

## **YOU HAVE HEARD...[PART III]**

### **Matthew 5:33-48**

Today we finish the short series on the section of the sermon on the mount where Jesus teaches his disciple about their righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees.

In these verses Jesus doesn't quote from the Ten Commandments. But he still picks up a law from the Old Testament covenant, from the Torah. He then explains what is the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. And to put the conclusion here at the beginning: the greater righteousness is not about being a better or 'gooder' person. What it really is about is how the Gospel of Jesus Christ – that Good News about God's love for sinners – works out in the disciple's life.

#### **Oaths**

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ <sup>34</sup>But I tell you, do not swear an oath 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>All you need to say is simply ‘Yes,’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. [TNIV]

In a way, this passage continues the theme of the previous sections on adultery and divorce, which were about treating people shamefully for one's own amusement or desires. Here it is about treating people shamefully for personal gain

Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:12: *Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.* [TNIV]

This rule is in a section about dealing honestly with each other.

Jesus is getting people back to dealing honestly with each other.

I wonder if his culture had as much trouble as ours with people making outlandish claims about their honesty in order to attract customers or avoid legal trouble:

“I swear on my mother's grave...”

“May the fleas of a thousand camels infest my arm pits if I am not telling you the truth..”

“I'm over sixty years old. How could I ever be involved in something like drug smuggling or murder?”

“Best brands at the best prices. Have I got a deal for you.”

“I have years of experience and success as a surgeon.”

“You could earn up to \$6,000 per month working from home...”

Even worse is the false witness in a law court. Or the exaggerated story told to others to put someone in a bad light – our media is full of such stories – don't let the facts get in the way of a good story.

In contrast to the cacophony of voices claiming our attention, and our own attempts to talk people into believing us, Jesus tells us to keep it simple.

<sup>37</sup>*All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

At heart, such honesty is also about being honest with the Gospel. If you are known to be an honest person, then people have no reason to doubt you when you start talking about Jesus and being his disciple. In 2 Corinthians we are told, *For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.”* [2 Corinthians 1:19, TNIV] In other words, the Gospel is not a wishy-washy message. It is simple and clear, and so should our witness of it be simple and clear.

Going on...

### **Eye for eye**

<sup>38</sup>*“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 anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.<sup>40</sup> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.<sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them 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.* [TNIV]

This Old Testament rule is in Exodus 21:24 and Leviticus 24:20.

The original intent was to limit people's demand for revenge and justice to what would be considered an equal level to the wrong. For the danger was, as still happens, that the retaliation was far worse than the initial wrong. The story of Dinah and the Shechemites in Genesis 34 is a good example of retaliation gone wrong.

What was intended as a limiting of revenge and justice was twisted into a rule demanding revenge and justice.

Jesus turns the rule back to where it is supposed to be.

I suspect Jesus' illustrations here are not just the neighbour to neighbour relationship.

What they suggest to me is the oppressed Jew and the Roman soldier or wealthy foreigner.

A slap on the cheek was an indication that one was regarded as far inferior to the person who slapped you. 'Walking the mile' refers to the law that Roman armies or platoons on the march could coerce civilians into carrying their goods. They could also demand food and other goods of local villagers. To hand over one's clothes is to be stripped down to one's underwear.

So this little section is not simply about retaliation.

Because, after all, what happens when the oppressed Jew becomes the wealthy person or the person in power?

The temptation is to slap that inferior person, to sue them for all their worth, to work them into an early grave, to hold onto one's wealth when someone seeks help.

Jesus teaches us to live towards others as though we were living in their shoes. After all, he has lived in our shoes:

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* [Hebrews 4:15, TNIV]

<sup>12</sup>*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

<sup>13</sup>*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* <sup>14</sup>*And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.* [Colossians 3:12-14, TNIV]

And now

### **Love v/v hate**

<sup>43</sup>*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* <sup>44</sup>*But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* <sup>45</sup>*that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* <sup>46</sup>*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* <sup>47</sup>*And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?* [TNIV]

This section follows on from the previous one.

The Old Testament rule comes from Leviticus 19:18: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.* [TNIV]

Note that the command was aimed at one's fellow Israelite.

Mind you it does not say to hate your enemy. That seems to be the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees.

Other rabbis had taught about loving one's enemies. But these words at that time and place must have across as a shock. For only a short while before, Roman soldiers had utterly destroyed a village because of a Zealot attack against a Roman platoon nearby. Sound familiar?

Imagine, then, sitting there as a disciples, or as one of the crowd listening in. With all the horror stories of what had happened to people of that village. And then being told, “Love your enemies.”

This surely has to be the most outlandish and unrealistic of everything Jesus said that day!

But note how Jesus describes it. He starts with the phrase “your Father in heaven”.

I doubt if, at that time, the disciples understood what Jesus was getting at. But I reckon after Jesus’ death and resurrection, this truth would have hit home.

We were his enemies. We were the ones who put him on the cross. Who denied knowing him and being his friends. We were one with the whole world in crucifying him.

And yet God the Father was working out his plan to save us. God the Father still welcomes us murderers through his Son. And the Son still encourages us to call God “Our Father in heaven”.

A thought: When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Forgive us our sins (trespasses) as we forgive those who sin (trespass) against us”, we are actually asking God to help us love the sinner (enemy!) as we sinners (‘enemies of God’ – Col 1:21) have been loved by God.

It is with this truth ringing in our ears, that we realize how humble we ought to be.

Only the prideful demand revenge. Only the prideful can pick and choose who are friends and who are enemies.

But Jesus was not prideful [Philippians 2:6-8]. And God the Father, in his humility, *causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*. Yes, this is about God’s humility – if it were about God’s pride it would be about his *burning anger, his tongue a consuming fire, his breath like a rushing torrent* [Isaiah 30:27-33, TNIV]

And so we have nothing to be proud about. We killed the author of life. And, like burning coals heaped on our heads (Romans 12:20), God shows us great kindness in Jesus; and calls us to do the same.

Which leads us to the final verse of the passage: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. [TNIV]

Perfection, then, is not about perfect goodness and correctness. True perfection is about having love for the sinner just as the God the Father has loved us sinners.

Amen.