

Getting Even 3-7-04

Matthew 5:33-42 (NIV)

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.'³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

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

This is the third sermon in the series from the Sermon on the Mount that deals specifically with Jesus' redefining the sacred Law of the Jewish people. He told the people that He had not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Then He started making it harder to fulfill by fleshing out the depths of the Law. They were used to hearing certain expressions and while keeping themselves from committing those forbidden acts, allowed their hearts to be full of evil. They didn't realize how guilty they were, just as we don't today.

Jesus began with the worst of crimes, murder. He described how nurturing anger in our heart makes us guilty of that crime. Then He went on to adultery and declared that before God, lust in the heart was the same as committing the act. In our passage today, Jesus continues with the making of oaths. It is somewhat humorous how cultures take translations and because of the multiple meanings of a word, can come up with something completely different from what was originally written. The source for our passage is a perfect example. Jesus is probably referring to Exodus 20:7. "*You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*" We have come to interpret that as using God or Jesus as a swear word. Actually, it meant to make an oath to God or in His name and not fulfill it. In swearing by God's name and not fulfilling it, you make God's name of no account. (Numbers 30:2) (Deuteronomy 23:21-22)

In Jesus' day the Rabbis insisted on complete honesty. Deception in any form was deplored. But the people had a habit of swearing (making an oath) about the most trivial things. They would try to make their statements more powerful by beginning it with "By my head..." or "May I never see the comfort of Israel if..." In this case, the Rabbis agreed with Jesus. They, too, taught that you should just say what you mean and mean what you say. Let your "Yes!" mean yes and your "No!" mean no. Jesus was saying that you don't need to impress anyone with what you swear by. If you keep your word people will respect what you say. Don't drag in something sacred and cheapen it by your connection with something trivial. Let your reputation speak for itself.

The Jews had one more related habit in their day, they made evasive oaths. If you swore an oath and the name of God was in it, you had brought God into the transaction and

Commented [notes1]: "When a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word"
Numbers 30:2

Commented [notes2]: "When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin in you"
Deuteronomy 23:21-22

were bound to fulfill it. If you swore by anything else, you might have a chance to get out of your commitment. In that sense Jesus was telling them to stop trying to deceive people. Just say what you mean and live up to it. It may be a loophole in the eyes of man, but not in the eyes of God.

How can we apply this to today? We play the same games with language. We try to impress with our words. We can attempt to slide in subtle deceptions for one purpose or another. When trying to have our way, we can skew the facts. We call it "spin". Jesus said, "Don't!" Jesus believed the spin needed to stop! Jesus had the first real "no spin zone". He just told it the way it was, and that is what we need to do too. Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Jesus said anything more than that was from the devil. He is a liar and a deceiver. When we enter into that spirit, we are cooperating with him. Follow through with your commitments. When you carry the label "Christian" you are being judged as His representative. If you aren't sure if you can do something, say so.

Our need to impress people comes from a lack of self-esteem. Once you realize who you are in Christ, you realize you don't need to impress anyone. God has accepted you in His Son. God is impressed with His Son, and you are clothed in Him. (Galatians 3:27) His life is in you. That makes you an heir of God, a child of the king, and a part of God's household. (Ephesians 2:19) That's impressive! People may not see it now, but they will one day. There is no need to impress people now. Now is the time for humility. There will come a time for glory, but this is not it. There will come a day when the words of Isaiah will come to pass. *Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.*" Isaiah 55:5 (NIV) But now is the time for humility.

When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration He didn't say, "Now tell everyone about my glory!" No! He said, "Don't tell anyone until I rise from the dead." (Matthew 17:9) God will glorify us in His time, so realize there is no need to impress others now. God is impressed with who you are in Christ. That should provide more than enough self-esteem. There is no need for a child of God to impress anyone by skewing the truth. "Be completely humble" Paul said. (Ephesians 4:2)

³⁸*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'* ³⁹*But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Jesus is quoting from Leviticus 24:19-20 (NIV). ¹⁹If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: ²⁰fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured.*

The Law was very equitable. This may sound harsh, but actually it was a limitation on revenge. Because of the influence of Christ in our modern world, we forget how brutal the ancient world was. Feuds took the lives of whole families. Cycles of violence could begin from mere accidents. This law actually predates Moses and brought about a way of limiting the violence. Whatever pain or loss you inflicted on another was the punishment that you were to be sentenced with. Fair, right? Jesus asks for more than what is fair. That was the divine Law of God, but now, Jesus is asking people to do the impossible. When someone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the left also. Now if this isn't against human nature, nothing is. How can you do this? Why should you do this? Jesus modeled it for us. On the cross He pleaded for forgiveness for those who were crucifying Him. His

Commented [notes3]: ²⁷For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Galatians 3:27 (KJV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, Ephesians 2:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Matthew 17:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

reason, "They know not what they do." If you could see the eternal consequences for hatred and violence do you think you would hold a grudge and attempt to inflict pain on someone? Let me put it in a different light. If you saw the love of Jesus and the price He paid for you, could you hit someone for whom He died? Those who do such things have never seen His love. They don't know what they are doing. When you resist them it only fans the flames of their anger. When you offer your other cheek, in most cases it douses those flames.

There is something hidden here that we need to understand. If someone right handed who is facing you strikes you on the right cheek, it is a backhanded slap. That was a severe insult in that time and culture. Jesus is asking us to accept insult without retaliation or resentment. Jesus did. His apostles did. The early church did, and we can too, through the Spirit of Christ within us.

Jesus is asking us to act in love. He is asking something that is impossible for our human nature, but is the natural response of the Spirit. He is asking you to see others as He sees them, ignorant and in need. In their mind the anger is quite justified. Do you want others to blame you for something you do in ignorance? Then you should not blame them for their acts committed in ignorance. They may know what they are doing to you, but they are ignorant of God's love and His heart; they are ignorant of the eternal consequences of their actions. They are ignorant of the fact that they are acting as slaves of sin.

We need to understand a teaching from John.

⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. 1 John 4:5-6 (NIV)

What do you expect? People from the world speak the world's viewpoint and the world listens to them. They can't hear us because they are tuned to the world. All we can do is forgive them and pray that their eyes will be opened. Don't fight with people who are worldly, pray for them. The only thing that will change them is our spiritual fight. Don't hit back, love back. Love conquers all.

⁴⁰And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

⁴¹If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Here again Jesus is presenting the idea that this world and the things in it are not nearly as important as relationships. You might think, "What is a shirt and jacket? No big deal." Because of the difficulty to hand produce the thread and weaving, clothing was like buying a car today. It was a major investment. Many folks could only afford two shirts and one jacket. The jacket was your blanket for the night and could not be taken from you according to the Mosaic Law. (Exodus 22:26-27) Jesus is saying to give it to the man who is trying to sue you. Give up your right to be right! What? We want to file a counter-suit, but Jesus says to give what they are asking for and twice as much. Why? This world is not our home. There are no U-hauls behind a hearse. When you have an eternal perspective, you try to win others, not resist and fight with them. If they think life is about a car, give them your car and your boat. They will soon find that it does not satisfy. Perhaps, just maybe, your generosity will cause them to consider the value of belonging to Christ. That would be worth more than any shirt and jacket or car and boat.

Commented [notes7]: ²⁶If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, ²⁷because 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. Exodus 22:26-27 (NIV)

Barclay writes: "The Christian thinks not of his rights, but of his duties; not of his privileges, but of his responsibilities. The Christian is a man who has forgotten that he has any rights at all; and the man who will fight to the legal death for his rights, inside or outside the Church, is far from the Christian way." —Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)

In that time in Israel, the Roman soldiers could force you to carry their gear for them. Jesus said that if they ask you to go a mile with them, go two. Imagine how someone would complain about the interruption to his or her day. Most of us get mad when we get behind a slow tourist. I can just hear the murmuring. Remember, these folks are descended from the people Moses led through the wilderness. The Roman soldier was probably glad the mile was over so he didn't have to listen to their bellyaching.

Now consider the difference when you ask someone who has this attitude Jesus is describing. All the way they are talking about the miracle worker, Jesus, who changed their life. They are joyful. At the end of the mile, they ask if they can go one more. Weird? No, that is those crazy Christians, willing to be put out to have a chance to express the love of the one that died for them. What kind of an impact do you think that would have on that soldier? No wonder the Roman Empire was conquered by Christianity in 300 years.

Do you long for opportunities to show the love of Christ, even when it costs you personally? I'll be honest, I struggle with this one. I get my plans set, and God throws in an opportunity to help someone and exhibit the love of Christ. I fight for free time to catch up with something around the house, and someone calls and asks for a favor. Sometimes I'm like the Jewish conscript that whines the whole way. I miss the opportunity that God has given me because I am thinking about myself. Then at the end of the mile, I'm out of there. Go another mile? No way! Who knows but in that second mile the love of God might break in upon that needy person's heart. People can't tell that it is extraordinary love unless it costs you an extraordinary amount. That is when they see Jesus. This is where we get the expression, "Go the extra mile." Go the extra mile because of the love of God.

The Jews hated the occupying power of Rome. Jesus was telling them they needed to let go of the hatred and see the individual. They thought the Roman had little or no chance of spiritual life, yet that is the person Jesus said they should be generous to. Jesus was. Who is your Roman? Is it your employer, your spouse, a relative or neighbor? Go the extra mile with the love of God and the grace of the Spirit. I've seen it transform beasts into princes. Jesus is asking us to be as gracious with others as He is with us. Is that too much to ask?

"But what if they don't respond?" you ask. Then God accepts it as offering of love to Him. (Colossians 3:23-24) Remember, "as much as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me," Jesus said. (Matthew 25:40)

Jesus went on to say, ⁴²*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

The Law required that everyone who was able assist the poor. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11) But Jesus is saying that we should be generous to all, whether a loan or an outright gift. Again, we see His attitude is focused more on the eternal worth of the individual and a possible opportunity to influence them with the love of Christ. The intent then is for their

Commented [notes8]: ²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,
²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.
Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ⁴⁰And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.
Matthew 25:40 (KJV)

Commented [notes10]: ⁷If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother.
⁸Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.
⁹Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.
¹⁰Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.
¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.
Deuteronomy 15:7-11 (NIV)

eternal good. That means that if someone who is working the system, insists on your generosity, you may not be doing the best thing for them. When an addict insists on some cash assistance, you are doing him a disfavor to give it to him. Be wise in the way you give, recognizing that we give to bless and help, not to hinder and harm. But don't make it an excuse to not to give when there is genuine need.

Is someone claiming to be hungry? Take them to lunch or even to the grocery store. Are they claiming to be on hard times and in need of cash for gas to get them home? Go to the station and fill up their car. Give freely, but give wisely. We have been able to help a number of people through the benevolent fund. The elders try to determine the authenticity of the need. Have you given to that fund lately? If you haven't been able to give to someone personally, perhaps you can give by dedicating an offering to the benevolent fund.

Any of us can fall on a set of circumstances and difficulty that will cause us to be in need. If we hope that others will be generous to us, we must be generous to others first. Once again, Jesus is only asking us to follow His example. The poor disciples gave so regularly to the poor that when Jesus told Judas to do what he was going to do quickly, they thought it was an offering for the poor. (John 13:27-29)

We were poor spiritually, but Jesus came and gave of His abundance that we might be rich in Him. The spiritual is infinitely more valuable than the physical. We should always be ready to give not only the spiritual, but the physical as well. That can only happen when our hearts are fixed on heaven and our treasures are there. (Matthew 6:19-21) If our treasures are in the passing things of this world, we can't find true generosity. We can only give until it begins to hurt and then we back away protecting our own assets. Jesus is describing someone who is overflowing with spiritual wealth and who has forgotten his or her own rights. The kingdom of God is what they desire, and no physical thing here holds their affections. Have you escaped the pull of this world's goods? Like gravity, they pull you hopelessly toward them, unless you have been set free by the truth in Christ. (John 8:32) Without Him, these instructions are impossible. Without His life, they are just impossible platitudes. Jesus is challenging you to find your life in Him. He's showing us how hopeless we are without Him, but at the same time, He is teaching about all that He can do in us.

When we recognize that Christ is describing something we are not experiencing, we must stop and ask ourselves why. Ask Him to conform you to His Word by His Spirit.

Commented [notes11]: ²⁷As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, ²⁸but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. John 13:27-29 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)