

Jesus' Ethic of Love

Part 2: Swearing Oaths, Retaliation, Love of Enemies

Matthew 5:21-48

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 2, 2104

Part 1 of this sermon dealt with Jesus' call to a higher righteousness and living into the tough ethic of love in the realm of God. We explored how this pertained to:

- 1) not letting our anger rise to the level of committing acts of violence,
- 2) not letting thoughts of lust lead to an act of adultery, which breaks the bond of faithfulness and commitment, and
- 3) not letting divorce allow the abandonment of a spouse, or an assault on the values of safety, nurture, honor and worth of both persons in the marriage covenant.

That was a fun sermon, wasn't it?! Today's sermon should be just as fun in exploring three additional examples of how Jesus gets behind the letter of the ancient Hebrew law to the deeper heart of the law, thus revealing how we, as children of God, live into in the idealized realm of God. That realm, whose full realization and fulfillment we yet await, is the new way of being and living in community that was inaugurated by the life and ministry of Jesus.

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 enemy. And Jesus caps off all of this instruction with the command, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

The first of our examples of a higher righteousness 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. 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, Jesus adds that we shouldn't swear an oath at all, in the attempt to prove our truthfulness.

In one of my more favorite of Jesus' instructions, he simply states that our yes must mean yes, and our no must mean no. As followers of Jesus living in the realm of God, nothing else needs to be added to our yes or no because we are called to be truthful in all of our speech. 'Yes' should never mean, "It depends." And 'no' should never mean, "We will see."

This is why our truthfulness is so necessary: it is the very foundation for trust. In other words, there is so much distrust in the world because often we are uncertain if what we are being told is actually the truth. Sometimes we even wonder if what we speak is actually the truth. 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 trying to conjure God up with pious formulas.

This is what led to the ancient prohibition not to take the name of God in vain. For swearing an oath is little more than a substitute, a stand-in, for the honesty and integrity that should *always* be part of the being and doing of our daily lives.

Remember, **it is our truthfulness and our integrity in all matters that builds trust and commitment.**

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

We live in a world that goes by the adage, "those with the most guns win." And even, "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. Instead of fighting back with every 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 intended to establish proportional justice, moderation and restraint. If someone takes an eye, then in return take *only* one eye, not two; if someone takes a tooth, then respond by taking *only* one tooth, not a whole mouthful of teeth.

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, wouldn't we all be broke, homeless, naked, and in the emergency room every day? I don't think any of us remember signing up for this?

Let's look briefly at the example of turning the other cheek. A slap on the right cheek indicated a backhand slap delivered by the assailant's right hand. Such a slap would be intended as a rebuke or insult rather than a violent attack. Turning the other cheek makes it impossible to be so slapped in this way again. That stance, then, becomes an act of nonviolent defiance. Turning the other cheek also discloses that cruel people may indeed do violence, but they do not have the power to take away the dignity and humanity of other people.

I won't go into the long details this morning of what it meant to give someone who is suing you not only what they ask, but more than the law allows; or of going a second mile when conscripted by a Roman soldier to carry his military gear for the maximum required distance of just one mile. Instead, let me just say that these examples are all **expressions of active nonviolence**. The higher righteousness of the realm of God is meant to lead us away from violent acts of retaliation into ways of peace.

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. And in the process, the church is called to respond to those in need of both peace and justice.

Biblical commentator and Presbyterian author and preacher Thomas Long writes that the idea here is not to be a victim or doormat for another to walk over us. Rather, it is to reflect that we are a human being created in God's image and, ultimately, to be a blessing, even to those who would do violence. He goes on to state:

In Jesus' day, this meant opening up one's purse to the village beggar. In our day of homeless people thronging city streets, it may mean working for programs to provide jobs for those who need work, safe shelters for

those in need of housing, food for the hungry, and community mental health services for those whose minds are diseased [or troubled].

In Jesus' day, living the kingdom ethic meant not swinging back when you were slapped, and showing that you refrained out of love rather than cowardice. In our day, it may mean working to see that police do not escalate violence in our communities, that words of anger spoken in our homes are met with words of compassion and not blows of aggression.

Let's move on (thankfully) to the final example of living into the higher righteousness of the realm of God. The Old Testament law commanded, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Even though it doesn't actually say anything about hating one's enemies, many felt that the law left some wiggle room to allow this because another could be defined as a non-neighbor. At the heart of the law of loving your neighbor, however, as Jesus interpreted it, was to love even your enemies and even pray for those who persecute you (Matt. 5:44). 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.

Perhaps Jesus' point, then, is that **we are called to break the cycle; the cycle of abuse, hatred, violence, and injustice. We, as Christians, are called to be Christlike – to counter evil with good, to allow Christ to live 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 your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). This isn't the same as being a perfectionist, however. That would be some cruel form of works-righteousness that no one, of course, could attain. We must recognize that this cannot be done out of our own resources. So this is no admonition to just try harder. For if it were, 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 compassion and desire for the good that expresses the way God responds to the world.

Perfection, then, is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves. And as Christians, we believe that Jesus is God's concrete example of that love. Thus, the character of those of us who are followers of Jesus should reflect the character of God. *This* is the higher righteousness that will characterize the age to come. This is the righteousness toward which Jesus calls us to strive and exhibit even now.

Over the past two Sundays you have heard me preach about how this call to a higher righteousness intersects with issues such as anger, lust and adultery, divorce, swearing oaths, retaliation, and love of enemies. Thinking back, perhaps I could have spared us these two tough sermons by simply standing up and stating in six words: God's values must be our values.

Amen.

Resources:

Thomas Long, *Matthew*

Feasting on the Word; Feasting on the Gospels