

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

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SECOND BLOCK (5:17-48)

The Ethics of Jesus: Code Vs Character, Part 3 (5:33-37)

Concerning Oaths

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not break a vow, but you shall keep your vow [as] to the Lord," 34 but I am saying to you, do not swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God; 35 nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King; 36 nor shall you swear on your head, for you are able one hair to make white or black. 37 Let your word be, "Yes" [as] "Yes," and your "No," [as] "No," whatever is more than these comes from the evil one (tou ponerou - one who is evil), (5:33-37).

Moral Codes and Oaths

Here, perhaps more than in any other area, we can see something of the ineffectiveness of code ethics in influencing moral behavior. In the first century Mediterranean culture, to assume that what a man said was the truth of the matter was to engage in pure folly. In fact, your best assumption, especially in matters of business, was that he would not tell you the truth unless you swore him to his word; and then, depending on the language of his oath, he may not be held to the truth or an agreement by his oath. It may be safely

said that "swearing falsely" had been developed into an art form in first century Palestine.

The OT clearly taught that one must carry out what he had sown to (Num 30:3; Deut 23:22-24; Psalms 50:14). The key passage in this discussion is, "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," (Exod 20:7). When one took an oath, the authority he called in a witness to his oath gave the oath its level of credibility and enforceability. To call God himself in to witness an oath was to call God himself in to witness an oath was to call in the ultimate authority.

The assumption here is that unless one is sworn to tell the truth, he may lie. In the first century culture to which Jesus was speaking, every man was assumed a liar unless he swore to his words, and the credibility of his oath rested on the source by which he swore! Any invocation of "the deity" held one to his oath. The Jewish theologians argued that since a Jew could not utter "the ineffable name" (YHWH), he might swear by that which represented God's presence and, could stand for God himself (e.g., the Scriptures, the throne of God, the temple, the altar, the temple sacrifice, etc.).

From this developed a very complex system of evasion and deception. It was argued that to swear by heaven (God's dwelling place) was more binding than to swear by the earth (God's creation). To swear by the holy city (Jerusalem) or by one's own head (as God creation) was not as binding as to swear by the Scriptures, the temple, or the altar, because God's presence was more associated with them. Professor Lightfoot, again, quoting from Talmudic sources, informs us:

If any swear by heaven, by earth, by the sun, etc., although the mind of the swearer be under these words to swear by Him who created them, yet this is not an oath. Of if any swear by some of the prophets, or by some of the boos of the Scriptures, although the sense of the swearer be to swear by Him that sent

that prophet, or that gave that book, nevertheless this is not an oath (*Talmud and Hebrica*, vol 6:127).

Moral Character and Oaths

Jesus' attitude toward this whole business was that such was nothing less than stark hypocrisy, as is reflected in his comments in Matt 23:16-22. Codes tend to lend themselves to manipulative interpretation. At the heart of all this is flagrant dishonesty and a person playing at these games of deception is completely devoid of moral character.

Jesus insists, "Let your word be, "Yes" [as] "Yes," and your "No," [as] "No," whatever is more than these comes from the evil one," (5:37). The emphatic construction is present here in the intensive (repeated) use of the affirmative particle (yes, yes) and the negative particle (no, no). The grammatical significance of this is that when we say yes to something, it should be absolutely yes, and when we say no it should be absolutely no. No equivocation, no double-speak, not deception, no games. A man should be of such moral character that when he gives his word, an oath to tell the truth is completely unnecessary. Of course he will tell the truth to the best of his ability, honesty is a part of who he is as a moral being (cf. also James

Concerning the Resistance of Evil, (5:38-47) (Code Vs Character)

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," [Exodus 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21] 39 but I am saying to you do not to oppose (antistenai – stand against) the evil one. But whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him also the other, 40 and to the one wishing to take you to court and take away your tunic, give him also your cloak, 41 and whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 From the one asking you the give, and from him wishing to borrow, do not turn away.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and

you shall hate your enemy,” [Lev 19:18] 44 but I am saying to you, “Love (agapao – to show good will toward) your enemies and pray for the ones who persecute you, 45 in order that you may become sons of your Father in the heavens; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust [in that all beings created in the image of God are sons and daughters of God], 46 for if you love (agapao) [only] the ones loving you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors the same? 47 And if you greet (aspasesthe – to acknowledge someone) your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 48 In this manner you will be perfect (teleios – complete or whole), just as your heavenly Father in heaven is perfect (teleios – complete or whole), (Matt 5:38-47)

As stated in an earlier lesson (cf. on Matt 5:9ff), peace (in Hebrew "Shalom") was and is one of the most uttered words in the land of Palestine. Peace was longed for, but peace never seemed to come, nor has it come even today. Conflict in the Middle East is at least three thousand years old. The primary meaning of the word peace, in Hebrew and Greek, is, essentially, “the absence of conflict” or “the resolution of conflict.” Whether conflict has adverse or positive effects depends on how one handles it. If we handle it well, the results can be growth on the part of both parties involved in the conflict. If it isn't handled well, the results can be harmful to all involved.

This is the concept of peace Israel has prayed for throughout its long history. In fact, this was one of the greatest longings of the Messianic expectation of first century Judaism. The coming of the Messiah would usher in a reign of peace. One of the titles ascribed to him was "prince of peace" (Isa 9:6). To many Jews, however, military conquest was the only way of bringing peace to Israel. These were those who lived by the edict of Leviticus:

If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him – 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him (Lev 24:19-20; cf. Exod 21:23-25; Deut 19:21).

This is the rule by which many of the Jews of the first century lived, and so today. Living by this kind of moral code brought nothing but hatred and death.

The Romans were an evil or tyrannical occupation force in Israel. The Zealots wanted the fight to come from within the nation of Israel with the help of Diaspora Jews throughout the world. This is one of the reasons the pilgrim feasts were such a threat to Rome. The Essenes wanted a holy war led by the sons of light (the Essene warriors and warrior angels of God) against the sons of darkness (the Romans, the evil Sadducees who had usurped the High Priest chair, and the Herodians who were not descendents of David and were not even truly Jews).

This is the context of Jesus' comments of Matt 5:38-48. To attempt to overthrow the forces of Rome with violence would utterly fail. If the zealots' terroristic agenda continued the results would be the destruction of Jerusalem. He knew what was going to happen as he foretold in Matt 24-25, and says to the people, you cannot conquer evil with evil, you must conquer evil with goodness, which is the message the human race must hear or it will wipe itself from the face of the earth.

Did Paul Know of Theses Teachings?

The question often raised concerns whether someone taking this teaching of Jesus in an absolute sense is then in conflict with Romans 13, and all other biblical examples of resistance of evil (OT, Jesus' cleansing the Temple, Paul's revelation of the assassination plot against him in Jerusalem, etc.). But Paul was talking about what the Christian's attitude should be toward government not personal self-defense. This was the position taken by some Church Fathers' following Constantine's recognition of Christianity (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, et al). Another argument was that Jesus' teaching was to be understood as applicable among brethren; his teaching here would not be applicable to the pagans, which is the topic of Romans 13.

Perhaps, the matter of greatest difficulty is that of the hermeneutical question of the application of this teaching outside the cultural context to which it was delivered. The concept of passive or nonviolent resistance, which was so much a part of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance, followed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and employed in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, is drawn from these words by Jesus of Nazareth. Gandhi said that he found his views in the teachings of Jesus found in his Sermon on the Mount and that he could find nothing in the teachings of Hinduism or Buddhism with such insight as to how to address the issue of assault against one's person.

One of the major difficulties of the hermeneutical science is that of application. All teachings of Scripture are not to be understood as universal mandates applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, and under all circumstances. This may be well illustrated with this passage. In his book *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Steve Chalke makes an excellent observation concerning the interpretation of this teaching of Jesus. His comments are worth the extensive quotation that follows:

In Jesus' illustration, the initial blow suffered by the victim would have been backhanded designed not so much to injure as to offer insult, to humiliate and degrade. This kind of blow was only administered to "inferiors," so a master would backhand his slave, husbands their wives, and Romans, Jews. But by teaching his lowly hearers to turn the other cheek, Jesus wasn't suggesting they take this insult lying down. In fact, the reverse is true. By following Jesus' advice, a servant would make it impossible for his master to hit him again with the back of his hand. The left cheek may now have offered a perfect target to strike another blow, but strong cultural taboos meant that the person hitting could not use his left hand, which was kept for "unclean" tasks. In practice this meant that aggressors only had one option if they wanted to continue to hit. Because they could only use their right hands, they would have to slap or punch their victims - but only equals fought this way (Steve Chalke & Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, pp 130-131).

This scenario would have worked if the cultural norms stated here were in place in other cultures. For one to assume that the person assaulting him would be shamed by striking again would be something of a stretch in many cultures. It could very well be the case in first century Israel, and if so, the instruction given by Jesus would have been a good strategy.

A similar scenario is presented by Chalke with reference to Jesus' instruction to give one's cloak in addition to his tunic, "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matthew 5:40 NIV).

The poor had only two garments - an outer and an inner one (i.e. their underwear). According to Deuteronomy 24:10-13, if someone owed a great debt and was unable to pay, a creditor was allowed to take the outer garment of the debtor as collateral, but had to return it each evening so that the poor man could sleep in it (*Lost Message*, p 132).

Chalke suggests that Jesus was instructing the poor person to shame the creditor by stripping himself naked in court. Chalke says,

He was actually urging impoverished debtors to use the system against itself. Stripped of land, their goods and finally their outer garments, he counsels them to hand over their underwear as well. This would mean stripping off and marching out of the courtroom stark naked! And because nakedness was another strong social taboo in Israel, such an act would have brought shame, not so much on the naked person (whose treatment had already robbed him of his dignity) but on those responsible for causing it. Once again the tables were turned. The poor had risen above their shame and delivered a trump card, "You want my robe; here, have everything." (*Lost Message*, pp 132-33).

This same scenario is played out in Jesus instruction concerning the soldier who forces a Jew to carry his pack. He could only require him to carry it for a mile, Jesus says, "Carry it two miles and see what

he does.” In all of Jesus’ instruction he presupposes a set of cultural norm that could be used to draw out the decency of the person abusing another or he is instructing the one abused to rise above it and stand firm in his own dignity.

This teaching may have worked in first century Israel with the cultural particulars present there, but would it work in every culture of all times and in all places? The presupposition at fault here is that all teaching of Scripture is applicable to all person, in all places, at all times, and under all circumstances. Would a person who has backhanded another have reservations against slapping him again with his open hand in every culture? This scenario played out in many cultures has resulted in the one turning the other cheek being taken to the emergency room with a broken jaw.

The culture in which Jesus gave this teaching may have been more open to the idea that a single backhand was enough to shame a servant, but are all cultures open to such a scenario? It is not the case that all teaching of Scripture is applicable to all situations. One cannot take the teaching given for one culture or context and apply it equally to cultures differing in content to other cultures. Whether one chooses to utilize the instruction given by Jesus here would depend on whether the circumstances were the same as those of his circumstances.

Moral Codes and Retaliation

Jesus is here addressing Torah teaching by means of hyperbole. In each point addressed in this series of contrasts (Matt 5:21-47), Jesus states a thesis followed by an antithesis (that which is opposed to it). To hate is to murder, to lust is to commit adultery. So with the way one handles conflict. There had to be a better way than Israel's "avenger" doctrine (similar to Islam's jihad doctrine present in the Middle East today). Revenge rarely accomplishes anything but the creation of more hate. In Palestine in the first century the Romans were constantly brutalizing the Jews (killing Jewish men, raping Jewish women). The avengers (Zealots or assassins) believed it was their God-given responsibility to take vengeance.

Moral Character and Retaliation

Many of the scribes or rabbis taught the doctrine of, "an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth." If one faithfully kept this command, one must take revenge. Jesus gives a different teaching, it is not always best to take revenge, and it is oftentimes better to forgive. Jesus is talking about approaching the teaching of *Torah* with a kinder spirit; and upon closer examination one will see that the traditional interpretation of these Torah texts had completely missed their original intent. The traditional interpretation fostered a spirit of vengeance or hate, the other a spirit of mercy and forgiveness. According to Jesus, it was not right to hate nor personally measure out justice (punishment) on those who had wronged them (cf. Lev 19:17; 24:17-23).

In these verses Jesus is saying to these people, "There's a better way of living than this." Living by their moral code produced nothing but the continual taking of human life. Only through the transformation of their moral character, which occurred through their conversion to Christ, could this way of life be stopped for the people of the ancient Mediterranean world, and so also with the world in which we live.

Living by moral codes does not necessarily make people better; that is, unless they develop beyond the moral codes to the kind of moral character reflected in this ancient Galilean teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. This is not because he came with superior codes to those of Moses. Jesus of Nazareth did not come here to reveal new and better codes or laws to us; rather, he came to reveal God to us, to show us the Father (John 1:18; 14:7-9), in order that we, as beings created in the image of God, may know who we are supposed to be as moral beings. This is why, for Christians, Jesus is the paradigm or model of all moral behavior. In that we have seen him, we have seen the Father. When we have seen the Father, the one in whose image we have been created; then, and only then, do we know who we are and who we are supposed to be and our moral

character will be a reflection of the moral character of the one who created us.

Questions For Discussion

1. How do you understand Jesus' expression, "I have come not to abolish them [the law and the prophets] but to fulfill them."? How was his very existence a fulfillment or accomplishment of this body of revelation from God?
2. Is there a value to codes/rules in the moral development of an individual? If so, what is it?
3. What was the purpose of God giving the law to Israel and how did the existence of Jesus fulfill that purpose?
4. How effective were moral codes in preventing murder in the first century world of Jesus?
5. In what way does what Jesus says about hating your brother (i.e., having contempt for a fellow human being) serve as a deterrent to murder? How is this an improvement over laws against murder?
6. Discuss the statement, "Only human behavior is deserving of contempt, not our fellow human beings." Is this concept realistic?
7. What effect did the Mosaic code against adultery and sexual immorality have on the Jewish people Jesus' time?
8. How does one's moral character effect the way he views a member of the opposite sex? Discuss the roles of moral character and moral codes as relates to sexual behavior.
9. Why do you think divorce was so rampant in the first century Mediterranean world? Were there not codes governing marriage, divorce, and remarriage? Why weren't they working? What role does moral character play in all of this? Apply to our own culture.

10. Discuss the practice of swearing or taking oaths in first century Palestine. What does this tell us about the effectiveness of moral codes? What does this tell us about these people's moral character?

11. What do you think Jesus was attempting to do with his teaching of Matt 5:38-47? What does the practice of the "avenger doctrine" have to do with the issue here?

12. Is there a difference between retaliation against evil and resistance of evil? What is the difference? Which do you Jesus is concerned with here in these verses?