

**Jesus Reinterprets the Law: Oaths and Retaliation**  
Matthew 5:33-42

Pastor Tom  
March 8, 2015

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician in the mid 1800's. He directed the maternity clinic at the Vienna General Hospital in Austria. Ignaz noticed a disturbing trend. Pregnant Moms would come to the hospital to give birth. They safely delivered their babies. But many would follow their delivery by developing a deadly fever. Many died in what was known as child bed fever.

So the doctor began research and observation. He noticed that with mom's who died doctors and medical students routinely went from dissecting corpses to examining new mothers. There must be a connection. Through vigorous statistical analysis, Semmelweis figured out where the problem lay. The doctors and students were transferring disease from the corpses to the new women. He introduced rigorous hand washing rules in the maternity ward. Deaths drastically lessened and he became known as the savior of the mothers.

We all know how important it is to wash our hands. But this was not the common practice in those days. Doctors and medical students came from touching a diseased corpse to touching a new mother. This common practice needed correction. Semmelweis helped so many yet ended up dying from another common practice that needed correction. He was committed to an insane asylum when he started to exhibit what was possibly the early onset of Alzheimer's. But the staff didn't know about such things. They thought he was being defiant and uncooperative. So they beat him when he wouldn't obey them and died of his injuries. Common Practices sometimes need correction.

Jesus did this through the Sermon on the Mount.

He had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. He fulfilled the Law through His extension and explanation of it. It was common practice to think you kept the commandment "you shall not murder," if you refrained from killing them. But you still might hate them in your heart. Jesus extended the command from "you shall not murder" to "you shall not murder anyone in your heart." It was common practice to believe that you obeyed the command against adultery by not physically doing it. But Jesus said "anyone who looks lustfully at another has already committed adultery with them in their heart." It was common practice for husbands to give wives a certificate of divorce for any and every reason. But Jesus refuted that practice with his strong condemnation of easy and convenient divorce.

Today we will look at 2 more common practices that Jesus reinterprets or fleshes out to show us God's deeper intent with each law. They concern the way we speak and how we respond when someone wrongs us.

Our text today is Matthew 5:33-42. You might want to find that now in your Bibles or on your devices for when we will get to it. If you wanted to reinforce or strengthen the force of your words, how might you do it? Well, some people yell to give more force to their words. Yelling gets people's attention and demonstrates your seriousness. But yelling all the time can lead to people tuning you out. Some people change to a different tone when they want to give a greater force to their words. They may speak more sharply or increase the level of intensity on their face. Other I swear that their words are true, that's what Jesus talks about.

**What can you do to reinforce your words? Common Practice 1 – Use oaths or swear by something greater than yourself.**

Some of you may have used this oath - "Cross my heart; hope to die; stick a needle in my eye." I remember using this oath as kids when we wanted to play with someone else's shiny toy or see what another person had in their pocket. Maybe they had something they were not allowed to have. So they would only agree to show it to you if you took an oath. "You can't tell anybody." So we reply "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye." Now I'm sure we sometimes broke these oaths as kids. But I don't ever remember someone actually hoping for their own death or taking a needle and attaching it to their eyeball. Our oaths were tools to get what we wanted in that particular moment.

But we do use more formal oaths in our society. People swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in court. They used to swear on the Bible and add "so help me God." But if you're an atheist, I don't think you have do that anymore. People in ancient Israel took oaths as well. They swore in God's name. The purpose was to demonstrate that the speaker would be under a curse by God if they did not keep their word. "As God is my witness" I promise to do or not do this." There are times when oaths are necessary.

You /Me  
Say you'll  
do  
something

Them  
Don't trust  
or know or  
believe us

We say we will do something. But the other person doesn't trust us or know us or believe us. So we swear an oath or write a contract to bridge the gap.



The oath is an attempt to bridge the gap between someone else and us.

God Himself sometimes takes an oath in Scripture to reinforce the weight of His Words. Jesus testified under oath at his own trial. Paul used an oath to testify to his truthfulness when writing letters to people that opposed him. But the problem arises when we have to use oaths in every day relationships. Let's look at what was happening.

Matthew 5:33-37 (ESV)

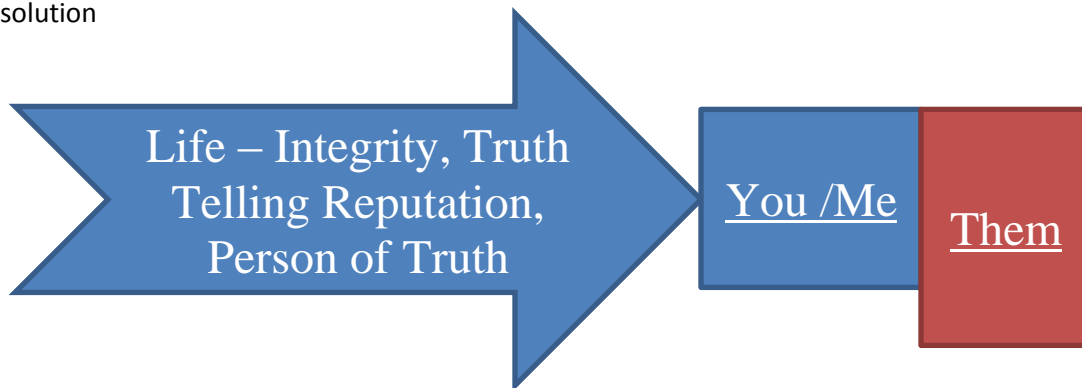
<sup>33</sup>“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.<sup>[a]</sup>

Jesus addresses a popular abuse of oaths in his day. The 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment declares – “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. To protect the sanctity of the divine name against inadvertent oath-breaking, common Jewish practice introduced substitute objects by which to swear. Some people apparently thought it harmless to deceive if they swore oaths by something like their right hand. But Jesus reminds his listeners that all the objects people swore their oaths by were ultimately under God's control anyway. Heaven is the throne room of God. Earth is His footstool. Jerusalem was the city of great divine King after all. And besides that, it's not like God does not pay attention to our words when we we're not using oaths. He hears everything we say. He is present in any and every situation.

So Jesus calls his listeners and us today to move away from the practice of using oaths in our everyday relationships. . After all, if someone needs to use an oath all the time to back up their words, what is that saying about them? They're not very reliable. Jesus calls us to speak truth and live truth.

**Jesus – live a life of integrity so you don't have to take oaths.** Kingdom disciples who depend on the Holy Spirit live lives of integrity. Look what happens when we do this. A life of integrity automatically moves us closer to another person.

Jesus solution



So when we say we will do something they learn about our integrity, they are less likely to demand an oath. Jesus' disciples are not to swear at all or need to swear at all with other people in every day relationships. Instead, our lives should be of such integrity that our words can be believed without an oath.

So we ask ourselves questions like "Do I give people reason to doubt my word? Do I act in ways that cause others to question the reliability of what I say or do? We can create such doubts when we promise to be on time but are often or always late. Or we say "I will do that" and we forget. 1 or 2 broken trusts require a long time to repair. We can say "I promise to change." But if we don't take significant, intentional, serious, deliberate steps to bring change, why should anyone believe us?

I remember a time in university when I talked with someone who shared a lot of personal info with me. Now they did not say it was confidential and I hope you won't share it. But it was very personal. In the next half hour, I shared this information with some of our mutual friends. By the time we met for lunch with our regular group, everyone knew this personal info. I could see the pain on the face of the person whose confidence I had betrayed. God struck my heart with a lightning bolt of conviction and sorrow. That news was not mine to tell. Their thoughts were not mine to share. They had been entrusted to me and I had broken that trust.

I prayed and asked the Lord to begin doing a work in me where I kept my mouth shut about others information. That prayer happened 30 years ago. I continue to need renewal in it. So any confidence that people entrust to me I strive to pass on only to the Lord. Or I ask permission to share this with others who can pray. If granted, only then will I share. But I'm not perfect.

A life of integrity is possible only by the Holy Spirit's power and strength. Some of you have already been doing this. You are known for integrity. Others of us might need to confess unreliability or deception and then begin the journey of building integrity through to power of the Spirit. You depend on the Holy Spirit – He has built integrity into your life. He says well done to you today. So Jesus wants His disciples to move from swearing oaths to back up their word to living lives that back up their word.

The next area Jesus discusses contains one of His most famous yet most controversial sayings. How do we respond when someone has wronged us or offended us. **What's appropriate to expect back when someone wrongs or offends you? Common Practice 2 – Take appropriate damages when someone has wronged you.** Jesus refers to this in Matthew 5:38. "You have heard it said "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That's a quotation of Exodus 21:24. This was the law of payback. Exodus 21:22-24 actually says

<sup>22</sup> "When men fight and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. <sup>23</sup> But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

This was the law of retribution. To us, it looks barbaric. But it was actually intended to limit retaliation. The law was supposed to work as appropriate and measured response to wrongdoing.

<b>They harm your:</b>	<b>The authorities take their:</b>
Eye	Eye
Tooth	Tooth
Hand	Hand
Foot	Foot
<b>They give you a:</b>	<b>You give them a:</b>
Burn	Burn
Wound	Wound
<b>Stripe</b>	Stripe

But when human beings are wronged and offended, they get upset. We get angry. Our emotions run high. We feel justified in taking revenge. They often take more than what was taken from them.

<b>They harm your:</b>	<b>You take:</b>
Eye	Both Eyes
Tooth	All Teeth
Hand	Arm
Foot	Leg
<b>They give you a:</b>	<b>You give them a:</b>
Burn	Multiple Burns
Wound	Mortal Wound
Stripe/Lash	Stripes/Lashes

So the law limited an overreaction for same wrongdoing. Jesus' alternative to this practice is not what anyone expects.

Matthew 5:38-42

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'<sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

You'd think he'd say something like "Stop going overboard in gaining your retribution. Just do what the law intended. Don't go beyond it. **Jesus solution – Jesus says "don't take personal vengeance. Instead leave that to God. Serve your offender.** Instead of paying back your offender, entrust the "payback" to God and serve them in hopes they will see and discover the truth of Jesus' kingdom.

<b>They</b>	<b>You:</b>
<b>Slap your cheek</b>	<b>Turn the other cheek</b>
<b>Sue you and take your tunic</b>	<b>Let them also have your cloak</b>
<b>Force you to go one mile</b>	<b>Go the extra mile</b>
<b>Beg and ask for a loan</b>	<b>Give and lend freely</b>

Now I don't know about you. But there are initially a lot of problems with Jesus' words in verses 39-42. Do not resist an evil person? Aren't we supposed to resist the devil? Are we supposed to let evil people just walk all over us? Should we let Isis march across the world and lie down and let them trample us? "If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also?" So if someone punches me, I just take it? If a wife gets hit by her husband or vice versa, just turn the other cheek. If someone sues you, give them more than they sue you for? And if they force you to go one mile, go the extra mile?

How can we make sense of Jesus' words? Well first, remember he's talking about interpersonal relationships here. This section is all about kingdom disciples living in daily life. So this does not prevent the state or government from addressing evil and crime. Nor does it forbid a nation from defending itself against an oppressor or stopping evil acts. Nor does this section call for us to be doormats that readily accept and embrace the abuse of others. It's not calling for kids to give in to bullies on the playground or at work.

But we're not to take revenge into our own hands. Romans 12:17-19 is one example. "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peacefully with all. Behold, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" says the Lord." So we can entrust payback to God. Jesus did stand up for others who were subjected to evil most notably His Father when the money changers made the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

But with the knowledge that God will look after wrongdoing and vengeance; with the knowledge that God will provide for our dignity and security and property and freedom, we can give these up for a greater purpose. We can go through the tough things an evil person might do with a greater purpose than regaining some dignity or insisting on our rights or freedom or property. The greater goal is to serve our offender in the hopes that they will see Christ.

Jesus talks about four everyday examples in his listeners lives. **"If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."** So this is not a punch or a vicious assault. It is more a shaming. Someone disapproved of the other person and they shamed them with a back handed slap across the right cheek. The purpose was more for an insult than physical harm. But insulting was as bad as physical harm in an honor based culture. Yet it was still offensive to receive a slap.

I remember one time someone from another culture disapproved of something I did. And they mockingly slapped me across both cheeks. "You shouldn't have done that. Slap. Slap." I remember how taken aback I was by this and offended. Yet that was common in Jesus' time especially for masters with slaves or with high society dealing with low society. "You put out the wrong dishes – slap!" Now of course such an action was offensive. The person giving the slap would expect the one receiving it to be shamed and angry.

But imagine if instead of responding with shame and anger, that person turned their other cheek. Perhaps that would give the slapper reason to pause. "What is this person doing? They are not reacting like I expect. They don't

have hate in their eyes towards me. They don't look ashamed. Was I right to slap them? Where do they get this strength from?" Turning the other cheek symbolizes a non-retaliatory, humble, gentle response to a wrong committed by an evil person. Such a response has the potential to greatly impact that evil person.

So this does not mean an abused spouse should just sit there and take repeated abuse. That's wrong and a fundamental violation of the marital vows. Nor does it mean we should just lie down in the face of evil. But when our dignity is wrongly slandered, instead of righteously rising to strike back, much can be accomplished with a gentle response.

**If someone would sue you and take your tunic, give him your cloak also.** The tunic was the outer garment that people wore especially in the cooler seasons for warmth. It was so important that if someone left the tunic as a pledge to pay later in the day. You weren't even allowed to keep the tunic from another person overnight. Most poor people depended on that tunic for warmth in the night. So to lose your tunic would be a huge loss. The cloak was the inner garment that went against the skin. So to give that up meant you had nothing to wear.

Now it could be that the person Jesus talks about was actually in the wrong. Someone sued them and won. His response to this is give the tunic that you've rightfully lost **and your cloak**. It could also be that this was a malicious person who got the court to rule in their favor through bribery. They won your tunic. So Jesus says give your cloak as well. If you did that, think of the potential impact on the person suing. They're joyfully celebrating that they got your tunic. Then you walk up and give them something more. Maybe this act of generosity and kindness will strike them to the core about the wrong way they have been living.

**If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** This was likely one of Jesus' most radical and unpopular sayings of the day. The only people who really had the power to make someone else go an extra mile were the the occupying Roman soldiers. "Forces you to go" is a specific term for the Roman soldier's practice of commandeering civilian labor in an occupied country. Because taxes did not cover all of the soldier's needs, they could impose on the citizens. They could walk up to you while you are at work and say "I command you to drop what you're doing and carry my things for the next mile." The Jews fiercely resented such imposition.

But Jesus says not only don't resist, but don't resent. And willingly offer yourself to go a second mile with the soldier. What kind of impact might that have had on a Roman soldiers? Some might have scoffed and mocked that an



occupied citizen would give more of themselves to help the Roman. But some might have been struck and wondered what kind of heart would do such a thing?

The last example exhorts us to give to the one who begs from you. Help those who are truly needy. Don't be resentful or so protective of possessions that we hoard them while others starve. This is the heart of a disciple.

We might summarize Jesus' teaching here like this. **Kingdom disciples who depend on the Holy Spirit live lives of integrity AND serve their offenders.** Some of you turned the other cheek – or helped those who wronged you. The world and other people might call you stupid for your willingness to be wronged. You might not get as much attention as the one who twists truth or shares all the gossip. But you are growing in Christlikeness if these traits are growing in your life. And there's nothing more important. Christlikeness will positively impact everyone around you.

The greatest example is Jesus Himself. He gave up His dignity through His arrest, 2 trials and accusations, beatings and mocking. He gave up his dignity as he was marched through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to the cross. He was crucified outside the city on a hilltop so he would be plainly visible to everyone who passed by. He was likely naked on the cross because the Romans stripped people naked to further humiliate them. He died a criminal's death. But Jesus gave up His dignity for something much greater – the saving of millions.

Jesus gave up His security. He had infinite resources at his disposal. He could have called 12 legions of angels to come to his aid. He could have called a defense lawyer to expose the inconsistencies in their case against him. He could have used His own miraculous power to free himself from arrest. But he chose to give that all up so that we would have life.

They took his liberty. They tried him illegally and listened to false witnesses. They listened to the mob instead of reason and arguments. They not only forced him to carry something for a mile. They forced him to carry his cross to his death. When he couldn't carry it any more, they forced him to continue walking up to that hill of shame and death.

Jesus gave up His possessions. They took his cloak from him. They cast lots and the winner took it home. That might have been Jesus' only earthly possession. Yet he was stripped of it. Yet he gave it up for something greater so that the centurion who oversaw this execution marveled at Jesus' death. This one was a son of the gods.

He did this so that we might be forgiven; so that we might be protected from God's holy measured sinless wrath. He did this so that we might be protected from Hell and adopted into God's family. He did not resist the evil

persons so that we might receive Him and the Holy Spirit; and so we could receive that new heart that we desperately need to change from the inside out. He did this so that we could begin the journey of becoming more and more like Him; until the day we die or he returns. Then we will be like Him.

But until then He calls us to cooperate with the Spirit's work in us; to live lives of integrity so that we don't have to take oaths to back up our words. He calls us to turn to Him and entrust to Him our dignity, security, freedom and possessions if by giving them up in some way – others may be saved; others might discover all that Christ has done for them – others might be freed.

We come to remember all this at His table today. Will you prepare your hearts to meet Him there – to thank Him – to confess to Him – to turn to Him for the Spirit's power to transform you from a liar to a truth teller; from easily offended to entrusting all that to Him for the greater good of seeing another come to Christ.

Some of you may not know Christ at all. Yet Jesus' words have exposed the reality of your life. Maybe you struggle with integrity. You're a double talker. Maybe there is something you've kept hidden recently or for years. You're living a lie. Or maybe you constantly have to get back at people. You constantly compete with them. You constantly have to be better than everyone and you hunt down and retaliate against anyone who dares affront you or your family. Maybe that's the Holy Spirit's way of gently yet skillfully revealing your need for God. If you think it's normal and natural to retaliate and get back at anyone who has ever offended or wronged you, you need God's work in your heart. Maybe you need to receive Christ for the first time and call on Him to forgive you and change your heart. Or maybe you need the Spirit to come and turn your heart of stone towards others or that person into a soft heart like Christ's. If this describes you, will you bring this to Christ today at His table? If you don't know Him, today is the day to surrender your life to Him and begin the wonderful journey of life with Christ.