

Brookland Baptist Church
Bible Study
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Lecture IX

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THE GREATEST SERMON EVER PREACHED
JESUS TEACHES ABOUT VOWS
Book of Matthew – Chapter 5:33–37

In Jesus' day, people commonly made oaths, or vows. Although God's law took these vows very seriously, many of the religious leaders had invented legal maneuvers to get around keeping their oaths. Jesus told his followers not to use oaths—their word alone should be enough (James 5:12). Are you known as a person of your word? Truthfulness seems so rare that we feel we must end our statements with "I promise." If we tell the truth all the time, we will have less pressure to back up our words with an oath or a promise.

5:33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' " This fourth example focuses on people's words. Jesus did not refer to any specific commandment, but he summed up Old Testament teachings on the subject of *oaths* and vows (*Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 5:11; 6:13; 23:21–23*). When a person made an oath, it bound him or her to keep it, whether it was an oath to another person or an oath *made to the Lord*.

5:34–36 "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." However, Jesus told his followers not to *swear* (or make oaths) *at all*. The religious leaders had designed an elaborate system indicating how binding an oath was depending on how the oath had been made. Such a system was a contradiction in terms (an oath by definition is binding), and it made light of God's Law. The leaders said that if they swore *by heaven* or *by the earth* or *by Jerusalem*, they could get out of their oath without penalty because they did not make the vow in God's name.

Each time Jesus used the pattern "You have heard it said ... but I say to you," he was presenting a traditional standard upon which to base a higher one. Rather than let people off the hook, he set the hook deeper. Jesus spoke about oaths in order to point out that they were not the main problem—integrity was. Oaths are no substitute for personal integrity. A liar's vow expresses a

worthless promise. But when a person of integrity says yes or no, that person's simple word can be trusted. Make integrity your standard.

5:37 “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” Jesus simply emphasized that his followers should tell the truth: When they say *yes* they mean *yes*, and when they say *no* they mean *no*. Consequently, people can trust and believe anything else they say as well. Those who add to their words with an oath imply that their words cannot be trusted. The phrase “from the evil one” is also translated “from evil,” revealing the sinful one's need to back up words with a vow. People need oaths only when telling lies is a possibility. Believers, however, know that they are accountable to God for every word they speak, so they will speak truthfully and do what they promise. Keeping promises builds trust and makes committed human relationships possible.

Some things to think about:

Are you the kind of person who

- can't say no when a caller asks for a donation?
- takes on too much at church?
- Worries over whether people like you?
- Worries over whether God likes you?

If so, this verse is your first lesson in assertiveness training. You need to learn how to say yes and mean it, and how to say no and stick to it, as a child of God.

Try this. Next time someone asks you to do something you cannot accept, resist the urge to launch into a twenty-minute explanation of your schedule conflict, and just say, “I'm sorry, but no.” Wow! Does that feel good?

Pretty soon, you will start believing in your own yes and no as genuine reflections of your intentions. You'll be you again, and not someone else's image of you.

JESUS TEACHES ABOUT RETALIATION

Book of Matthew, Chapter 5:38–42

When people hurt us, often our first reaction is to get even. Instead, Jesus said we should do good to those who wrong us! Instead of keeping score, we should love and forgive. This is not natural—it is supernatural. Only God can give us the strength to love as he does. In the following illustrations, Jesus used hyperbole (extreme examples) to make a point about the attitudes of his followers.

5:38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” This example came from God’s Law as recorded by Moses in Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–20; and Deuteronomy 19:21. While the law sounds severe to us, in its time it set guidelines against what may have been escalating personal vendettas among people. The principle of retribution, *lex talionis*, gave judges a formula for dealing with crime. That is, “Make the punishment fit the crime.” The law limited vengeance and helped the court administer punishment that was neither too strict nor too lenient.

5:39 “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” The word “*resist*” translates the word *anthistemi*, also used for “*take legal action against*.” Not only did Jesus command against getting back at someone physically, but he commanded against “getting back” by any other means as well. Jesus focused on the attitudes of his followers when dealing with evil individuals. The world advocates getting even, looking out for oneself, and protecting one’s “*personal rights*”

THE CYCLE OF REVENGE

The “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” formula expresses the harsh standards of justice. When the principle was applied in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21), the context involved punishment administered by society at large in response to a personal crime. Practicing this principle on a personal level leads to revenge. Far from settling offenses, revenge escalates them. This is because we don’t just get mad and we don’t just get even; we get “just-a-little-more-than-even.”

In the face of this human dilemma, Jesus proposed a better way—the radical response of love. His standard was not an attack on the necessity for justice. Rather, Jesus was presenting a practical, rational, and holy way to deal with personal conflict and offense. The apparent impossibility of our generating love and concern for our enemies on our own directs us to God for help. Rely on him for strength to give the appropriate response.

5:40 “If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.” Under God’s law, no one could take a person’s *cloak*. “If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate” (*Exodus 22:26–27 NRSV*).

5:41 “**And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.**”^N This is an allusion to the forced labor that soldiers could demand of ordinary citizens, commandeering them to carry their loads a certain distance (*one mile*, the term for one thousand paces). The Jews hated this law because it forced them to show their subjection to Rome. Yet Jesus said to take the load and willingly go two miles. Jesus called for a serving attitude (as he himself exemplified throughout his life and especially at the cross).

THE SECOND MILE

5:42 “**Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**” Jesus’ followers should have a generous spirit. Because they loosely hold on to their personal rights and possessions they can freely *give* when the need arises and won’t *turn away from the one who wants to borrow*. While people should not blindly give away their possessions the book of Proverbs makes recommendations about this, Proverbs 11:15; 17:18; 22:26), Jesus illustrated the heart attitude that he expected of his followers. They must willingly put other’s needs before their own and other’s rights before their own.

JESUS TEACHES ABOUT LOVING ENEMIES **Book of Matthew, Chapter 5:43–48**

By telling us not to retaliate against personal injustices (5:38–42), Jesus keeps us from taking the law into our own hands. This also keeps our focus on him and not on our own rights. By loving and praying for our enemies, we prove our relationship to our Father, show his love in an unlovely world, and overcome evil with good.

SIX WAYS TO THINK LIKE CHRIST

We are, more often than not, guilty of avoiding the extreme sins while regularly committing the types of sins with which Jesus was most concerned. These six examples expose our real struggle with sin. Jesus explained how he required his followers to live. Are you living as Jesus taught?

| <i>Reference</i> | <i>Example</i> | It's not enough to: | We must also: |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 5:21–22 | Murder | Avoid killing | Avoid anger and hatred |
| 5:23–26 | Offerings | Offer regular gifts | Have right relationships with God and others |
| 5:27–30 | Adultery | Avoid adultery | Keep our hearts from lusting and be faithful |
| 5:31–32 | Divorce | Be legally married | Live out our marriage commitments |
| 5:33–37 | Oaths | Make an oath | Avoid casual and irresponsible commitments to God |
| 5:38–47 | Revenge | Seek justice for ourselves | Show mercy and love to others |

5:43–44 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The Pharisees interpreted Leviticus 19:18 as teaching that they should love only those who love in return, “neighbor” referring to someone of the same nationality and faith. While no Bible verse explicitly says *hate your enemy*, the Pharisees may have reinterpreted some of the Old Testament passages about hatred for God’s enemies (*for example, Psalms 139:19–22; 140:9–11*). But Jesus explained that his followers would do the true intent of God’s law by loving their *enemies* as well as their neighbors.

5:45 “So that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” The *Father in heaven* shows indiscriminating love to all people, allowing the sun to rise and rain to fall on both the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. Therefore, his *children* those who believe in him must reflect his character and show indiscriminating love for both friends and enemies. This verse refers to physical blessings on earth, not spiritual blessings. Obviously God’s children will receive far more in the future. In the meantime, God’s love reaches out to all people. God’s people must do the same.

5:46–47 “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

Jesus has been explaining the much higher standards that are expected of his followers, standards higher than those the world or even their religion accepted. “Why the command to love enemies?” someone might ask (5:44). Jesus would answer, “Because that will mark my followers as different, with hearts and minds turned over to God alone, who can help them do just that.” Anybody can love those who love them—that comes naturally, even for *tax collectors (who were among the most hated people among the Jews of Jesus’ day; see more on 9:9–13)*. In the same way, if Jesus’ followers greeted only their fellow believers, they would be no different from the *Gentiles* (non-Jews who did not believe in the one true God). Those disciples who live for Christ and are radically different from the world will receive their *reward*.

5:48 “**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**” The word translated “perfect” is *teleios*, a word that can also be translated “mature” or “full-grown” *as in Ephesians 4:13; and Hebrews 5:14–6:*. Jesus’ followers can *be perfect* if their behavior is appropriate for their maturity level—perfect, yet with much room to grow. Considering all that Jesus had said in this chapter, the perfection Jesus required of his followers did not include strict and flawless obedience to minute laws. It called instead for an understanding of how the law pointed to the *heavenly Father* who is himself *perfect*.

As followers of Jesus Christ, how can we be perfect?

- ***In character.*** In this life we cannot be flawless, but we can aspire to be as much like Christ as possible.
- ***In holiness.*** Like the Pharisees, we are to separate ourselves from the world’s sinful values. Unlike the Pharisees, we are to devote ourselves to God’s desires rather than our own and carry his love and mercy into the world.
- ***In maturity.*** We can’t achieve Christ like character and holy living all at once, but we must grow toward maturity and wholeness. Just as we expect different behavior from a baby, a child, a teenager, and an adult, so God expects different behavior from us, depending on our stage of spiritual development.
- ***In love.*** We can seek to love others as completely as God loves us.