

Jesus' Higher Standard of Ethics

Part 2: Swearing Oaths, Retaliation, Love of Enemies

Matthew 5:33-48 Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If you were fortunate enough to have been here last Sunday, you know that Part 1 of this sermon dealt with **Jesus' call to a higher standard of ethics and righteous living within the realm of God**. We explored how this pertained to:

- 1) not letting our anger rise to the level of committing acts of violence, whether physical, emotional or spiritual violence
- 2) not letting lustful thoughts become the first step to an act of adultery, which breaks the covenant bond of faithfulness and commitment
- 3) not letting divorce be an excuse to abandon one's spouse, but neither should a marriage become an assault on the values of safety, nurture, and honor of both persons in the marriage covenant.

That was a fun sermon, wasn't it?!? Today's sermon should be fun as well, as we explore three additional examples of how **Jesus gets behind and beneath the literal letter of the ancient Hebrew law to the deeper intent and heart or spirit of the law**, thus revealing how we, as children of God, live into the idealized realm of God in our midst in the here and now.

The three examples today include Jesus' instructions on why we are not to swear oaths, how we are not to retaliate or seek vengeance, and how we are called to love not only God and our neighbor as ourselves, but also our enemies. And Jesus caps off all of these teachings with the command, "Be perfect, therefore, as God in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

As you might imagine, knowing the historical context and setting is crucial for a proper interpretation. The **first** of our examples of higher ethics and righteous living has to do with the ancient custom of taking or **swearing an oath**. This is similar to adding gravity to one's vow or promise by invoking the name of God or anything else. Something like, "As God as my witness, I swear to you that..." or, "I swear to God that I'm telling the truth." Even though the ancient law of Moses said that we should not swear falsely (basically telling a lie), Jesus adds that **we should not swear an oath at all in an attempt to prove our honesty and truthfulness**.

In one of my favorite of Jesus' teachings, he simply states that our yes must mean yes, and our no must mean no. **Jesus calls us to honesty, integrity, and truthfulness in all of our speech and dealings**. That doesn't mean that we can't change our mind, but a solid 'Yes' should never have an underlying, "It depends." And 'No' should never have a hidden, "We'll see." **Our truthfulness is paramount because it is the very foundation of building trusting relationships**. And for those of you who were Boy Scouts, like myself, I suspect it was intentional that the first of the twelve Scout Laws is the pledge to be "Truthful." (Truthful,

loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. I continue to be guided by these values.)

There is so much distrust in the world because often we are uncertain if what we are being told is actually the truth. [You can add your own political commentary here.] Sometimes we might even wonder if what we speak is actually the truth, or an "alternative fact." So within our own homes, within our places of work and leisure, and within this community of faith, **let us say what we mean – 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No' – without bringing God into it as our backup. Again, honesty and integrity must always be part of who we are and what we do in our daily lives.**

Our **second** example, which is Jesus' fifth in his list of six, deals with the issue of **active nonviolence as opposed to seeking retaliation or revenge**. This is a tough one, and it requires an explanation. Who hasn't heard the admonition to "turn the other cheek," or "give them the shirt off your back," or "go the second mile"?

We live in a world that goes by the adage, "those with the most guns win." Our president professed just this week that we should expand our nation's nuclear arsenal so that we can be at the "top of the pack." Too many people actually live by a reversal of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others what they *have* done unto you" or, "Do unto others first *before* they do unto you." But even the laws of Moses sought to be a moderating force when it came to retaliation and vengeance.

The Old Testament law instructed that instead of fighting back with every ounce of destructive force in our power to control, our response should be measured by the offense given. In the Old Testament, **"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," was not a call to violence in and of itself. Rather, it was intended to establish proportional justice, moderation and restraint.** Metaphorically, if someone takes an eye, then in response take *only* one eye, not two; if someone takes a tooth, then respond by taking *only* one tooth, not a whole mouthful of teeth. In other words, **the punishment should be proportional to the crime.** Now there's an entire sermon, especially one dealing with the fairness, or lack thereof, of our criminal justice system.

Jesus takes this a lot further, however, by demanding the seemingly preposterous instruction to not even resist an evildoer at all. But if we followed this to the letter of the law, we would all be broke, homeless, naked, and in the emergency room every day. I don't think this was what Jesus was asking us to sign up for. So let's look briefly at the examples of turning the other cheek, offering our cloak as well as our coat, and walking not just one mile but a second mile as well.

The following can be labeled as the **'nonviolent resistance' interpretation**. As you will see, this contradicts a common interpretation that we are to simply be a doormat and a victim to an aggressor. But that verges on religiously motivated masochism, to which we are not called to by Jesus. Biblical scholar, theologian and activist Walter Wink, in his book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, interprets the passage as ways to subvert the power structures of the time. At the time of Jesus, **striking someone on the right cheek meant that the right-handed aggressor would have to use a backhand slap, thus asserting authority and dominance over someone deemed to be of a lower class or social status.** If the persecuted person "turned the other cheek," the aggressor was faced with a dilemma. **To strike someone on the left cheek, the aggressor would be forced to use an open hand as a challenge, or a fist to punch the person, but this was seen as a statement of equality.** Thus, **by turning the other cheek the person being persecuted was demanding equality.**

Concerning an interpretation of **handing over one's cloak, which served as a long undergarment, in addition to one's outer coat**, the debtor has literally giving the shirt off his

back, thus leaving himself naked. This situation is actually forbidden by Hebrew law as stated in Deuteronomy (24:10–13). It's important to note that biblically, public nudity was viewed as bringing shame on the viewer, not just the naked person. **Giving someone your cloak (basically your underwear), was therefore an act to shame the aggressor.**

In the third example, Jesus incorporates the commonly invoked **Roman law** that allowed Roman soldiers to demand that inhabitants of occupied territories **carry messages and equipment the distance of one mile, but prohibited forcing an individual to go further than a single mile**, at the risk of suffering disciplinary action. In this example, the nonviolent interpretation sees Jesus as placing criticism on an unjust and hated Roman law as well as clarifying the teaching to extend beyond Jewish law.

These three examples, then, are all **expressions of active nonviolence and defiance**. No doormats here. We are all aware that violence begets more violence. And yes, we know that even a nonviolent response does not always prevent further violence. Yet, we are challenged to bear witness to our Christian identity by finding just and nonviolent avenues to peace in the midst of violence.

Let's move on to the **third** and final example of living into the higher ethical standards of the realm of God. The Hebrew law commanded, as we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). But **at the heart and spirit of the law of loving your neighbor, as interpreted by Jesus, was the call to love even your enemies and pray for those who persecute you** (Matt. 5:44). Presbyterian biblical commentator Thomas Long summarizes it this way:

The reason that one ought to do this is because **God is like this**, and we are God's children. **God does not hate the enemy**; indeed, the good gifts of life – the sun and the rain – are lavished on everyone. **If we love only those who love us, we are not imitating God. We are simply imitating the world**, for even tax collectors and Gentiles love those who love them.

Through all these examples, Perhaps Jesus' point is that **we are called to break the cycle! Break the cycle of unfaithfulness, the cycle of abuse, hatred, violence, and injustice. We, as Christians, are called to be Christ-like – to counter evil with good, to approach hate not with more hate, and to allow the Sacred Presence of Christ to live in and through us.**

This leads to perhaps the hardest command in the entire Bible: to love as God loves. It is this call to be like God that best interprets the saying "Be perfect, therefore, as God in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). This is not an admonition to just try harder. For if it was, it would indeed be a recipe for despair. Rather, **to be "perfect" is to respond to other people – even our enemies – with the kind of love, compassion and desire for good that expresses the way God responds to the world.** Perfection, then, is less about getting things exactly right and more about loving as God loves. And as Christians, we believe that **Jesus is God's concrete example of that love. It is a love we are called to live out and reflect in our own lives, and in the life of this community of faith.**

Over the past two Sundays you have heard me preach about how this call to a higher ethical standard and righteous living within the realm of God intersects with issues such as anger, lust, divorce, swearing oaths, nonviolent resistance, and love of enemies. Thinking back, perhaps I could have spared us these two tough sermons by simply standing up and stating in one sentence:

God's values – values of love, compassion, integrity, justice, forgiveness, dignity, and non-violence – must be our values, visible in and through our lives.

May God bless and empower you, and us together, with the strength and courage to make it so.

Amen.

Resources: Thomas Long, *Matthew; Feasting on the Word; Feasting on the Gospels; Wikipedia, "Turn the Other Cheek"*