

OATHS AND ADVERSARIES

Virgil Warren, PhD

This chapter looks at Matthew 5:33-48, dealing first with verses 33-37 on taking oaths. Jesus said,

You have heard that it was said to them of old time, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord your oaths.” But I tell you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God, nor by earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your conversation be yes, yes and no, no. Whatever is more than these comes from the evil one.

Deuteronomy 23:21 requires people to fulfill their oaths, but Jesus forbids taking oaths. This regulation makes us wonder whether his rule is as straightforward as it sounds. Taken in an absolute sense, it would mean that all kinds of oaths are proscribed, and that Christians should never swear an oath under any circumstance. Particularly of concern is whether Jesus prohibits taking legal oaths, as in a courtroom.

In Matthew 23:16-22 Jesus objects to the Pharisees’ practices in oath taking. He criticizes formulas they used: *“Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor.”* Contemporary religious leaders considered oaths binding only if taken in special ways. The question is whether Matthew 5:33-34 refers to such things or whether it addresses oath-taking generally.

To make inferences about the problem, we must look at the solution Jesus proposes. *“Do not swear at all”* has three possible applications or combinations of them. First, it could prohibit expletive oaths. An expletive is a relatively meaningless expression that fills a slot. At best it indicates a feeling or attitude. Expletives include using the Lord’s name in vain. In a comment like *“I will do it, by God,”* the parenthetical element does not carry much meaning. The speaker throws it in off-handedly for emphasis. The Old Testament already objected to using God’s name like this, because it sounds as if there is no reality that corresponds to that word. God deserves more respect than that from those he created, sustains, and redeems. Even though English uses the “oath” to cover expletives, it is uncertain that Jesus had that in mind.

A second alternative is more likely. Jesus could be forbidding legal oaths. A legal oath either promises that a person will certainly do something or that testimony on the witness stand will be true. A promissory oath promises to do something; an assertive oath says that information is true. Legal oaths can occur outside a courtroom, especially in cultures where court

proceedings are not typical. People often work out verbal agreements, and there are no signatures on a contract. Such procedures solemnly pledge to repay debt or perform service. Prohibiting oaths in transactions would not cause much difficulty in America because a person may “affirm” rather than “swear,” saying “so help me God.” Some countries may not give Christians that option, however. But Jesus is not necessarily concerned with legal oaths, because his words can be legitimately understood in another connection—one that derives from the every-day social character of the sermon as a whole.

Jesus appears to be concerned with bringing an oath mentality into interpersonal settings. People sometimes want to make themselves appear more believable. They swear, take oaths, formalize commitments. While there may be occasions when taking legal oaths is appropriate, Jesus is saying to make promises and commitments in a simply interpersonal manner. We should not always be trying to use “showy” means for settling social issues and accomplishing everyday goals. In day-to-day life, oath taking is not necessary or particularly effective. It probably betrays personal or moral immaturity, especially if not swearing makes us feel less obligated to keep our word. Something along this line happens when people make verbal commitments but renege without feeling guilty if they have not signed any papers. *“Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no”* ends up meaning *“Keep your word,”* *“Mean what you say.”* Whether a statement is made informally or formally with an oath must not impact keeping our word.

In general, Jesus opposes legalizing relationships. Consequently, he is probably talking about circumstances in which a person initiates taking an oath—instead of being compelled to do so as in court. He just puts the oath in there. Jesus’ statement is similar to Paul’s comment about love feasts in 1 Corinthians 11: *“Don’t you have houses to eat in?”* By eating too much at their “church dinners,” the Corinthians were embarrassing those who did not have enough. Paul was not banning love feasts, but prohibiting their misuse. *“If you are going to act like that, eat at home.”* It is worth noting that Jesus let Caiaphas put him under oath in one of his trials: *“I adjure you by the living God: tell us whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”*

Similarly, Jesus is saying, *“If you are going to carry on this way, don’t take oaths at all.”* This understanding makes especially good sense if his contemporaries were distinguishing obligatory and non-obligatory oaths, if people sensed less moral obligation when oaths were not involved, or if people were taking oaths for effect. *“Don’t swear at all”* means *“Don’t be taking oaths all the time.”*

We pass now to verses 5:38-42:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but I tell you, “Do not resist him that is evil. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other one, too. And if anyone wants to take you to court to get your coat, give him your cloak as well. And whoever tries to make you go a mile, go with him two. Give to him that asks of you and from him that would borrow, do not turn away.”

There are two concerns in this paragraph. The first is “*an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth*,” an Old Testament statement that occurs several places (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). In those contexts, “eye for an eye” is a guideline for judges in measuring out punishment in court cases. It expresses the principle that the punishment should fit the crime. In other words, heavy crimes call for heavy punishments and lesser crimes call for lesser punishments.

Interpreters take two approaches to Jesus’ alternatives to “eye for an eye.” To some “turn the other cheek” means pacifism, the view that warfare or physical combat is always wrong. People of this persuasion will not serve in the military or on a police force, nor will they use violent self-protection. Beyond interpersonal influence and legal authority, they are willing to use only passive resistance. They make no distinction between aggression, on the one hand, and self-preservation, on the other. They do not subscribe to the concept of “just war” and usually object to capital punishment.

Although a reader might get that impression, it is doubtful that Jesus is advocating pacifism here. Since his sermon addresses everyday social interaction, it is not necessarily talking about non-resistance in other settings—national, criminal, or physical. National enemy would better be indicated by the word *polemios* (πολέμιος) in the original language. Matthew uses the word *echthros* (ἐχθρός), personal enemy, someone you do not get along with or someone who works against you. The word looks more particularly at personal interaction. Consequently, pacifism lies outside the frame of reference for a sermon that assumes an interpersonal framework.

The second interpretation is that Jesus prohibits pugnacity. A pugnacious person is ready to fight “*at the drop of a hat*.” He “*has a chip on his shoulder*.” He has to “get even.” If somebody does something to him, he will “get him back.” To preserve his honor, he avenges every indignity. This much, at least, Jesus is forbidding. He rejects the “get even” mentality and advocates an attitude that is above striking back all the time. A person can learn to “take it on the chin” without letting it bother him. In everyday life if we treat other people the way they treat us, we are going to be in a bad mood much of the time. Jesus’ point should be taken in connection with the second great commandment he is about to quote, as well as the Golden Rule in 7:11,

which rewords that commandment. Instead of treating people the way they treat us, we treat them the way we would want to be treated in their shoes.

Jesus presumably objects to contemporary practice. People were evidently lifting “*eye for an eye*” out of its legal setting and using it in the social context, which turned it into revenge. When someone does something to us, we have a right to do something back. That attitude worsens and destroys relationships. What Jesus says in the following verses is clear. “*Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth*” confuses legal and interpersonal processes again, and destroys something essential for healthy interaction. This is the best place to see that Jesus is not objecting to the Law, but to its misuse. As a principle of jurisprudence, there is nothing wrong with “eye for an eye,” but there is something very wrong with making it a guideline for social relations.

The next question is what Jesus means by the illustrations he contrasts with “*eye for an eye*”: turning the other cheek, giving the cloak as well, going the second mile, giving to people who ask for things. He means at least that we should quit trying to get even through taking legal action. Some people are “always wanting to take you to court”; they have a litigation mentality. They want to “make a federal case” out of everything. Forbidding this would be especially appropriate to getting even with false witnesses and to the statement, “If any man would go to law with you and take away your coat, let him have your cloak, too.” Deuteronomy **19** contains provisions for dealing with a false accuser. His intended victim could take him to court to exact on him the sentence that he was trying to have put on the falsely accused. On this background Jesus would be saying, “*If somebody tries to take you to court, don’t feel that you have to turn around and take him to court to get even.*” As much as lies in us we are to use the interpersonal course in place of legal recourse.

Slapping a Jew backhanded across the right cheek made a statement against his dignity, and legal recourse could be taken for it. In this light Jesus is saying, “*Don’t be a person that has to get back at a people who degrade you. Don’t be to him as he was to you. You do not always have to be exercising your ‘rights.’*”

Forcing someone to go a mile is reminiscent of the circumstance with Simon of Cyrene in Mark **15:21**. The soldiers made Simon carry Jesus’ cross out of Jerusalem to Golgotha. Commandeering was legal under Roman law. If government officials needed help, they could force a person to help them. In such a case Jesus recommended this tactic: “*Instead of doing only what the person commandeers you to do, take hold of the situation positively by going beyond the demand. Do it out of your own will. He may be making you do it, but that is not the way you look at it. You are doing it out of your own will, and therefore you have freedom even under compulsion. When the mile is up, show that you are doing it freely by going beyond the demand. That puts you above the circumstance.*” The advice follows the same guidelines Paul

recommends to slaves (1 Corinthians 7:21-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 4:1; 1 Peter 2:18-25; see also the Book of Philemon).

Jesus' comments on giving to beggars and borrowers are rather straightforward. There are situations, of course, where we wonder about giving to a beggar because we are not sure he is a beggar. But we understand in principle.

Matthew 5:43-48 brings up a third matter:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you that you may be the son of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love them that love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same thing? If you say 'hello' to your brothers only, what do you do more than other people? Do not even Gentiles do the same thing? Therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In the previous paragraph Jesus encourages his hearers not to do evil back to their personal enemies. In this paragraph he encourages them to go beyond that by doing good to them. That is hard. Anyone that has had to deal with someone who was "out to get him" realizes how big a demand Jesus makes here. Instead of passive resistance, he calls for positive helping to better the situation.

No statement in the Old Testament says, "*Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*" Leviticus 19:8 does say to love your neighbor, a concept Jesus called the second greatest commandment. "*Hating your enemy*" was a popular notion or a "rabbinical gloss," that is, an explanatory addition by teachers of the law. This is another place where Jesus was clearly not objecting to the law but to the way it was used. None of the Matthew 5 quotations begin with "*It is written.*" They all say, "*You have heard that it has been said,*" a looser expression that can include oral tradition.

One way to love enemies is to pray for them. If we can bring ourselves to pray for an opponent, we have our side of the problem whipped. Praying for him is difficult, especially if he is attacking our reputation or destroying our ministry. Praying for an adversary is a prelude to bringing ourselves to actually doing good for him. It erodes the negative feelings that must be changed before objective progress can take place. Starting with ourselves is the only way strained relationships with others ever get turned around. Prayer puts us in a frame of mind to leave our gift beside the altar and go seek reconciliation.

It is hard to quit treating people the way they treat us. People tend to respond in kind. Jesus' teaching takes advantage of that tendency to accomplish something good, in fact, to

reverse evil itself. If we do something good to an opponent, he tends to respond in kind, which is good in this case. It reduces the degree of his future evil toward us, moves him toward neutral behavior, or influences him to goodness. At the very least it “*piles fiery coals on his head*” (Romans **12:20**).

We are called on to be better than average if we are going to follow Jesus. He himself set that very high standard. In fact, that observation closes out **5:33-48**: “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” That is equivalent to the second great commandment and the Golden Rule. The statement in Leviticus **19:2** (“*Be holy as I am holy.*”) is pronounced elsewhere, but in Leviticus **19** it appears near other material about taking a person to court (**19:17-18**). Jesus is likely correcting a misunderstanding later in the chapter with a reference to the way the chapter begins.

Perfection has always been God’s standard. Although perfection might seem unrealistic, one sin was the basis for dismissal from the Garden of Eden. During the Mosaic dispensation God required Israelites to “*continue to do everything written in the Law*” (Deuteronomy **27:26**; cp. Galatians **3:10**). James **2** says that breaking one commandment makes a person a law breaker. In fact, even aside from biblical revelation, perfection is always the standard for personal relationship.

There is a combination between the perfection requirement and the realization that we do not live up to it. Consequently, the Sermon on the Mount sets forth ideals that are never hauled down, but the gospel that goes with it surpasses these ideals by offering redemption from failure to achieve them. It tells us the good news about how to be brought back into fellowship with a perfect God despite our imperfection. But this next dimension of total revelation is not part of the message of this sermon.