

Matthew 5:33-47

CENTRAL THEME: *The Spirit of the law, not just the letter.*

The kingdom of heaven has very different standards to the kingdoms of this world. Therefore there will always be a temptation to seek to water them down and make them more achievable. Jesus warns us against this and calls us to wholehearted obedience. Our lives are not to be shaped by the values of this world, but by the character of our heavenly Father. In each case we must resist the temptation to focus on the exceptions and caveats, and instead focus on living out the principle.

Context:

Jesus is teaching about life in the kingdom of heaven. He began with the beatitudes, exposing how radically different the values of heaven are compared with the kingdoms of earth. All of this begs the question of how Jesus' teaching relates to the OT Law – is he rejecting all that God had taught his people through Moses...? As we learned from vv.16-32 he has not come to abolish the law of Moses, but to fulfil it. In this section he fulfils it by expounding the true, full meaning of the Law. He explained in v.20 that the kingdom of heaven requires a higher righteousness than that of the Pharisees. He showed what that meant in vv.21-32, correcting misunderstandings about the laws relating to murder, adultery and divorce. In each case he showed that God requires heart obedience, not just box-ticking external compliance. Now in verses 33-48 he teaches that God wants wholehearted obedience, not a hair-splitting attitude that seeks to limit the demands of the Law.

As before Jesus is speaking in unnuanced, antithetical statements. They are designed to shock us out of casual disobedience, but they are not designed to give us a full understanding of the subject. So to work out what it means in practice we will need to consider other passages.

1. Speak honestly, don't hide behind oaths (33-37)

Verse 33 is not quoting a particular OT passage, but appears to be a summary that people used in Jesus' day for the teaching of a number of passages on the subject of oaths (Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-24). An oath is a *declaration guaranteeing truth*. For instance, when we say 'I promise I will' rather than just 'I will' Or 'I swear on my mother's life that it's true...' What follows in verses 34 appears to be a simple command not to swear oaths. However, in the light of the rest of the Bible, it does not appear that Jesus' point is to ban all oaths. How can we say that? The OT specifically permits the swearing of oaths – even in God's name (Deut 10:20). In the NT we see Paul in particular swear a number of oaths (Rom 1:9; 2Cor 1:23; 1Thess 2:5). Lastly, God himself swears an oath in Heb 6:17!

So what is going on? All of the above passages have in common that the oaths are about making truthfulness more solemn and sure. The opposite appears to have been the case in Jesus' day. Matthew 23:16-22 shows the perverse approach to oaths adopted by the religious leaders. One famous Mishnah (containing Rabbinic traditions) asserted that if an oath was sworn 'by Jerusalem,' then the swearer was not bound, but that if they had sworn 'towards Jerusalem,' then they were bound. In other words, the whole system of oaths in Jesus' day was geared towards undermining truthfulness, rather than strengthening it. That is why Jesus condemns it.

His point in verses 34-36 is related but different. To swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem is to involve God in our oaths. This is a serious matter because it involves God in our deceitful casuistry (hair-splitting word games). The alternative approach of avoiding God in our oaths and swearing by our own head is pointless since we have no power. One must swear by one greater than oneself, or there is no point in the oath, but to swear by heaven or earth is tantamount to blasphemy if our intention is not to keep our word fully (Exodus 20:7).

Into this culture Jesus has a simple command: his followers are to tell the truth in a straightforward manner. The devil is the father of lies. So, any system of oaths that ends up in the kind of casuistry employed by the religious leaders in Matthew 23, has its origin in the devil, rather than in God, who is truth (John 14:6).

- when it comes to things like answering a friend who asks ‘*what do you think of my new haircut*’, the key is this: is my truth-concealing motivated by love for others, or for self?
- It is ok to swear on a Bible if we are required to give evidence in court because the intention is to solemnise truth rather than enable us to undermine it.
- “What about the Nazis...?” What should a Christian do if the Nazis knock on the door asking whether they are hiding Jews? (or a Hutu if they are protecting Tutsis). Some argue we should tell the truth and trust God to protect us. Others have looked at incidents in the Bible like Rahab lying to protect the Israelite spies in Joshua 2 and concluded that it is ok in this situation to lie: When someone wants information to help them murder, they *forfeit the right to the truth*, so the lie is not wrong in that situation.

2. Turn the cheek, don’t seek revenge (38-42)

If we thought the last command was costly... Again, we need to be careful to ensure that we understand what Jesus is and is not requiring of us. As ever, he is forcefully teaching what the true purpose of the law is, and correcting the false interpretations that dominated in his day. The retributive law of justice ‘*an eye for an eye*’ was laid out in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. However, the people of his day had clearly lost sight of its purpose. From what follows it seems that they were looking to the law to understand the fullest extent of revenge that they could take against someone who wronged them. But that was never the point. It was there to limit the cycle of violence so that blood feuds did not spiral out of control. It was about justice, not vengeance. 4 examples follow in which Jesus shows how radical his way is.

- An insulting slap*. Note, this is about personal attack, and does not imply that it is wrong to have police, or to defend someone else (indeed self-defence is not ruled out either). The point though is that Jesus’ people are not looking to strike back. They are willing to suffer insults and not looking to harm even the people who attack them.
- Standing on my rights*. The coat was a specifically protected item in the Law. If it was used as collateral in a loan, it had to be returned at night (Exodus 22:26). So Jesus point is that his people should not be renowned for ‘fighting for my rights.’ We should be willing to forego our rights sometimes for his sake.
- Begrudging service*. At the time Jewish civilians could be commandeered by Roman soldiers to help them to carry loads – as Simon of Cyrene is when Jesus cannot carry his cross. Rather than begrudge the humiliation, Jesus’ followers show their heavenly perspective by cheerfully doing more than has been asked.

iv. *Cheerful generosity.* The final example encourages his followers that in both giving and in lending, we should be generous and cheerful. There are many biblical reasons why we should not give to everyone who asks exactly what they are pleading for – from children who want ice-cream for meals to the professional beggar or drug addict. However, again, the big point must not be missed. Jesus' people should be known for cheerful generosity, not for being calculating and miserly.

In all these matters it is very hard to work out what we should do in any individual instance. But the broad point is clear. As followers of Jesus, we should not be known for standing on our rights, but for our generous service of others.

3. Love your enemies, like God does (43-48)

Once again, it is clear that the teachers of the day had twisted God's Law. It did not say that it was ok to hate one's enemies. They simply assumed that because Leviticus 19:18 commanded love for neighbours, that this was the limit of God's requirement for love. That maybe why the questioner in Luke 10:29ff was so keen to know '*and who is my neighbour...?*'

Jesus, however, calls us to love even our enemies. The particular focus is on those who persecute us (which we should expect, 5:11-12), but we should think through how we treat those who are in the categories below '*enemy*': How do we treat those who have let us down? Those who inconvenience us? Those who bore us? The motivation to love is simple: this shows that we are children of God (v.45). Biblically, children are like their father. The following verse then demonstrates one simple way in which God loves those who have no right to his love, those who are his enemies: he providentially supplies what they need for life. We might add John 3:16 and Romans 5:8 – the supreme example of this is God's salvation of sinners. We were his enemies when he sent his Son to die for us. Jesus models verse 44 for us as he prays for the forgiveness of those who have nailed him to the cross (Luke 23:34).

Verses 46-48 press into the issue that underlies this whole section: is the way we live shaped by the cultural values around us, or our Father in heaven above us? Is our love more a product of our culture and upbringing, or does it demonstrate to the world that we are children of God? (John 13:34). That is his point in verse 48. We are not to look around to work out what are the reasonable limits of our love. We are to look up and seek to emulate the perfection of our heavenly Father. Here is both an encouragement to radical action, and another spur to come back to the cross thankful for our forgiveness – for who can claim to achieve this?!

APPLICATION

At one level, the application is very simple: tell the truth; don't take revenge; love even your enemies. One difficulty lies working out the detail. The greater difficulty is resisting the temptation to create endless exemptions and caveats, rather than focusing on simple, radical obedience. Living out the Sermon on the Mount should *not* make sense to others. The standards are deliberately, unapologetically divine. If everything about our lives makes sense to our unbelieving families, friends and colleagues, then you can be sure we are not living as Jesus intends.

QUESTIONS

- How would you summarise the attitude Jesus calls us to live out in 5:1-12?
- How does Jesus relate to the law according to 5:17?
- How has he been fulfilling the law in verses 21-32?

Verses 33-37:

- What appears to be Jesus' simple command in these verses?
- Split into 3 groups and consider Deut10:20; Rom 1:9 & Heb 6:17. How might these verses change how we understand Jesus' seemingly simple command?
- Matthew 23:16-22 helps us see why Jesus speaks as he does. Read those verses. What was the attitude to oaths in Jesus' day?
- According to verse 37 what should be our attitude to truth?

So it's ok to use an oath to *reinforce* truth, not to *undermine* our truthfulness.

- Where does this bite for us?
- In what circumstances does our culture / your work place undermine truth?
- How true are you to your word when it's inconvenient / costly? [eg 'I'm just leaving.' 'Yes, I'll come to your party next weekend' 'I'll be there at 7...']

Verses 38-42

- What do you think the point was of the command Jesus quotes in v.38?
- How might someone abuse it? [*use as carte blanche to strike back rather than forgive*]
- What attitude does Jesus instead call us to in our personal relationships in v.39? [*NB not speaking about police or military*]
- Verse 40 envisages a lawsuit. According to Exodus 22:26 your coat could not be taken in a lawsuit. So what attitude is Jesus encouraging?
- Verse 41 probably refers to the Roman practice of co-opting local civilians to help legionaries carry equipment (remember Simon of Cyrene on the way to Calvary). What should our attitude be when forced to do something we don't want to do?
- Clearly it's not always good for someone to give them what they want – think children – but what attitude does v.42 encourage? [*generosity should be the engine, wisdom then applies brakes*]
- What would each of these look like in practice today? Where are you most tempted to look for the nuance/exception rather than obey the principle?

Verses 43-48

- The law just commanded love for neighbours. How had people misapplied it?
- What attitude should we have to our enemies and why?
- How does God demonstrate his love for enemies – in this passage and in other parts of the Bible? [*look at Romans 5:8*]
- To a people always trying to lower the demands of the law, to make it more human, what should we be seeking, v.48?
 - When have people treated you as an enemy? How did you respond?
 - Down a level, how do you respond to those who bore/inconvenience/frustrate/annoy/let you down?
- Lastly, how does 5:3-6 encourage us if we feel crushed by our failure?