

## The Sermon on the Mount

### Session 6 – “You have heard it said...” (Part 2) – Matthew 5:33-42

**Verses 33-37**...*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.”<sup>34</sup> But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;<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 swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.<sup>37</sup> Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

When Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate, the governor posed the question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Truth is as much an issue today as ever – just watch any news commentary. This section deals with telling the truth.

1. How might the issue of oaths and vows be connected to the topic of marriage and divorce, about which Jesus just spoke?

Jesus is referring back to Numbers 30:1-2. *Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: “This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.”* Through time, the Pharisees had created elaborate formulas for oaths, with some being binding and some not (Matthew 23:16-22). A big thrust of this passage, is that life cannot be divided into neat little compartments, some of which are exempt from God’s presence and some are not. But God is everywhere, and so truth is as important in one situation as in another.

The Pharisees were more concerned with the “formula” used in making an oath, rather than the content. There were especially two problems at the time:

- 1) Frivolous swearing – taking an oath when it was not necessary or proper.
- 2) Evasive swearing – including a loop-hole – wanting to keep God out of the transaction. But God is involved in all of our life – there is no compartmentalization.

2. Why do you think Jesus opposed oaths?

3. Why should oaths be unnecessary for Jesus’ followers? How does a person’s character come into play?

4. Does this mean, for example, that we should refuse to give evidence under oath in a court of law? Why or why not? We should keep our promises and be people of our word; then vows are unnecessary. Biblical commentator Dr. Frank E. Gaebelin wrote, “It was our Lord Himself who said: ‘Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’ (Matthew 12:34). Words that are truly godly

come only from a godly heart. Such a heart is one that is possessed first of all by a deep love for Christ. The heart of the one who really trusts the Lord will express itself in words that are true and edifying.

**Verses 38-42** ... *You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." <sup>39</sup>But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup>And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup>If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

5. What do you find most difficult about Jesus' instructions in these verses? Jesus was referring to what has sometimes been called in Latin, "Lex Talionis" – the law of retaliation, whereby a punishment resembles the offense committed in kind and degree. One form was found in the Code of Hammurabi from about 2250 B.C.

6. Jesus' quotation of "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" comes from Exodus 21:24. How would this instruction to Israel's judges clarify the meaning of justice? How would it also limit the extent of revenge?

"Lex Talionis" was originally designed to:

- 1) Limit vengeance (rather than constant escalation).
- 2) This was intended to be only for the court, not individual retaliation. It was rarely carried out literally.

7. This was only part of the Old Testament law. What do these verses say?

Leviticus 19:18 –

Proverbs 24:29 –

Proverbs 25:21 –

8. The Pharisees evidently extended this principle from the law courts (where it belonged) to the realm of personal relationships (where it did not belong). What consequences might have resulted?

The Apostle Paul also deals with this issue in Romans 12:19-21. *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Note: don't take "heaping burning coals on his head" as meaning something like "that will really fix him" – which would be out of character with verse 21. Rather, think of the refiner's fire that eliminates the dross and results in a purification, and the production of useful material.

9. How would you summarize Paul's admonition?

10. Looking at verses 39-42, how would you contrast our natural responses in such situations with the responses Jesus expects of us?

When Jesus talks about a person being struck on the right cheek, it is more than just an ordinary blow. If two right-handed people are facing each other, it would have been a blow with the back of hand, which was considered an insult.

11. What is accomplished by turning the other cheek, giving a cloak or going a second mile?

Some background: The Old Testament law had something to say about cloaks. Exodus 22:26-27 says, *If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.* A person might have multiple tunics, but usually only one cloak. A person could be sued for a tunic, but his cloak could not be taken away.

Roman soldiers were allowed to force civilians to carry a burden for them for up to a mile. Hence, we see this enacted when Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross of Jesus. So Jesus was saying, don't stop with the minimum requirement, but go further, give more.

12. In what situations might Christ's commands apply today?

In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, James M. Boice relates this story of one who did what Jesus commanded. "The late black evangelist Tom Skinner was converted to Christ while he was leader of the largest, toughest teenage gang in New York City, the Harlem Lords. His conversion was so real that he left the gang the next day, turning from a life of fighting and violence to preach the gospel. There was no immediate victory over crime and cruelty. Soon there was victory over hate and bigotry also. Several weeks after his conversion he was playing a football game in which, as his assignment on one play, he blocked the defensive end while his own halfback scored a touchdown. As he got up from the ground to head back to the huddle, the boy whom he had blocked jumped in front of him in a rage and slammed him in the stomach. As he bent over from the blow he was hacked across the back. When Skinner fell, the boy kicked him, shouting, 'You dirty black n----! I'll teach you a thing or two.'

"Skinner said that under normal circumstances the old Tom Skinner would have jumped up from the ground and pulverized the white boy! But instead, he got up from the ground and found himself looking the boy in the face and saying, 'You know, because of Jesus Christ, I love you anyway.' Later Skinner said that he even surprised himself, but he knew that what the Bible had promised was true. He was a new creature in Christ, and it was no longer necessary for him to operate on the old level of tit for tat, hate for hate, or retaliation. Moreover, when the game was over and the opposing end had some time to think about it, he came to Skinner and said, 'Tom, you've done more to knock prejudice out of me by telling me that you loved me than you have if you'd socked my jaw in.'"

