



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Do Right By Difficult People

Matthew 5:33-48

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A Point Not So Well Taken

Last Tuesday, I received my weekly Leadership Humor Newsletter, including a cartoon that fit last week's sermon on being urgent about relationship strains.

It depicts a woman greeting a man on her front porch. He is saying, "The pastor said it's unhealthy to live with unresolved conflict ... is your husband home?" On his hand is a boxing glove!¹ Obviously he got the point about the urgency in healing relationships; but he missed the important point we'll stress today.

Things To Recall About Our Text (5.17-20)

1. Jesus intended to show the deeper meaning of the Law (see 7.12).
2. He also intended for the Law to be taken seriously, not lightly.

Dealing with Difficult People (5.33-48)

It's easy to see how the last two sections fit the idea of dealing with difficult people. But, verses 33-37 may teach us what is most important for the task.

1. We must be people of integrity (5.33-37).
 - a. Jesus identifies the *behavior* with which he is concerned in v. 33, citing from Lev. 19.12 and Num. 30.2, which are grounded in Ex. 20.7.
 - b. The *cause* of his concern is elaborated in vv. 34-36.
 - i. People were using oaths designed to reinforce the truth of a statement to avoid being honest. Matt. 23.16-22 elaborates.

¹ The cartoon was by Dennis Fletcher, © 2012. The email was received November 19, 2013. Copyright © 2013 ChristianityToday.org, Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved.

- ii. With Lev. 19.12 in view, notice John Stott's summary: "They argued that what the law was really prohibiting was not taking the name of the Lord *in vain*, but *taking the name of the Lord* in vain. 'False swearing', they concluded meant profanity (a profane use of the divine name), not perjury (a dishonest pledging of one's word). So they developed elaborate rules for the taking of vows.... One need not be so particular ... about keeping the vows in which the divine name had not been used."²
- iii. Some had twisted the intent and were "relax[ing] one of . . . these commandments" (Mt. 5.19).
- c. Jesus called for an honesty *initiative*.
 - i. His premise (see Mt. 23.16-22) was that the formula used to make a vow is irrelevant since God owns everything; there's nothing one can swear by without at least implicitly referring to him.
 - ii. Just be truthful: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No';..." (Mt. 5.37).
 - iii. Nothing helps more in our dealings with others, including difficult people, than for us to be honest with them.
 - 1. Honesty involves more than merely *saying* true words; finding loopholes, shading meanings, intonation, body language, etc., are used to *communicate* with the intent to deceive.
 - 2. We should be honest, not "mostly honest."
- 2. Payback is not the way of Jesus.
 - a. The *behavior* is introduced in v. 38 and seen more fully when we study the conditions at odds with the commands in vv. 39-42.
 - i. The Law did teach "an eye for an eye" (Ex. 21.24; Lev. 24.20; Dt. 19.21).
 - ii. But, those laws were intended as sentencing rules; they were not intended for *personal* payback as Dt. 19.15-21 which references witness, priests, and judges shows.
 - b. Jesus called for ceasing behavior that *causes* escalation of violence when neither side will "break the chain of evil action and reaction."³ His illustrations help us see what was at issue.

² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 100.

³ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 35A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1989), 297.

- i. In Jewish culture, a slap to the right cheek was typically a backhanded slap from a right-handed assailant, an insult.
 - ii. The suit was a legal illustration rooted in what was permitted as collateral for a loan: the inner garment, not just the outer one (see Ex. 22.26-27).
 - iii. Two miles not one was also a legal figure, referring to the “Roman conscription of private citizens to help carry military equipment.”
 - iv. The fourth example sums up the other three: have the attitude that seeks to do good, not evil, to people, even if they started it.⁴
- c. The *initiative* Jesus called for is to do good to any evil person (the best way to take τῷ πονηρῷ [tō ponērō] in v. 39; see Blomberg, *et. al.*).
 - i. “Each of these commands requires Jesus’ followers to act more generously than what the letter of the law demanded” (Blomberg, 113).
 - ii. Jesus’ example keeps the focus on doing good and is grounded in the assumption that evil is overcome with good, not with further evil.
- 3. Summation: seek the best for all, even our enemies.
 - a. The *behavior* envisioned in 5.43 grew out of a distortion of the Law.
 - i. The Law taught them to “love their neighbors” (Lev. 19.18) and never said, “hate your enemies.”
 - ii. In practice, some limited “neighbor” to fellow Israelites and foreigners who resided in Israel (see Lev. 19.34).
 - iii. As Luke 10.25-37 illustrates, “and hate your enemies” was the way Leviticus 19.18 was understood in practice.
 - b. The problem’s *cause* is identified in vv. 46-47: when we follow our world’s norms, we settle for and justify behavior that does not reflect God’s love.
 - c. Thus the *initiative* that Jesus commands calls us to follow the highest standard in the way we treat people.
 - i. We are called to seek what is best for all, even our enemies.
 - 1. This is the meaning of ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*), commanded here: the word refers to invincible good, good will, benevolence, and describes an action we *choose* to follow.
 - 2. Jesus gets specific: “pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). Bonhoeffer elaborated: “Through the medium of prayer we go to our

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 113-114.

enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.”⁵ It’s hard to do evil to someone we are sincerely praying for.

- ii. We are called to mimic God’s quality of holiness, to be “whole, entire, undivided in allegiance and devotion to God”⁶ (vv. 45, 48).

Exhortation

Loyalty to God’s holiness and character: that’s the issue of Jesus’ entire sermon. As Alfred Plummer put it, “To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.”⁷

We will deal best with difficult people by living God’s truth and love. That’s who Jesus calls us to be.

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⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Touchstone, 1959, 1995), 149.

⁶ Frank Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 64. This is Matera’s definition of the meaning of “perfect” in v. 48.

⁷ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, Reprint (Minneapolis: MN: James Family Christian Publishers, n.d.), 89.