

Jesus on Oaths/Nonresistance/Love
Matthew 5:33-48; Luke 6:29-30

“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.’ But I say to you, “Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But 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. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons 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 those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

“And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:34-36). You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- People swore by many things other than God to testify that their word was true. It eventually became necessary for rabbis to determine which oaths were entirely binding. Jesus says that everything by which one could swear is ultimately God’s, and demands that people be as good as their word. Jesus argues this point in part from Isaiah 66:1, which declared that heaven is God’s throne and earth is his footstool.

- The language about nonresistance in 5:38-42 is partly hyperbole, which Jesus used to provoke hearers to consider the radical nature of how he was telling them to respond. Jesus is simply calling his followers to value relationships supremely and regard possessions as nothing.

- “An eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” is part of the ancient Near Eastern law of retaliation. In Israel and other cultures, this principle was enforced by a court and refers to legalized vengeance. The OT did not permit personal vengeance (1 Samuel 25:33; 26:10-11).

- The blow on the right cheek was the most grievous insult possible in the ancient world (apart from inflicting serious physical harm), and in many cultures was listed beside “eye for an eye” laws. Both Jewish and Roman law permitted prosecution for this offense.
- The poorest people of the Roman Empire (i.e. most peasants in Egypt) had only an inner and outer garment; therefore, theft of a cloak would lead to legal recourse. Jesus gives this advice in spite of the fact that, under Jewish law, a case to regain one’s cloak would have been foolproof.
- Roman soldiers had the legal right to demand the labor, work animal or substance of residents (Mark 15:21). Although such demands may not have happened often in Galilee, they happened elsewhere. The fact that impressment could happen would be enough to raise the eyebrows of Jesus’ hearers at this example of nonresistance, and even loving service to the oppressor.
- The OT did not explicitly teach hatred for one’s enemies (Exodus 23:4-5; Proverbs 25:21-22), although hating God’s enemies was a pious way to feel (Psalm 139:19-22).
- Prayer for one’s persecutors did not generally characterize even the most pious Jews in the OT (2 Chronicles 24:22; Jeremiah 11:20; Psalm 137:7-9).
- Some Jewish teachers emphasized kindness to Gentiles as a means to draw them to the truth, but most people greeted and cared only for their own. Tax gatherers were considered among the most apostate Jews of all.
- The Aramaic word for “perfect” can mean “complete” or “whole,” to include the nuance of “merciful” (Luke 6:36). In this context, it means fulfilling the requirements of Matthew 5:21-47. The OT already commanded Jews to “be holy as God is holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26), and Judaism sometimes argued ethics on the basis of imitating God’s character.

Questions:

- + What is the most important oath you have ever taken, and why was it so important to you?
When Jesus said, “Do not take an oath at all,” what did he mean, and how do you apply it?
What did Jesus mean when he said that anything more than Yes or No comes from evil?
When is it easy to keep your word? When is it hard? How can you always be truthful?
- + If you follow Jesus’ command, “Do not resist the one who is evil,” how is justice served?
What is the risk of turning the other cheek? Would you take this risk? Why or why not?
Have you ever gone the “extra mile” for someone? If so, how did the experience affect you?
How do you react or respond to beggars on the street? How would Jesus have you respond?
- + Do you really “love your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you?” Why or why not?
Who is the hardest person for you to love? How can you be more loving to that individual?
How would Jesus have you love those who are very different from you, and not your friends?
- + Do you lend money? Why or why not? If so, do you expect to be repaid? Why or why not?
What point is Jesus making in Luke 6:34-36, and how does he want to apply it to your life?
What is your response to Jesus’ command to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect?”