

Truth and Love in the face of Evil (Matthew 5:33-48)

In this passage, Jesus continues to illustrate the radical righteousness that he calls his followers to embrace as people who belong to God's Kingdom. He continues with another 3 sayings that are presented as corrections to the way people had been reading and applying the Law of Moses. Jesus is revealing the fulfilment of the Law in our lives, which is ultimately a righteousness that reflects God's own heart, and so marks us out as his children (5:45-48). And finally, it's a righteousness that enables us to stand out as salt and light to the world around us (5:13-16).

Read Verses 33-37

Numbers 30:2 says, "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or swears an oath to put himself under an obligation, he must not break his word; he must do whatever he has promised."

In response to way these verses highlight the serious nature of breaking an oath or vow made to God or in God's name, the Jews had developed the habit of swearing oaths against lesser, but still important or sacred things, such as the examples Jesus mentions: heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even your own head. But Jesus says this is misguided, and in-fact comes from 'the evil one'.

What are the two major problems with this practice according to:

- V34-36?
- V37?

What kind of people should we be instead?

Reflect...

Do you ever say 'yes' to someone or something knowing that you don't really mean it or suspecting that you may not end up following through?

→ *Why are we tempted to do this?*

Do you think there are still helpful contexts for oaths or vows? How are these situations different to what Jesus is telling us to avoid?

Read Verses 38 - 42

In verse 38, Jesus is referring to the civil laws (such as in Ex 21:24) that prescribed and regulated punishment by appointed leaders or the courts. The purpose of these laws was to ensure justice was carried out and that the punishment was not excessive or worse than the crime. It was a 'concession law', designed to deal with the reality of a sinful world, rather than describing the ideal God created us for. By Jesus' time, however, these laws were used as justification for personal vengeance - as if the laws were encouraging a spirit of retaliation.

How does Jesus challenge that whole way of thinking in verses 39-42?

→ What basic principle(s) should guide followers of Jesus when being mistreated by others?

How do you think we should relate these principles to our concern for justice and healthy boundaries?

Dig Deeper:

Compare Paul's response to injustice in Acts 16:37; 22:25; and 25:8–12 with his advice in Romans 12:17-21.

What insight does this give us as we wrestle with the tension between working towards justice (including for yourself) on the one hand, and on the other hand, embracing a spirit of non-retaliation, which prioritises the other person's needs over your own personal rights?

Reflect...

→ In what situations are you tempted to fight back, or demand your rights? What do you (realistically!) think Jesus is calling you to do in such circumstances?

→ How can we help each other prioritise the needs of others over our personal rights and possessions?

Read Verses 43-48

How had the OT command to 'love your neighbour' been misunderstood and applied by people in Jesus' time?

How does Jesus correct this understanding and application? What was and is the true intent of the command to 'love your neighbour'? (*Consider also the famous parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37*)

What reasons does he give for such strange behaviour?

Reflect & Pray

Are there people in your life who you may be tempted to think of as an 'enemy' because of the way they treat you?

→ What would it look like to love them? What could you pray for them?

How have you witnessed or heard of other Christians living out this call to love their enemies?

→ What impact has it had on others, whether directly involved or not?