

Matthew 5:33-48

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 August 2019

Preacher: Paul Friend

- [0 : 0 0] There's a story told about a little girl during a thunderstorm, and I thought it might be appropriate to start with that this evening, given the amount of thunderstorms have been happening. The father had just finished doing the nightly routine.
- They were a Christian household. As a father, he did his duty, reminding the little girl how much she was loved by God, because she was a little bit frightened going to bed this night with the lightning flashing across her bedroom window and the sound of thunder.
- And he thought after an hour or so, he should go in and check on his daughter just to make sure that things were okay, that she was settling down, that everything was going to be okay, that they were going to have a peaceful night.
- The thunderstorm was still raging. The lightning was still flashing. And as he opened the bedroom window, he saw his young daughter of four years old pressed against her window, smiling.
- And he says, what on earth are you doing? Get back into bed. Are you not frightened? No, she says. I think God's trying to take my picture. A little girl who understood how loved she was by God, because her father had told her, because she'd read it in the scriptures.
- [1 : 2 1] And one of the things that I think is so important, this is a tenuous link, shall we say, is that when we come to passages like the Sermon on the Mount, and actually, as we come to the scripture, very often we read it with our minds intact, but we do not read it with our emotions intact.
- We do not read it as the love letter that it is meant to be. Especially when we come to something like the Sermon on the Mount. There is these instructions that are contained within it, instructions for moral living.
- So much so that Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by these words, as are many other leaders who are not believers. And if you come to the Sermon on the Mount like that, you will go away, perhaps with a different moral value, but you won't go away knowing how loved you are by your Father in heaven, who gives you these instructions to say, these are the kingdom values I want you as Christians to model.
- Because I think in these particular set of verses that Graham read to us, I don't know about you, but this is how the conversations have often gone with me over some of these verses.
- I had a friend who was due to appear as a witness in court. He was insistent after reading these verses that he would not take the oath as he stood on the witness stand.
- [2 : 5 2] Because he was insistent that these verses told him that he mustn't take an oath. I'm sure like me, you've had the conversations in churches as to whether it's right for a Christian to serve in the armed forces or the police forces.
- These verses from 38 to 42, I have had many conversations where people have used these verses to defend that view. I've also heard people use these verses to expound the view about not defending oneself against an attacker because we're not meant to resist the evil person.

Or that Christians should never be rich because it says we should give away our cloak. And I'm not saying there is complexities to some of these conversations.

You may well hold a pacifist view and believe that Christians shouldn't serve in the forces. That's not the view I hold. But you may well hold these views. You may well hold the view that Christians shouldn't be rich.

But to take these verses and use that as your defense is actually to miss the point. And in actual fact, it's to do what the people of Jesus' day were doing with the law.

[4 : 03] Manipulating it to make a point. Manipulating it to keep a certain group of people down or to keep control. Manipulating it to keep control. The people of Jesus' day were seeking to abuse and manipulate the law of God in order to serve their self-interests.

And unfortunately, we sometimes do the same as disciples of Christ. And so as we make our way through these different sections of the Sermon on the Mount.

Be thinking about how does this help me as a disciple serve the other Christians around me. And how does this as a disciple allow me to model to the world around me.

That I'm serving a different master. That it's not just about moral duty or moral law. But it's because we have a God in heaven who loves us so much.

That he leaves us with these instructions and these ways of living as kingdom people. What are the kingdom values that we're meant to learn about here?

[5 : 14] And so we have three different subjects tonight. Jesus is showing the religious leaders and the people of the day the principles behind God's law. And not the other hundred side clauses that they had created in order to manipulate and control.

So remember context is key. The Sermon on the Mount is key teaching for those of us seeking to live out kingdom values.

That's the other point to have in your mind as we make through them. So let's look at these under three headings then. Because it conveniently, it gives us three headings really in a sense. We have telling the truth.

We have turn the other cheek. And we have tenderness for the enemy. Do you see what I did there with TTT? Yeah? It's amazing what you can do when you type in something to a computer and then hover over it with a mouse.

And it gives you all these other letters. It's a great tool. Where would I be without Microsoft Word? I do not know. Two thousand years ago in Israel, the story goes something like this.

[6 : 21] Telling the truth, verses 33 to 37. Jack approaches Graham about an unpaid debt. Look, Graham, I know I owe you money for that debt.

I can't pay it just now. But I swear by Jerusalem that during lambing season this year, I will give you the choice of the best of my offspring once the Lord has his share.

Would that suffice to cover the debt, Graham? Graham, being a reasonable fellow, agrees to that offer. And then, after lambing season has passed, approaches Jack to collect on the debt.

Jack turns to Graham and says, Now, I know that's exactly the kind of thing that was going on in Jerusalem at the time of the Sermon on the Mount.

The rabbis were allowing people to renege on their oaths. The Bible says it's okay, actually, to take an oath.

[7 : 43] God takes an oath. The Apostle Paul talks about taking oaths all the time. But they were saying, Ah, that oath didn't count because I only swore by Jerusalem.

If I'd sworn toward Jerusalem, then I would have had to have paid up on the debt. Or, I didn't swear by the temple, so I'm not legally bound to cover that debt.

That's just the rules, I'm afraid, because the rabbis have said so. Because they've allowed all these clauses to go on. You see, the issue in this particular part of verses 33 to 37 isn't the issue of oath at all.

The issue is one of truthfulness. The issue is one of truthfulness. Can you, as a follower of Jesus Christ, be trusted that when you say you're going to do something, that you're going to back it up with action?

So the people were really saying, Well, I didn't actually take the oath before God. So it doesn't count. And Jesus comes and says, Listen here. Can you just kind of imagine that Jesus is just saying, Listen up now.

[8 : 57] You're saying that these oaths don't count because you've never sworn them by God or by the temple. But he says, Look, all oaths are taken before God.

Because who owns Jerusalem? God the Father does. Who owns the temple? God the Father does. Who owns the earth that you're very standing on? God the Father does. So if you take an oath, whether you say it's by Jerusalem, to Jerusalem, by the temple, it does not matter.

All oaths are taken before God. So stop this nonsense about what does and doesn't count, Jesus is saying. Stop trying to manipulate and squirm your way out of something.

It's simple, says Jesus. When you say yes, mean it. And when you say no, mean it. Now, how does this then apply to us today?

Well, I will give you one of the, I think, one of the examples that is probably prevalent in most churches and in most Christian conversations. And I will admit that I too am guilty.

[10 : 05] I too am guilty of doing this. Have you ever been part of that or observed the conversation in church that goes something like this? Thank you for sharing that with me, brother, sister.

I'm sure it's not been an easy time for you. I will pray about it. Or the other one. Now, you turn to a Christian friend.

I'm sharing this with you, not for gossip, but for your prayers. Jim told me the other day that him and Gene's marriage is in real trouble. Now, you must promise me that you mustn't tell it to anybody.

I told him I wouldn't tell anybody. But I'm just sharing with you, not as gossip, but it's a prayer point. Will you promise to join me in prayer? How often then, when you go away from that conversation having promised to pray, do you forget to do it?

I'm sure there are best intentions. But I actually think the reality is, very often we just say these words because we don't know what else to say. We're like Job's comforters.

[11 : 10] We don't know what to say, so we just say the first thing that comes out. I'll pray about that. And then it gets us out of the conversation, and then we move on to something else. And then before we've got to our car, we've had a row with the wife. We've kicked the dog when we've got home.

And our prayer life is in a mess anyway. And we've forgotten to pray about the very thing we promised we would. Or we've betrayed a confidence. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Here's a tip. We can maybe talk about this afterwards in our discussion. How do you stop just from rushing out those words, I'll pray about that? Maybe the best thing to do is go, let's pray about it now.

Let's sit down at the front of this church now and pray about it now. Or in the coffee house when your friend shares it with you. I remember there's a great man in Ferny Hill, John Hannah.

I'm sure you know him here. He's probably come and preached. But when he says he's going to pray about it, he doesn't let you leave. He sits you down wherever you are or stands you wherever you are, and you have to pray with him even if it's in the middle of a crowded street.

- [12 : 08] Because he is worried he's going to go home and forget, and he doesn't want to renege on a promise. Because he says, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Now that's just one example, but I think it's a very serious example.

Because if you promise to pray for somebody and you forget, it's very, very dangerous. I think it's very, very dangerous. Because can you be trusted? Ask yourself that question.

Can you be trusted? Truthfulness is a kingdom value. A Christian should be one whose word can be trusted.

My word is my bond and all that. This isn't about how bad oaths are, but how damaging telling lies are to the Christian witness. Not living up to the promises.

So you conclude this little section with this question in your mind. Can I be trusted? Can I be trusted? Turn the other cheek then.

- [13 : 11] Now as I've said, this verse has been used as backup for Christians not being in the forces, or that Christians can't defend oneself against an attacker. You may have an opinion on these things, but you can't use these verses as your sole text for that defense.

It is to take them out of context. Let's briefly remind ourselves why this law existed. The law eye for eye, tooth for tooth, was created to reduce the blood feud principle that can so often occur.

I get beaten up. It wouldn't work for me actually, because my brother's actually weakling. But if I get beaten up and I send my brother to beat the guy who beat me up, and then his brothers come and beat my brother up, and then before you know it, I mean, you see it.

Families at war. I work in Gilmoreton. We have two families at war. That was what the stabbing was over a few weeks back. Guns were involved at one point. Two families who had been at war for years.

And it probably all started over something really, really silly. What was happening with this law by Jesus' time was that it was being used for the petty and gaining limited retaliation and revenge, and it was missing the purpose.

- [14 : 29] Sinclair Ferguson points out in his book, The Sermon on the Mount, the real fulfillment of the law would be in the one who did not seek personal retaliation or revenge. And in order to back up that point, Sinclair Ferguson uses divorce as his example.

The real fulfillment of the divorce law, he says, was not stretching it to its limit, but fulfillment was in lifelong marriage. Not that you had a get-out clause. And so the background to verse 39, and that resisting, that word resisting, the evil one, it's a legal word that's being used.

The word resist is explicitly legal. It's translated as take to court. And I think I would agree with what Sinclair Ferguson and Don Carson say about this verse here, that they say, in other words, Jesus is saying, don't stand on your legal rights as Christians in order to plead others of their resources.

The Christian should not make their legal rights the basis of their relationships with others, rather than use them to exclude Christians from participating in certain employment.

And I think that's true when you look at the examples that Jesus uses here. Jesus is going to show them personally what it looks like to surrender one's rights on his journey to the cross.

[15 : 57] He will show that in a great example of surrendering it. He doesn't take his legal rights, does he? He turns the other cheek in perhaps the greatest example that we've ever witnessed.

But the images presented by Jesus here are powerful. Turn the cheek. To be slapped with the back of one's hand in the Near East is a gross insult even still today.

The average fine in this day was a man's annual wage. A bit like the defamation cases you see coming much of today. That's what it was like. It was that kind of an insult.

So what is Jesus asking for when he says turn the other cheek? Is he saying willingly you should suffer? No, Jesus is explaining in a figurative way.

He's not just saying just stand there and take it. A physical beating for the sake of it. He's pointing out that we should not seek revenge for those who insult us as Christians.

[17 : 02] Who will be impressed by the Christian who seeks revenge and retaliation? Children of God need to live in a different way.

Our reputation and our standing come from being God's children. Not from seeking out petty retaliation which neither serve the kingdom of God or display its principles.

So the first example is one of turning the cheek. And the other is this idea of giving your coat. It's figurative. Remember how important the coat was in this day and age.

If it was taken as a deposit toward a debt or in guarantee of a debt it had to be returned by nightfall. That was the legal requirement of that day because very often it was the only coat that was owned.

It was used as bedclothes too. Jesus is making the point about how the Christian stands up under persecution.

[18 : 02] Don't just go to your legal rights. Show like Jesus that you are willing to surrender even your very coat. Now I think this probably has much more meaning in areas of the world where people experience physical persecution.

We actually don't know how good we have it here. I've been doing the New Christianity Explored DVDs with a few people, Discipleship Explored, with a few people at our church. And one of the things that the guy says at the beginning is the guy who worked out in Eastern Europe.

And the very first video is him saying, I pray for you Christians in the West to receive persecution. And it's like, whoa, calm down a wee bit there, mate.

But he makes the point where he says, only then will you learn to surrender those rights that you hold so dear and be willing to suffer for Christ.

That's what's being asked for here. Go the extra mile. If somebody asks you to walk a thousand miles, a mile, walk another mile, says Jesus. The Roman army had the right to commandeer people to help them.

[19 : 11] Easy to abuse, hated by the Jews, humiliating. Humiliating. But I actually think there's a passive-aggressive thing at work here, in some ways. You were required to walk a thousand paces.

Well, says Jesus, walk a thousand more. What's happening there if you walk a thousand more? Who has the power then? You do, because you do it voluntarily. Imagine the shock on a Roman soldier's face as an army of Christians hoiked the soldier's backpacks on their back and said, no, I'm going to walk another, I'm going to walk another thousand steps.

I only need you to walk a thousand. I've got the power. I serve a different master. I serve a different master. The Roman soldier in charge who has seen the great leaders suddenly seeing an army of Christians whose leader is far greater, who's allowing them to live in a completely different way and surrender their rights, turn the other cheek, walk not just one thousand yards but another thousand more.

What power is at work in these Christians that they willingly do that? That's what would have been being asked. And that's what's at stake here. The last example is just another way Jesus makes that point of willingly giving to others.

It's a powerful Christian witness when a Christian goes above and beyond what is required. And in fact, we know it's one of the reasons why Christianity exploded in those early days.

[20 : 45] When others looked on at these Christians, they saw they were different. Burying not just their own dead but the dead of Romans who were just throwing their slaves out in the street. Sharing the wealth together.

Sharing of their possessions. Why? Because they served a different master. So rather than take these verses to explain why you're a pacifist, and you may well be and there's nothing wrong with that.

It's maybe a good thing to be. Maybe I should be dealing with a bit more pacifism in my life but I'm a former rugby player so it's difficult to be a pacifist when you're on a rugby field. Here's the question.

In the first section, can I be trusted? Second section, am I willingly surrendering my rights for the sake of the gospel? Am I willingly surrendering my rights for the sake of the gospel?

And finally and briefly, tenderness for your enemies. Who is my neighbor? The question used to try and get Jesus to give them a list of people they could love.

[21 : 49] They didn't really want to know who their neighbor was. They just wanted to know who they could love. And secondly, a list of people they could hate. The law only required that you loved your neighbor. And so what had happened was they figured, well, if the law only demands we have to love our neighbor then that means we can hate our enemy.

A distortion. It's a bit like Peter when he goes to Jesus thinking he's all high and mighty. How many times should I forgive my brother? Seven times? I mean, the average you're allowed to. I mean, to go three times was above and beyond the call of duty.

Peter's doubled it and added one. He thinks he's amazing. No. Seventy-seven times seven says Jesus. What? Not sure I'm ready for that kind of forgiveness.

Who is my neighbor? When Jesus is asked that question he points out that the Samaritan, that country that they wouldn't even dirty their feet in, that was their neighbor, the good Samaritan.

Because it's easy to love someone we share something in common with. Jesus says even the dirtiest of sinners do that. I worked with former convicts for a long time and I worked in a rehabilitation unit for 15 years.

[23 : 05] There was members of gangs in there, members of drug gangs in there. There was genuine affection and love between these guys if you were in the same gang as them. Of course there was.

They had business interests together. They had money to make together. They had people to extort money from. They had people to beat up. They had a camaraderie.

They loved one another. They didn't love their other gang, the opposition gangs though. They killed them in a heartbeat.

So Jesus makes the point even these tax collectors, well they love other tax collectors. They love each other. it's easy to do that. But tenderness for enemies, love for enemies, that's a different thing altogether.

Jesus is asking us here to be like God the Father who while we were yet sinners and enemies of God sent his son into the world to die.

[24 : 10] You do realize that, right? The love you have for God right now is given to you by him. That he made the first move. That you didn't make the first move to God.

While you were his enemy and had fallen short of the mark, he sent his son not just into the world to live and teach us great things on a Sermon on the Mount, but to die on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem.

And to be raised three days later. I have to tell you though, in closing, how difficult I have found this love for enemies.

A few weeks ago during the Women's World Cup, I love sport and I will watch any sport and I will play any sport. I got a message through after the England women had won against Cameroon from a guy who has been, his children come to our youth clubs.

He's a member of a church. I'm not sure where he stands before God, but given what occurred between the two of us, it's been very, very heartbreaking. I'm not going to, I guess, it's not for me to say where he stands before God actually.

[25 : 30] But I get a message through about Phil Neville's aftermatch comments. Now as an Englishman living in Scotland, I know it maybe doesn't sound like it, but I've been here for 30 years. I have been subjected to abuse, not just banter, but abuse.

I've seen my brother beaten up for being English. I've seen all sorts of horrendous things and heard horrendous things and even in churches I've heard horrendous things. I'm very sensitive, I guess, probably too much so now.

Lots of people don't realise I'm English because I have a kind of Scottish accent, a kind of hybrid accent. He took humbridge to the fact that England had won and he wasn't happy at some of the things that Phil Neville had said.

I'm a Man United fan. Phil Neville, I grew up loving Phil Neville because he was one of the class of our great team. And I just simply said back to him, look, I'm not going to agree with you on the basis of the fact that I don't agree with you and I love Phil Neville and I think what he said was okay.

Within a second, I had incredibly abusive texts about how English I was, how I was an effing this and an effing that, how I was a clown and how he was going to block me from all social media.

[26 : 36] I have really struggled with this because his kids arrived at the youth club that I was leading last week and I was looking at them thinking, why should I give of my time to you when your dad's sitting at home cursing me to the point where I had to block him from sending messages to me?

Why should I give of my best to your children? And then I looked again at the passage I was meant to share on tonight and I was like, I've got to go and love this guy.

I've got to forgive this guy. I've got to show tenderness. I've got to show tenderness to his children. Give of my best to them and I will tell you it has not been easy and I'm not sure where I am with it yet.

And I think my story is one that you probably all have at times. Maybe not the English side of it but you'll be amused by people.

You'll have been cast aside. You'll have enemies. The kingdom value that we are asked is to love our enemies and that is really, really hard.

[27 : 48] But I think that when you do that the power that is in genuine forgiveness and surrender of our rights can be incredibly powerful as the world looks on and says wow, these Christians are different.

They serve a different master. Can I be trusted? Am I willing to surrender my rights? And I guess in closing am I willing to show that I'm serving a different master?

Let me just pray. Father, we thank you for your word. Father, we thank you for all that it means to us. Father, we pray that in the moments we find it difficult to model Christian living, in the moments we find it difficult to be your disciple, please give us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, to lead us.

in those moments where we struggle to forgive those who abuse us, those who seek to harm us, remind us that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the powers and principalities and that you, Lord Jesus, will win the victory and for that we are truly grateful and we surrender our rights to you and we ask, Lord, that you will help us to take up our cross daily and live out these kingdom values in your name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[29 : 33] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.