 24:20, the same principle is applied when “anyone injures his neighbor.”

The point of the principle is that punishment should be proportionate to the crime.

If a thief steals bread, should you cut off his hand?

Of course not!

The thief did not cut off anyone’s hand –

the thief took someone’s bread –

therefore a proportionate response would be

not just to make him “give it back”

but to make him give another loaf of bread to the one that he wronged.

Here in Deuteronomy 19, Moses applies the principle to perjury.

If a false witness is *deliberately* trying to get someone else in trouble,

then the malicious witness should receive whatever penalty

he was trying to impose upon the innocent.

Notice that there is a distinction between a *false* witness and a *malicious* witness.

The penalty is only invoked on those who are deliberately malicious.

So, in our day, if we followed this principle,

if someone falsely accused another person of a crime

that would result in 6 years in prison,

then the false witness would receive 6 years in prison for their perjury.

It’s actually a very useful deterrent to perjury!

It should be clear from all these passages that “an eye for an eye” is a judicial principle  
*not* a standard for personal ethics.

The principle of proportionate judgment is found in Psalm 35 as well.

David says that his enemies have dug a pit for his life,

and so he asks that God will let his enemies

fall into the very pit that they have made.

It’s appropriate – at times – to pray this regarding the wicked.

Paul will echo this in 2 Thessalonians 1.

We know that God is a just judge –

and so we pray that God will *do justice* and make things right.

But notice that David *also* says,

“when they were sick – I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting;...  
I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother...” (v13-14)

Psalm 35 distinguishes between the way in which we ought to love our enemies –

“pray for those who persecute you” –  
and the way in which we may still ask God to *do justice*.

If you *love* your enemies and pray for them when they are afflicted,  
*then* you may also pray that God will bring judgment on them!

Sing Psalm 35

Read Matthew 5

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

There is a tendency in every generation to make excuses for sin.

No one is perfect...  
Everyone makes mistakes...  
It wasn't my fault...  
If you hadn't done that first...  
The woman you gave me...

But Jesus does not accept this way of doing things.

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Sin is never “okay.”

God never says that 70% is a passing grade.  
Perfect holiness – justice, mercy, humility –  
nothing less.

You might be tempted to say,

“Well, in that case, I'll never get in...”

Woah!

Get in?

Jesus never said anything about “getting in”?

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This is not the way that you *become* a Christian.

This is what Jesus says to *Christians*!

You are already in!

This is the way of life of the disciple – of the one who is already a follower of Jesus.

The way that you become a disciple is by repenting, believing in Jesus, and getting baptized.

Jesus died for your sins.  
Your sins are forgiven.  
When God looks at you, he sees the blood of the holy, spotless Lamb of God.  
There is *nothing* that you can *do* in order to “improve” how God sees you!

The Sermon on the Mount is laying out the way of life for those who believe in Jesus –  
for those who are Jesus’ disciples.

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”  
What else could Jesus say?  
Try hard!?  
Do your best!?  
70% will be fine – we’d prefer 90% - but perfect obedience is unattainable,  
so don’t bother!?

Since when is holiness optional?  
Jesus understands that you are going to sin –  
that’s why, in the very next section, he teaches us to pray,  
“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”!  
But that doesn’t make sin “okay.”  
Sin is always *wrong*.  
Our problem is *not* that we “feel guilty” –  
our problem is that *we are guilty!*  
And only repentance – confession – turning away from sin –  
will deal with that!  
If you are guilty of something that God says is sin,  
there is no way to “feel better” about it,  
except to confess your sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness.

After all, if you have sinned, then how can you be perfect?  
Only by confession – repentance – faith in Jesus.  
And then, by putting to death the deeds of the body.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is setting forth not so much an “ethical code”  
but a way of life –  
a way of life that first and foremost describes who Jesus is.

And today, especially in verses 45 and 47, Jesus highlights that this is *who God is*.  
The Greek and Roman gods were very much “like us” in their passions and desires.  
The Greek philosophers, therefore, came up with a distant deity –  
Aristotle’s ‘unmoved mover’ or Plato’s ‘the One.’

The Triune God of the Bible is different from all of these.  
He could have been like Aristotle’s unmoved mover.  
He didn’t have to enter our world and share our nature.  
Our God freely chose to enter our world –

the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

When Jesus says “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,  
so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven,”  
he is describing himself.  
He is the Son of the Father who has done this.  
For while we were sinners, Christ died for us.  
While we were enemies, Christ loved us and reconciled us to the Father.

You worship a God who loves his enemies –  
who shows kindness and mercy to those who hate him –  
even to the point of the cross.

This is why Jesus doesn't simply talk about "being a good person" –  
he talks about being like your Father in heaven.

As I have often said, what distinguishes Christians from other people  
is *not* that Christians are more ethical,  
but how Christians respond to unjust suffering.

Why did those 21 Coptic Christians march calmly and quietly to their death?  
Why did they not try to run away?  
Why not go down fighting?  
(Maybe they could have killed one or two of the “bad guys” before they died!)

Because they were like their heavenly Father in showing the same love to their enemies  
that they showed toward one another.

Okay,  
let's take a look at how Jesus talks about this in Matthew 5.

### **1. “You Have Heard That It Was Said” – How to Interpret the Old Testament**

First, I want you to see that Jesus is *not* simply dealing with what the Old Testament said.  
If he wanted to talk about OT teaching, he could have said, “It is written.”

Jesus is talking about Old Testament interpretation.  
He does not ignore the centuries of rabbinic interpretation.  
He knows full well that no one approaches the biblical text in a vacuum.

Look at verse 33.  
Jesus is *not* quoting a passage of scripture;  
rather, he is repeating a popular summary of biblical teaching:

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.”

There are several passages that say similar things:

Leviticus 19:12 says, “You shall not swear by my name falsely,  
and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.”

Numbers 30:2 says, “If a man vows a vow to the LORD,  
or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word.  
He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”

Deuteronomy 23:21 says, “If you make a vow to the LORD your God,  
you shall not delay fulfilling it,  
for the LORD your God will surely require it of you,  
and you will be guilty of sin.

But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.  
You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips,  
for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God  
what you have promised with your mouth.”

Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it,  
for he has no pleasure in fools.”

You can see from this that Jesus’ summary is a good summary of OT teaching:

“You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.”

So, in verse 33, Jesus provides a popular summary of OT teaching.

In verse 38, Jesus quotes Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19.

In this case he uses a direct quote from the OT,  
but it’s clear from his comments, that he is not dealing with what Moses said.  
He is interacting with popular opinions about what Moses meant.  
As we saw earlier, Moses was talking about judicial practice in the courts.  
Jesus doesn’t say anything about legal practice, but about social relations.

In verse 43, Leviticus 19 *does* say “love your neighbor” –  
but there is nothing about “hating your enemy.”

So in all three cases Jesus is not dealing with abstract questions of “what did Moses teach?”  
Rather, Jesus is interacting with the communal interpretation of Moses.

I start here, because we face this all the time!

Just the other day, an atheist asked me,

“Does your God tell you to judge people?”  
(expecting me to say, “Of course not!”)

I replied by saying, “Well, God is the judge, so ultimately that’s his job –  
but he does tell us what his standards are.

For instance, he tells us that what Hitler did is wrong – and we should say so.  
Murder, adultery, stealing – these things are wrong – and we should say so.”

Indeed, that’s where Jesus started in his proclamation.

As we've seen over the last couple weeks,

Jesus is not just a new Moses who says "thus saith the LORD."

Rather, Jesus is the LORD himself who declares, "But I say to you."

Jesus is not just a wise rabbi who interprets and explains the law.

Jesus speaks as one having final authority to *declare* what the law is.

Therefore, we need to read and interpret the whole of the Old Testament in the light of who Jesus is and what Jesus says.

## 2. Three More Examples (v33-48)

Over the last couple of weeks Jon and I have shown you the first three examples:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not murder" –

and Jesus applies this to anger and conflict.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery" –

and Jesus applies this to lust – the eye and the heart.

It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" –

and Jesus says that divorce should *not* be treated as casually as it was in his day.

Stanley Hauerwas summarizes this well:

"Jesus offers us participation in a kingdom that is so demanding we discover we have better things to do than to concentrate on our lust.

If we are a people committed to peace in a world of war,

if we are a people committed to faithfulness in a world of distrust,

then we will be consumed by a way to live that offers freedom from being dominated by anger or lust." (p69)

Today we go on to explore three other examples of what it means to follow Jesus.

Matthew signals us that we should think of these as two groups of three by his use of the word "again" in verse 33.

### a. "Yes" or "No" – Speaking Truth in Love (v33-37)

<sup>33</sup> *"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.'*

In Matthew 23, Jesus will explain how far Israel had fallen from God's standard:

"Woe 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 his oath.'"

In other words, people were using oaths to finagle their way out of telling the truth!

So Jesus says:

<sup>34</sup> *But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,* <sup>35</sup> *or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.* <sup>36</sup> *And do*

*not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* <sup>37</sup> *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.*<sup>[g]</sup>

Oaths are not inherently evil.

(God himself has sworn *by himself* when he made a covenant with Abraham – Heb 6:13).

Rather, there is a *danger* connected to oaths –

the danger is that we will use *oaths* to avoid telling the truth.

Paul will write in 1 Thessalonians 5:27,

“I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.”

So even the NT plainly permits oaths and vows under certain circumstances.

Jesus is making a more basic point.

We should be truth-tellers.

We should be characterized by honestly and plain dealing.

If you need an *oath* to make you tell the truth, then you’ve missed the point of oaths!

Think of the recent “Dilbert” cartoon where his pointy-haired boss starts a sentence by saying,

“To be perfectly honest...”

and Dilbert responds by saying,

“Why do you need to say that you’re being honest  
in this particular case?

You’re implying that you’ve lied to me so often in the past  
that this one instance of honesty is noteworthy!”

<http://dilbert.com/strip/2015-02-01>

Jesus is saying that if your culture requires special code words

to signal when you are telling the truth

then there is something wrong with your culture –

and you need to change the way you think and speak.

Do not take oaths to prove that you are a truth teller.

*Be a truth teller!*

Just as Jesus himself was a truth teller.

“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37)

Pilate heard those words and wondered “What is truth?”

“I am the way, the truth, and the life –

no one comes to the Father except through me.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well:

“Only the cross as God’s truth about us makes us truthful.”

In the OT, the oath and the vow were intimately connected with the offerings  
(there is even a specific “vow offering”).

Again, this doesn’t mean that we should abolish oaths and vows.

Just like we don’t *abolish* sacrifices!

Rather, Jesus fulfills the sacrifices –

and so we offer the sacrifice of praise to him.  
Likewise, Jesus fulfills the oaths and vows –  
and so we speak the truth in him.

But this has implications for our life together,  
as Bonhoeffer continues:

“There is no truth toward Jesus without truth toward other people.  
Lying destroys community.  
But truth rends false community and founds genuine fellowship.  
There is no following Jesus without living in the truth  
unveiled before God and other people.” (quoted in Hauerwas, 71)

We live in a day when people prize “niceness.”  
Truth-tellers often sound harsh and unloving –  
because what they say may not sound “nice.”  
If someone opposes you, what’s wrong with that?!  
You might be wrong!  
That’s why I *love it* that in recent years we’ve had more people  
disagreeing with each other (disagreeing with me!) publicly!  
Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Speaking the truth in love is *essential* for our life together –  
because we must speak the truth to one another.

If you are serving on a committee and there is a difference of opinion –  
*Great!*  
Have a majority report and a minority report!

“A community of truthfulness cannot be afraid of conflict.” (Hauerwas, 71)  
We are going to have times when we disagree.  
We just need to be a community where we respond to one another  
like Jesus did – both by speaking truth, and by bearing the cross.

Though, of course, most of what Jesus is talking about here  
is the conflict and opposition that comes from outside the church.

You might think that a community of truthfulness would be winsome and attractive.  
And it will be – to those who are tired of lies!  
But those who love lies will hate truth.

A community of truthfulness will provoke opposition.

And Jesus goes on in verses 38-42 to speak of how to handle that.

**b. “Do Not Resist” – Turning the Other Cheek (v38-42)**



<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, <sup>[h]</sup> let him have your cloak as well.

As we saw earlier, Jesus is quoting from passages that are talking about civil law – passages that regulate the judicial practices of Israel.

But Jesus does not then address judicial practice.

He focuses on how *you* respond to those who do bad things to you.

But again, remember what we have seen before:

Jesus is not attempting to set forth a code of ethics.

He is not giving a list of rules for personal conduct.

Jesus is laying out a way of thinking – a way of acting – a way of doing – that will characterize himself and his people.

In verses 38-42, Jesus holds before us his own example.

Jesus does not say that if you do this you will get what you want.

If someone slaps you on the right cheek,

he will likely slap you on the left cheek as well.

When Jesus turned the other cheek, he was hung on a cross.

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

In other words, your disposition – your attitude – should be, “Do not resist the one who is evil.”

Don’t think that *your rights, your freedoms* are what matter.

Later Jesus will talk about how God will make all things right in the end.

(Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord).

Jesus entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Can you trust God to make things right?

The desert fathers told the story of a young monk who was furious over how he had been treated.

He went to his superior and declared

that he would take vengeance on those who had wronged him.

The older monk nodded, and said, “Let us pray,

O God, we do not need you to take vengeance on the wicked.

We can handle it ourselves. Amen.”

Jesus entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

Our problem is that we don’t trust God.

Everyone struggles with how to apply this.

Anabaptists like Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder

argue that Jesus’ words *must* mean pacifism.

They rightly point out that you cannot simply divorce your “private” life

(where you do what Jesus says)  
from your public life  
(where you can ignore Jesus!).

Where they err is in their attempt to absolutize *one* statement in the Sermon on the Mount while relativizing others.

So, for instance, when Jesus says that if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out – they will say that Jesus is using hyperbole.

But when Jesus says ‘if anyone slaps you’ – they will say that Jesus expects us to turn the other cheek literally and absolutely.

How do we do better?

Well, as we’ve already seen,  
the laws of Moses were given for judges in judicial cases.  
Jesus is saying that “an eye for an eye” does not work well as an ethical maxim.

It’s important to observe what Jesus does *not* say –  
Jesus does *not* say that if anyone would rape your wife,  
give him your daughter also.  
The examples that Jesus gives are examples where *you* are willing to suffer  
for the sake of Christ –  
not where you are contributing to the suffering of others.

Verses 41-42 apply this to other situations:

<sup>41</sup> *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* <sup>42</sup> *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*

I think that it is safe to say that Jesus does not mean that you must *always* give to *every* beggar.  
But if your default position is that you *don’t* give to beggars –  
that is *not* consistent with what Jesus says.

You might say, “Oh, but they don’t deserve it!”  
True – but Jesus is generous to people who don’t deserve it!  
And we are to imitate him.  
We are to have that mindset – that attitude of self-sacrificing humility –  
that characterized Jesus.

But really, the only way that we can understand what Jesus means by this  
is to *keep going* and hear his final contrast.

**c. “Love Your Enemies” – Imitating Your Heavenly Father (v43-48)**

<sup>43</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> 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.*

You will look in vain for a passage in the OT that says  
“You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”  
The OT never says that!  
But again, Jesus isn’t dealing with what the OT *says* –  
he is dealing with what “you have heard” that it was said.

Jesus says that you should not think this way.  
Why?  
Because what Moses really meant was...  
No.

Jesus is *not* a new Moses.

Moses simply said “Thus saith the LORD.”

Jesus says,  
*I say to you.*

Jesus is not a new Moses.  
Jesus is the Yahweh who spoke to Moses!

If you would understand all that Jesus is saying in his contrasts between what you have heard  
and what he now says,  
then understand this:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

And in so doing, “you will be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”  
This is *God’s own attitude* toward his enemies.

God shows his love for the wicked by giving them sun and rain – just like the righteous.  
God’s common love for humanity is the model  
for how we ought to love indiscriminately.

I want you to realize how radical Jesus’ words are.  
Throughout all of human history, every tribe and nation has been tribal and nationalist.  
It’s about taking care of “my” people – “my” family.  
But Jesus says that if we are going to be sons of his Father who is in heaven,  
then we need to see that “our” people extend as widely as the image of God.

We must love all those who are made in the image of God  
because when we see them, we see the reflection of the one whom we love!

<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers,<sup>[i]</sup> what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

You must love your enemy.

First, pay attention to how Jesus says this.

*Everyone* in all of history has loved their friends.  
Even tax collectors love their friends and look out for them!

When you are out shopping, and you see a friend, you go out of your way to greet them.  
That's *not* particularly Christian.

The *Christian* thing to do is to greet the stranger – even to love the enemy.

When you are in the store, and you see that person who hates you –  
and you greet them – you treat them with love and respect.

Now, remember what we said earlier about truth-telling.

Truth-telling will bring opposition.  
So will loving your enemies!  
Loving your enemies does not mean that you applaud them for their wickedness!

Jesus loved his enemies  
when he proclaimed seven woes on the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23,  
saying things like, “You serpents, you brood of vipers,  
how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:33)

The scribes and Pharisees did not come away from that encounter with Jesus  
feeling warm fuzzies because Jesus had “affirmed” them!

Loving your enemies does not mean ‘making them feel good.’  
Loving your enemies means that you do not return evil for evil.  
If someone does something nasty to you,  
you may not respond by doing something nasty to them!

As Hauerwas puts it,  
“To be a disciple of Jesus,  
to be ready to be reconciled with those with whom we are angry,  
to be faithful in marriage, to take the time required to tell the truth –  
all are habits that create the time and space to be capable of loving our enemies.”  
(Hauerwas, 72)

<sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.