

Raising the Bar on Integrity

Matthew 5:33-42

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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Worship: A God of Overflowing Grace

Key Sentence: Kingdom people keep promises and relinquish rights

Outline:

I. Promises (Matthew 5:33-37)

II. Rights (Matthew 5:38-42)

Matthew 5:33–42 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Raising the Bar on Integrity Matthew 5:33-42

What does it mean when you cross your fingers. In my life that has always meant that I'm hoping this thing I'm talking about will happen. But what does it mean if you cross your fingers behind your back? All my life it has meant that I was swearing something was true that was really false. Somehow crossing your fingers behind your back gave you permission to tell the fib or the lie. I looked up "crossing your fingers behind your back" and one explanation was that it was like making the sign of the cross to absolve you of the sin of lying. It was often emphasized that this was a behavior of children.

What this says to me is that people will go to some length to avoid feeling bound by their promises, to avoid taking responsibility for their words. Apparently ours is not the first generation to act this way. It seems the Pharisees and others in Jesus' day had a trick of their own. They had very specific words that had to be said to make an oath binding. My favorite example is if you said "I swear by Jerusalem that I'll be home for dinner," that oath was not binding. But if you said "I swear toward Jerusalem," that was binding and you could be found guilty in a law court if you weren't home. There was an entire tract in the commentary of the rabbis, the Mishnah that was given over to these details.

Jesus is not impressed with all this complexifying. In Matthew 5:33-37 he pushes back on their sophistry and teaches that deep righteousness, true integrity, is simply and plainly committed to truth telling. Then in verses 38 to 42 he takes the subject of integrity even further, teaching that his people do not respond to evil with evil or with revenge, but relinquish their rights and care for others. He teaches that kingdom people keep promises and relinquish rights.

Let's begin with verses 33-37, the integrity of truth-telling. *"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.*

Verse 33 does not quote any one law of Moses, but is a summary of several Old Testament precepts which require people who make vows to keep them. The vows in question are, strictly speaking, 'oaths' in which the speaker calls upon God to witness his vow and to punish him if he breaks it.

Moses emphasized the evil of false swearing and the duty of performing to the Lord one's oaths. Here are a few examples: Leviticus 19:12 "You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God." Numbers 30:2 "If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." Deuteronomy 23:21 "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin." These commands prohibit a lying vow. But in the face of this plain meaning, the Pharisees focused on the details of the vow, not the moral requirement of truthfulness and integrity.

It is this sophistry that Jesus pushes back against. In Matthew 23 he says "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

Here in Matthew 5 Jesus similarly argues that however hard you try you cannot avoid some reference to God, for the whole world is God's and you cannot eliminate him from any of it. If you vow by 'heaven', it is God's throne; if by 'earth' it is his footstool; if by 'Jerusalem' it is his city, the city of the great King. If you swear by your head, even that is God's creation and under God's control. You cannot even change the natural color of a single hair, black in youth and white in old age. So preoccupation with a formula was not the point of the law at all. A vow is binding no matter what the accompanying words. That being so, the real implication of the law is that we must keep our promises and be people of our word. Verse 37, Do not swear at all but rather let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.' As the apostle James was to put it later: 'Let your yes be yes and your no be no.' And anything more than this, Jesus added, comes from evil, either from the evil of our heart and its fundamental deceit, or from the evil one whom Jesus described as 'a liar and the father of lies'.

But this strong stance on oath raises two questions. First, if swearing is forbidden, why has God himself used oaths in Scripture? Why, for example, did he say to Abraham: 'By myself I have sworn ... I will indeed bless you ...'? I think the answer is that the purpose of divine oaths was not to increase his credibility but to reinforce and confirm our faith that God himself has promised us this.

Hebrews says “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.” God swears oaths to strengthen our faith.

Second question: is this prohibition absolute? For example, should Christians, in order to be consistent in their obedience, decline to swear an oath in a court of law or a legal document. The Anabaptists took this line in the Reformation, and most Quakers still do. But last week we saw that while we always take Jesus’s words seriously, there are times when taking him literally is unwise or unnecessary. After all, Jesus himself, Matthew later records, did not refuse to reply when the high priest put him on oath, saying: ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ He answered under oath and confessed that he was. But what Jesus emphasizes in this teaching is that honest men do not need to resort to oaths. It was not that they should refuse to take an oath if required by some external authority to do so.

The application is clear. Using phrases like “I swear I’ll be home by ten,” or “I promise I’ll never do that again,” is, according to Stott “a pathetic confession of our own dishonesty.” As A. M. Hunter says “Oaths arise because men are so often liars.” What’s sad is we’re often lying to ourselves, trying to convince ourselves we’ll do what we say, when deep down we know we won’t. Or we get so used to telling convenient lies that sometimes we don’t even notice them. So, we all probably need to turn up our internal lie detectors.

When do we tend to lie? We lie to cover up selfishness, we lie to cover up a bad use of our time, we lie to cover up blowing our diet. We lie to impress. I remember the first time I realized this when I was a kid. For whatever crazy reason I told my friends that I went to Maine every winter and lived in a cabin and trapped beavers? I don’t know what I said. I’m sure no one believed me. But I thought I was making myself cool. Then I realized it was an unsupportable lie, and I finally felt ashamed. But on some level, probably more sophisticated, the temptation to lie or exaggerate to impress is still there, probably for all of us.

Or we lie to hide our feelings and thoughts, our shallowness or our anger or our neediness. For example: “What’s wrong?” “Nothing.” Wouldn’t it be better to say “I’m sorry, it was not a worthy thought,” or “I’m grumpy but I don’t know why” or “I’m thinking about something but I’m not ready to talk about it,” or “I’m kinda down about something,” or more boldly “I’m struggling. Can we sit and talk?” Lying to avoid relationship is as bad as a false oath.

But the third kind of lie that I hate in myself is when I make promises that I don't, or don't even intend to keep. "I'll send that e-mail out." "I'll look into that." "I'll pray about that." And then I don't. I've had more than one occasion when I've promised something for Christmas or someone's birthday. It hasn't been ready yet, or done yet, but I've promised it will be in the future. Then I don't make it happen. I really hate it when I do that. I promised Michael a skydiving trip a year and half ago. It still hasn't happened. Jesus says to me, don't make promises you can't keep. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

But compelling though this application may be, verses 38 to 42 take us to a new level of integrity. Stott says "The two final contrasts bring us to the highest point of the Sermon on the Mount, for which it is most admired and most resented, namely the attitude of total love which Christ calls us to show towards one who is evil (verse 39) and our enemies (verse 44). Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling." Jesus says that rather than retaliating, we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to give up our rights.

Matthew 5:38-42 *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*

Verse 38 comes straight from the law of Moses, from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It's called the *lex talionis*, the principle of exact retribution. It first lays the foundation of justice, specifying the punishment a wrongdoer deserved. Second, it limits the compensation of the victim to an exact equivalent and no more. It defined justice, restrained revenge, and prohibited the taking of the law into one's own hands. The law says "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people."

"But," Stott says, "the scribes and Pharisees evidently extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts (where it belongs) to the realm of personal relationships (where it does not belong). They tried to use it to justify personal revenge. . . The principle of judicial retribution was being utilized as an excuse for the very thing it was instituted to abolish, namely personal revenge." So, verse 39, "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil."

Notice that Jesus does not say “Do not resist evil.” We know we are to resist temptation and evil and all that flies in the face of godliness. We’re told to resist the devil. But this word is “the evil one.” We are not to resist or take revenge on the evil person who seeks to do evil to us. Jesus does not deny that the person is evil. He asks us neither to pretend that he is other than he is, nor to condone his evil behavior. What he does not allow is that we retaliate.

This thought saves us from the ways the verse has been mis-applied. Some pacifists have used it to justify total non-retaliation by individuals and states, so that an individual must not resist the person attacking his loved ones and a nation must not resist the country that invades it nor even protect her people. But if the verse is not about not resisting evil but about how you show the love of Christ to even evil persons, then these questions change. Jesus is not talking about leaving the innocent and the helpless vulnerable to evil, but about the gentleness and love which allows his people to overcome evil with good, as the Apostle Paul will put it. The key to that, as seen in each of Jesus’ four illustrations is the willingness to give up our rights. There are he says, many situations, some of them quite uncomfortable, where we have a right to push back on someone’s demands, but we choose to give up our rights for the sake of love, service and witness. “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

I love the idea of giving up rights. If anger comes when expectations are thwarted, then this is the other side of the coin, the conscious choice not just to forgo what we expected, but to give up what we have a right to expect. For three years after Harvey ReachGlobal Crisis Response hosted teams in our building and every Sunday they would do orientation for the new team. I attended often. My favorite part of the presentation was two slides called “release of rights,” which asked the team members to give up their right to things like “a comfortable bed, familiar food, seeing results, control of myself, control of others, control of circumstances, making decisions, being successful, being understood, being heard, being right.” Instead I entrust these things to God. Not resisting an evil person, in the examples Jesus gives, is all about giving up my rights. That’s not something our culture teaches us to accept. But it’s a counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, upside-down kingdom, isn’t it?

How do we apply this command? As we said earlier, we don’t necessarily apply them literal, though we don’t avoid a literal application if it presents itself. But even if we don’t take Jesus’ examples literally, we do take them seriously. We apply them with wisdom. We want to apply the command and the illustrations wisely. Without using ‘wisely’ to wiggle out of the seriousness of the demand.

First, “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” A right handed person strikes the right cheek with the back of his hand, and in the Middle East, even today, this is considered the greatest insult. To then turn the other cheek means being willing to accept reproach, especially unjust reproach, without retaliation. This is what Jesus did. It had been written of him in Isaiah “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.” When he was arrested the Jewish guard spat on him, blindfolded him and struck him in the face. The Roman soldiers crowned him with thorns, jeered at him, knelt before him in mock homage, spat in his face and struck him with their hands. And Jesus, Stott says “with the infinite dignity of self-control and love, held his peace.” Peter says “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” Jesus was not a weakling. His self-control and love for others were so powerful that every form of retaliation was absolutely rejected.

There’s an old story that illustrates this on a much more ordinary level. Renowned preacher Charles Spurgeon and his wife would sell, but refused to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, “You may have them only if you pay.” As a result, some labeled the Spurgeons as selfish and greedy. The couple accepted the criticisms from their community for years without ever defending themselves. It was only after Mrs. Spurgeon died that the full story was revealed. The Spurgeons had used all the profits from the sale of eggs to support elderly widows in the community. Because they desired their giving to be known only to God, they endured the attacks in silence. They gave up their right to be understood and appreciated.

Verse 40 “And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” It was possible in that day to sue others for the very shirt on their backs. However, no one could take another’s cloak for a permanent possession. A cloak or outer robe was indispensable for living in Palestine. So even if you lost your shirt in court, and your opponent asked for your cloak and won it, he had to return it each evening for you to sleep in. That was the law. Jesus, giving advice to the poor among his followers, says “As they sue you for your shirt and win it, give them your cloak too, even though they cannot legally take it.” This is supremely radical. It’s giving up our rights. Yet Jesus implies that good will result. It reminds me of a legal situation Gail and I were in for many months with our family where the court ruled against our desires time after time, but somehow God allowed us both to comply with the court and come out better off and closer to our actual goal time after time.

Verse 41 “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” The word “forces” is from a Persian root. The Persians had a form of pony express where they would commandeer a horse whenever the horse they were riding got tired. The Romans modified this. Whenever a Roman official or soldier asked anyone within the Empire to carry a burden a mile, that person had to do it regardless of who he was. Almost all Jews had been subject to this, and they hated it. Jesus was asking here was willing cheerfulness for any of his followers in this circumstance. It’s a revolutionary response in a difficult situation, the kind that would cause a hardened soldier to say, “What’s with him? This person has something I do not understand.” This is the way Rome was won to Christianity! So how can you go the second mile? Find a way to do what you’re supposed to do and, cheerfully, something more. If you have to wash the dishes, clean the counter. When you go to the grocery store, bring home a surprise. If you take a meal to a friend, bring flowers too. Don’t just help your child with homework, but write an encouraging note to the teacher.

Finally, verse 42 “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” This last command needs no cultural context. We still live in a world where some want to beg and some want to borrow, and it’s easy to see how we could impoverish ourselves if we gave in to every request. This is where the wisdom comes in, and the love. Give to the one who begs from you if by giving to them you can do them real good. Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett wrote a book called *When Helping Hurts* that laid out the difference between doing someone real good and just perpetuating their poverty. But the interesting thing for me from that book was that the kind of giving that does someone good was also the hardest kind to give: time, energy and relational investment rather than just money. Jesus’s “do not refuse” here is not calling us to give or lend in harmful ways, but to invest in loving ways, including investing our time, our money, our energy and our relational capital.

Stott says it this way, and this is really good: “We cannot take these four little cameos with wooden, unimaginative literalism. This is partly because they are given not as detailed regulations but as illustrations of a principle, and partly because they must be seen to uphold the principle they illustrate. That principle is love, the selfless love of a person who, when injured, refuses to satisfy himself by taking revenge, but studies instead the highest welfare of the other person and of society, and determines his reactions accordingly. He will certainly never hit back, returning evil for evil, for he has been entirely freed from personal animosity. Instead, he seeks to return good for evil. He is willing to give to the uttermost – his body, his clothing, his service, his money – in so far as these gifts are required by love. Thus the only limit to the Christian’s generosity will be a limit which love itself may impose.”

Who do we look to for an example of these things. Many of you have not had the privilege of knowing Novella Denny, who doesn't get to church much anymore, especially with COVID. She was married to Marvin in 1946 and for more than seven decades poured herself out for Marvin, and for her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and, I believe, great-great-grandchildren. She loved them and was primary caregiver for several, in each generation. Furthermore, for decades she cared for every baby in the nursery and every family in the church. She has poured herself out unselfishly. She's gone so many second miles you can't even see where she started. This is an amazing picture of what it looks like to be Jesus to others.

We could talk about others in our generation, from Mother Theresa to Chuck Feeney, who quietly gave away 8 billion dollars while living in a side street in midtown Manhattan and buying his clothes off the rack. For other philanthropists he coined the phrase "giving while living."

We could talk about my favorite fictional character, Lem Warren, who endured derision and insult from everyone who should have loved him: his mother, his wife, his daughter, but who returned good for evil over and over and poured himself out to care for them and everyone who came into his world. I won't rehearse the story for you again. You've got to read it. But he's who I want to be when I grow up. Any one of these people. I'm sad that I'm not. But it is this upside-down, self-forgetting, other-centered wisdom of Jesus that tells us how to really live, keeping promises and relinquishing rights. It's hard and it seems impractical, but it's the real deal.