

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 5:33-37, 38-42
“Going Hard Against The Grain”

March 1, 2015
(2nd Sunday In Lent)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

**IIID4-5: MATTHEW 5:33-37, 38-42
"GOING HARD AGAINST THE GRAIN"**

Begins The Second Group Of Three

D4: 5:33-37 INTEGRITY AND SIMPLICITY IN PROMISE MAKING AND KEEPING.	
4 th Antithesis: Against Trivial Oaths/Vows	
1) v.33 What The Law Of Moses Said: Lev. 19:12, Ex. 20:7, Num. 30:24, Dt. 5:11 (M).	
3 rd Commandment, Jewish Oath-Taking Was Prevalent, Open To Abuse	
33	"Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, //5:21 Full Form, Oaths = Concessions To A Lying World
Line 1	'You shall not swear <i>falsely</i> ,' (i.e. do not perjure yourself)' Lev. 19:12, Dt. 6:13, 10:20 Swear By God, Not Idols
Line 2	'but perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'" 2 Explains 1, Speak Truth, Dt. 23:21-23; Num. 30:2, Ps. 50:14b
Oath = Promissory Vow To God, Not Use Name In Vain, Ex. 20:7, Dt. 5:11)	
Ecc. 5:5, In New World Of Kingdom, No Lies, No Oaths, Simple Truths	
2) vv.34-37 Jesus' Radicalization: 3 + 1 Examples, Simple Integrity Of Truthful Speech.	
Hyperbole? Oppose Oaths = Sir. 23:9-11, On Essenes: Josephus <i>Jewish War</i> 2.8.6.135	
34	a) But I say to you, To you = Disciples, Authoritative Introduction, Again Hyperbole?
	Do not swear at all, God Is Not Humanly Manipulated, Oath = Appeal To Outside Guarantor For Truthfulness
Scorns Avoidances, Non-binding Formula Are Binding	
3+1 Form	b) 1) either 'by heaven,' for it is the throne of God, m. <i>Sebu</i> 4:13, Ex. 20:7, James 5:11-12a
35	2) or 'by the earth,' for it is his footstool, Downward Pattern, m. <i>Sebu</i> . 4:13, Is. 66:
	3) or 'by Jerusalem,' for it is the city of the great King. m. <i>Ned</i> . 1:3, Ps. 48:2-3
4 Examples Of Non-binding, What People Take As Non-Binding Invokes God!	
36	a') And do not swear 23:16-22, 26:63 = Jesus' Refusal, Honesty Needs No Props To Hold It Up
	1-3 Outside The Self, Is Jesus Against Evasive Oaths Only?
	b') 4) by your head (life), m. <i>Sanh</i> . 3:2, Perhaps, "For it is the image of God"
	for you cannot make one hair white or black. Usurps God's Universal Jurisdiction
Judged For Every Idle Word, 12:34-37	
37	(+) Let what you say be simply 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; Essenes, Jam. 5:12a, Simple And Honest Is For Pure Hearts
	anything else come from evil (or, "the Evil One"). Insult, If Some Words More Truthful Than Others, Evil Is Near
The Very Act Of Swearing Casts Suspicion On Truth, Disciples Do Not Look For Loopholes	
Love And Mercy Surpass Truth, We Are To See Our Speaking Differently, Experience A Change In Character	

D5: 5:38-42 MEETING ABUSE NOT WITH RETALIATION BUT WITH SERVICE.	
5 th Antithesis, Live The New World	
1) v.38 What The Law Of Moses Said: Ex. 21:23-25, Lev. 24:17-21, Dt. 19:21 LXX.	
How Properly To Understand Law Of Retaliation = <i>Lex Talionis</i>	
38	"You have heard that it was said, Official Law Aims At Liability Limits, Equal Justice, Just Proportion
	'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Social Advance, Limits Revenge, e.g. Gen. 4:23-24 (Lamech: Seventyfold!)
Christians Opt Out Of The Cycle Of Retaliation, Rom. 12:19-21	
2) vv.39-42 Jesus' Radicalization: 3 + 1 Examples, No Retaliation, But Creative Responses.	
No Retaliation = Evil for Evil, Jesus Limits Violent Response Interpersonally	
39	But I say to you, Limit Revenge To Zero! Keeps Us From Becoming Evil, How <i>The Evil</i> Behave
	Do not resist (retaliate against) one who is evil. Prov. 20:22, Is. 5:6, Principle: Small Scale Relationship Examples
3 + 1 Form	Moral Condemnation Of Mistreatment, In 1-3 Another Uses Power Over Me
	1) But if anyone strikes you on the <i>right</i> cheek, *Lk. 6:29a (Q), Job 16:10, Lam. 3:3, Insult: Not Injury
	turn to him the other also; * Respond Out Of God, Possibly Your <i>Back</i> , 26:67-68
All 4 Are Specific, Extreme, Stir Imagination, Verbal Icon, Open-Ended	
40	2) and if any one would sue you and take your inner garment, Example 2: Court, Dt. 24:10-13, Ex. 22:26-27
	let him have your outer as well; * Lk. 6:29b (Q), Respond Out Of God, Abundant Goodness
Non-Literal, Provocative For Moral Imagination, Non-Casuistic	
41	3) and if any one forces (conscripts) you to go one mile, Example 3: Hated Roman Coercion, Simon 27:32
	go with him two miles. Lk. 6:29b (Q), Respond Out Of God: Unexpected Action, Empowers Victim
Do Good, In No. 4 We Have Power Over Another	
42	4) Give to him who begs from you, b. <i>Yoma</i> 23a, No Tit For Tat, Example, 4: Beggars/Poor, Dt. 15:7-11
	and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. * Sir. 12:1-7, *Lk. 6:30 (Q) Respond Out Of God
Non-retaliation, 1 Thess. 5:15, Romans 12:17, 1 Pet. 3:9, Did. 1:4	
Become Non-Retaliatory, We Resist Evil With The Tools Of The Kingdom Of God, Chiefly Love, 22:39-30 Love, Mercy	
Shock, Not Laws But H.S. Creativity, Surrender Possessions, b. <i>Yoma</i> 23a, Giving Was Way To Establish Power Over People	
Avoid Patron/Client Relationships In Shame/Honor Culture; Be A Real Benefactor	
Jesus Calls For Non-violent Direct Action That Exposes Evil, Others Are Not To Dictate Our Actions	
Jesus Empowers The Oppressed, Takes Away Power Of Humiliation, Lets Them Seize Initiative	

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 5:33-37, 38-42

With 5:33-37 on *Integrity In Speech* and 5:38-42 on *Non-Retaliatio*n we move to the second cluster of three antitheses. As in 5:21 the full formula is used, “*Again*, you have heard that it was said to the men of old...” The two units are tied together by: 1) the expected *you have heard... but I say to you* formula (vv.33-34 // vv.38-39), 2) the link word *evil* (vv.37b // v.39b), and 3) the structuring of four examples into a 3 +1 pattern where the last member breaks the verbal pattern of the previous three (vv.34-37 = three places in descending order + one head // vv.39b-42 = three who use force against me + one who begs).

The making of oaths was common and permitted in Judaism if not false or irreverent (e.g. Num. 30:3-15, Zech. 8:17). To *swear by Yahweh* set Jews apart from the pagans who swore by their deities; it was a sign of loyalty (Dt. 6:13-14). The idea of an oath is that of naming a god who witnesses a promise and brings punishment if it’s violated. This is the intent of the third command, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” then the added threat, “for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Ex. 20:7). In other words, “If you attach my name to a promise, I will do my part, so you’d better do yours!” The problem with oath-taking is that it sets up a gradient between *more reliable* and *less reliable* promises and so tends, in a world of deception, to be overdone. While it may be necessary in some cultic and legal contexts, when it becomes necessary to sustain basic social and commercial interactions, abuse multiplies. The citation of Jesus in v.33 is a blend of Lev. 19:12 and Dt. 23:22, the idea being that if Jews use God’s name, it must be with the full intent to obey, or else they besmirch God’s reputation and show themselves as liars in violation of command nine, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16), Keeping promises and telling the truth are good for all.

The radical reading of Jesus is to forbid oaths, “Do not swear *at all*...” In the new kingdom and among Jesus’ disciples we speak the truth in love, and in such a community there’s no need to invoke God since he’s present and the intent to deceive is absent. Speech is now simple and truthful. So complex and devious had oath-taking become that all sorts of pious diversions were offered. One might swear a non-binding oath in descending order *by heaven* or *by earth* or *by Jerusalem*, but it is an evasion since heaven is God’s throne, earth his footstool, and Jerusalem his city. Not even one’s own head is exempt since we have so little power, even over the color of our hair. Followers of Jesus have no need for oath-taking since their speech is simple, unadorned, and reliable. Christianity is a communications revolution. Wherever speech goes beyond an emphatic *Yes* or *No*, evil intent is near since the devil was the first liar. Speech is to reveal, not conceal. How this works out in differing contexts takes community discernment.

In the next thought unit (5:38-42) the topic shifts to the creative practice of non-retaliation since disciples- through Jesus- have a new understanding of God’s intent and new power to carry it out. They are shaped to be a new, counter-cultural kind of human being. Retaliation is so natural to fallen humanity that it often gets out of control in tribal feuds about honor. To limit such, the famous *lex talionis* or law of revenge was a communal social advance, “You may take *only* an eye for an eye, not both, and a tooth for a tooth, not a mouthful.” That this was later largely replaced with monetary damages is a second level of advance. But Jesus’ followers are to practice non-participation in the cycles of revenge. As above, four examples are given in vv.39-42 following the command, “Do not retaliate against one who is evil.” The setting is not war between nations but close, interpersonal relationships. A backhanded slap on the right cheek is an insult, but if you turn the other cheek, he must now hit you with an open hand or fist and show his evil character. To give your inner garment is to stand naked in court and shame your greedy opponent. To go an extra mile with a Roman soldier is to reverse the roles of power, and to lend to one who has refused to lend to you is nothing but generosity. With such creative examples now before us, we are free to allow the Spirit to give us new ones depending on the circumstances. We are peacemakers.

1. What about necessary oaths in court or upon assuming political office?

The United Methodist Articles Of Religion	<i>U.M. Book Of Discipline 2012: 69</i>
Article XXV: Of a Christian Man's Oath	
“As we confess that vain and rash swearing is forbidden Christian men (women)	No Casual Oaths
by our Lord Jesus Christ and James his apostle,	Matthew 5:33-37 James 5:13
so we judge that the Christian religion doth not prohibit, but that a man may swear when the magistrate requireth,	<i>We = Church Councils Under Government Demand</i>
in a cause of faith and charity, so it be done according to the prophet's teaching, in justice, judgment, and truth.”	Higher Moral Criteria, Good Public Order, Truth In Courts Motives And Goal

2. What do the United Methodist Social Principles Say About Military Service?

Officially, only the General Conference can speak for The United Methodist Church on social issues such as war and peace. Every four years, “The United Methodist Social Principles” are reviewed and revised, along with the rest of the <i>Book of Discipline (BOD)</i> .	
<u>Military Service:</u>	<i>U.M. Book of Discipline 2012: Para. 164-I, page 138</i>
We deplore war and urge the peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations. From the beginning, the Christian conscience has struggled with the harsh realities of violence and war, for these evils clearly frustrate God’s loving purposes for humankind. We yearn for the day when there will be no more war and people will live together in peace and justice. Some of us believe that war, and other acts of violence, are never acceptable to Christians (i.e. pacifist tradition). We also acknowledge that many Christians believe that, when peaceful alternatives have failed, the force of arms may regretfully be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide (i.e. just war tradition). We honor the witness of pacifists who will not allow us to become complacent about war and violence. We also respect those who support the use of force, but only in extreme situations and only when the need is clear beyond reasonable doubt, and through appropriate international organizations. We urge the establishment of the rule of law in international affairs as a means of elimination of war, violence, and coercion in these affairs.”	
	<i>On War and Peace, see p. 140</i>

3. What are the historical criteria for consideration of a just war?

GOING HARD AGAINST THE GRAIN

“Let what you say be simply Yes, Yes or No, No.”

No deceptive or evasive speech allowed to disciples.

M A T T H E W 5 : 3 7

Just this month The Higher Education Research Institute released the results of its annual *Freshman Survey* given to over 150,000 college students.¹ In 2014, 27.5 percent of incoming students selected *none* as their religious preference, the highest since the survey began in 1971. Thirty years ago, only 10 percent identified as *nones*. A writer for *The Yale Daily News* noted that 34 percent of Yale freshmen identified as having no religion. Scott Greenberg then offered these earnest comments:

“The secularization of college students has seemed a foregone conclusion for some time, yet it represents a momentous shift for our society... even the best of secular institutions have not yet been able to replicate what religion used to provide its followers... [In particular], there is one traditional role of religion that few communities at Yale have figured out how to fill: *the role of moral compass*. Religion presented constant demands about how to live better, using regular rituals and communal norms to spur members... to moral action.” Then these lines, “There is no evidence Yale has developed any comparable frameworks for ensuring students are more ethical when they graduate than when they arrive. Morality isn't something we talk much about as a campus.... Violence, lying, cheating, and greed remain rampant..., and few institutions have stepped up *to help people to be better.*”²

Smart? No doubt. But better? No. Sadly, intelligence and goodness too often

¹ For the research, see “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise; for a comment, see Andrew Hess, “Increasing ‘Nones’ and Shrinking Faith- Is It As Bad As It Sounds?” www.focusonthefamily.com/aboutus/focus-findings/family-formation-trends/rise-of-the-nones.

² Edited from S. Greenberg, "Filling Religion's Void," *Yale Daily News* (2-10-15).

dwell in separate slices of the human pie, else the scholars would all be saints. But this insight into university culture raises two issues for me, and the first is that- despite what some philosophers claim- I do not think it's possible to create a convincing cross-generational system of morality apart from religious grounding which offers a convincing center and a boundary of ultimate accountability. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* Dmitri speaks to Aloysha of an earlier conversation with Rakitin, "But what will become of men then?" I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?'"³ This is sometimes reduced to the slogan *Without God, all things are permitted*. And in these days of ISIS atrocities, it needs to be added that it really matters which God and which reading of which sacred book you invoke.⁴ *Without God, all things are permitted; and with some gods, all things are still permitted*. And secondly, that the youthful Scott Greenberg is forgiven his narrow vision of what counts as an institution, because each faithful church is a moral community where love and wisdom are practiced, the Ten Commandments rehearsed and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount taught. Remove the churches, our moral restraint and compassionate contributions, and watch the culture sink under the weight of its sins and treacheries. We are salt that preserves.

I frankly have trouble keeping up with all the good done through this church, which is as it should be. The moral vision of the church is not something we made up from scratch; it was not an academic project, though great Christian thinkers refined its insights. We claim for it the highest of authorities. It was revealed to us by the Living God who first formed the Jews as his own tribe and then through them brought us Jesus who is our window into the Triune divine life and a preview of God's plan to heal the world. In following Jesus as his students- the original meaning of *disciple*,⁵ we have a chance to become a new kind of human being with new capacities. Our heart and character are reshaped. His Spirit is our companion and tutor with immediate access to the risen Jesus and all his followers. What hope is there for our world but Jesus Christ, his person and his program and his people and his ultimate

³ Slavoj Žižek, "If there is a God, then anything is permitted," *Religion and Ethics ABC*, April 17, 2012.

⁴ The article of Graeme Woods, "*What Isis Really Wants*" (www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980) has stirred quite a debate since he takes their religious roots and theology seriously; he argues that their program is the result of a serious, and seriously wrong, system of interpretation of the Koran.

⁵ See Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), Chapter 1, "Biblical Foundations of Discipleship," 23-49.

reappearance? I don't see any options that compare.

Read the four gospels and you will see the new reality demonstrated in every paragraph. Where Jesus goes sins are forgiven; broken bodies are healed; community forms around him as the new center of loyalty; the poor are blessed; evil is routed; prodigals leave pigpens and head home; death is pushed back; religion becomes transparent to God; freedom is restored and truth revealed; vengeance is forsaken, and love that is willing to suffer rather than strike back is the new order of the day. Jesus is our living window into this alternative kingdom and parallel universe. In his words and deeds we glimpse what the world would be like if God was actually in charge and if all free wills- angelic and human- were in harmony with the divine purpose. Where Jesus was, there was the kingdom, because there was the presence of the Spirit and the blessing of the Father with the Son, whether he was teaching a crowd or sleeping under the stars after a day of being swarmed. In Jesus we see and hear what the kingdom looks like when it intersects a broken world; he is its personal embodiment.

For instance, Rabbi Jesus teaches us to disengage from deception and tell the truth simply and without adornment because all our words are to be true and seasoned with grace. No more need to appeal to an outside authority in divine oaths. Yes means Yes, not Maybe; No means No, not Perhaps. Misuse of language is out because they no longer cooperate with the Evil One who majors in deception and evasion. Over time we gain a reputation for integrity and find new influence.

The people called disciples also give up the right to hurt others who hurt them in face-to-face relationships. They leave settling scores to God and refuse to be consumed by vengeance. You simply can't make them respond in kind. They know that to copy the tactics of their opponents is to become like them, which they refuse. They've learned it's more fun to be like Jesus than be like others. Over time they gain reputations for peace-making and coming up with outrageously creative ways to respond to the meanness of our world. Just one of these in a family or church or town makes a difference. Someone has to start for one to become two or more.

So if want to become a truth-seeker and a truth-teller, one who is so deeply rooted in the love of the Triune God that it's harder and harder to behave in a way inconsistent with that love, there's only one place to enroll, and that's the school of Professor Jesus. If you want to be a physician, you must learn anatomy and pathology. If you want to be a plumber, you must learn pipefitting; and if you want to live with Jesus in the kingdom, you learn simple, truthful speech and leave settling scores to God. You actively choose not to cooperate with *the other kingdom* which

is the pervasive environment of our world. To the disciple every day is a classroom and every encounter an opportunity to practice the truth and skills of Jesus. Through you the kingdom can find an entrance and a place to expand. In his sermon *A Knock At Midnight* Dr. Martin Luther King included this appeal:

“Somewhere somebody must have some sense. Men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for... everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil.... And you do that by love.”⁶

Where did this man learn to speak this way? From one who said, “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 violently resist one who is evil.’” That’s where he learned the lessons of non-violence and of the power of persistent love for enemies. From Jesus, and from Ghandi’s practice of the same as political protest. What went public in the bus boycott was learned in Bible reading and preaching in his father’s church. Ideas were planted and character shaped; a moral imagination was furnished with prophetic tools to envision a new day for a nation that had not yet lived up to the ideals of its own Declaration of Independence. Not all our founding fathers were eighteenth century.

The world is not going to change unless some of us change and break the cycles of deception and revenge. You can’t do this all of a sudden; it goes against the grain of human nature. It must be learned in relationship with Jesus to become part of who we are. We will not lie or participate in evasion; we will not respond in kind when mistreated. We will live in a way that startles the world. This takes time, because when the occasion comes there is no time to *get ready*; you have to *be ready*. Whenever something surprises me and I make a wrong response- something not grounded in Jesus’ reservoir of love and creativity- I know something valuable I did not know before: I was unprepared for this challenge. Happens all the time, and after some embarrassment, I typically *fess us* and sign up for a new class with the Master, and if the same lack comes up over and over- as has recently- I have a character flaw to deal with, and those are not as easily remedied.⁷

⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King, “A Knock at Midnight,” PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:33-42.

⁷ That this painful refining process of sanctification is normal is exemplified in our U.M Articles of Religion, Article XI: Of Sin After Justification, “Not every sin willingly

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Integrity And Simplicity In Speech (5:33-37).

By my reckoning there are two types of swearing, one crude, the other serious. We sometimes say a man or woman has *a foul mouth*. What flows out the mouth indicates what's in the heart, and when Jesus Christ takes up internal residence, you should observe a change in colorful vocabulary. The spigot is cut off. And if it leaks, their conscience afflicts them. This is the crude meaning of swearing, and it's not at all what Jesus was speaking about in verses 33 through 37.

What Jesus spoke to was the problem of how to guarantee truth in human relations. In a world where lying is an art form and deceit a refined skill, how can I count on what you're saying? The classic way is to invoke a higher power, to appeal to God as the guarantor of my promise, the idea being that God will punish those who invoke his name and do not follow through. With our hand on the Bible we solemnly swear to *tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God*. That's an oath in the serious sense; to break it is to perjure yourself and risk serious punishment. If you as a Christian lie in a business or legal matters, you've taken the name and reputation of the Lord in vain and attached it to something unworthy. So one of the tests is this: Are we creating people who are simple truth-tellers?

In the Old Testament the people of God were allowed to swear by the name of Yahweh. To swear by the One *who brought us out of Egypt* was a sign of loyalty to our God, not some other deity. The third commandment about *taking the Lord's name in vain* is not about cussing- at least not primarily; it's about not lying in a matter after I've invoked the name of this God as a guarantee of truth. The flip side is commandment nine which prohibits bearing false witness against a neighbor. Gossip is a problem, but lying in court where the stakes are higher is a bigger problem for my neighbor because it brings real damage. If I gossip, I corrupt our friendship, but if I

committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent" (*BOD 2012: 65*).

lie in court, I corrupt the nation.⁸ Using the name of the Lord as a cover for lying was a serious offense spoken to in many places in the Old Testament. Jesus summarized the best practice of his people in verse 33, “Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’” His was an accurate summary; Jesus was a knowledgeable rabbi.

The problem with divine oaths is that the more you use them, the less they mean. If the truth of some words is more reliable than others because an oath is attached, why not invoke oaths for everything important? It’s an overuse that borders on trivia. So, in order to not misuse the Lord’s name, Jews in Jesus’ day began to substitute lesser things that pointed towards God. They swore *by heaven* or *by the earth* or *by Jerusalem* or *by my head*, and then the issue was: Are such oaths as binding as the invocation of God’s name? Some rabbis said Yes, others No. If you say *by heaven* there’s wiggle room, but if you say *by God* you have to follow through. What a mess! Jesus would have nothing to do with pious evasions. Heaven is God’s throne, earth his footstool, Jerusalem his city, and you are God’s child; underneath your current hair color the original remains! Don’t swear. “Let what you say be simply Yes, Yes or No, No; anything else comes from evil.” Walk in the light. Every oath is a witness our normal promises are not to be trusted. It’s a culture of distrust; no one can count on anyone. Handshakes vanish; legalities multiply.

In a move for which he alone had authority, Jesus cut through convoluted practice with a single command, “But I say *to you*, Do not swear at all.” He announced God’s intent, which is that his people be truth tellers. Character is shaped as we make and keep promises. Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga says this:

“Our culture tells us we can be real selves only if we claim our right to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. But a free self knows he becomes a genuine self by making commitments to other people, promises he intends to keep even when keeping them exacts a price. Some people ask, ‘Who am I?’ and expect the answer to come from their accomplishments. Other people ask, ‘Who am I?’ and expect the answer to come from what other people think about them. A person who dares to make and keep promises discovers who she is by the promises she has

⁸ For a thorough treatment and history, see Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009), Chap. 8, “Telling The Truth,” 343-386.

made and kept to other people.”⁹

It takes wisdom to know which promises to make, what to say Yes and No to. Boundaries and gateways are important, and we are responsible for their use and maintenance. Let the wrong stuff in, and you will be hurt; keep the good stuff out, and you will be impoverished. Yes and No are our two most powerful words. Yes to truth; No to lies. Yes to God; No to evil and the Evil One. Yes to building up; No to tearing down. Yes to integrity of speech; No to using words as smoke and mirrors.

Tell the truth simply and do it in love and wisdom. And when we become people for whom speaking truth in love at the right time is a habit, we change the world around us because we’ve changed. In our circles of influence we build a culture of trust, where- as they used to say- *a man or woman’s word is their bond*. But with each deception and each little lie we trade in a piece of our character and give the Evil One grounds to attack us. Jesus warned us, and he knew the Adversary’s tactics better than any of us, “..anything else (other than simple truth telling) comes come evil.” Truth telling is a powerful tool. Those who live under the influence of Jesus know and speak the truth. They do it simply, look you in the eye, without fear and in love. And whatever the consequences, they don’t flinch. If they later find they’re wrong, they admit it. And if they don’t know, they don’t fake it; they say, “I don’t know.”

Truth tells us what to say, and love tells us when and how. All three are important, and to learn to do both well is an art taught by the Holy Spirit with many mistakes along the way. Enrolling in his school of truth telling and holy love will change your life. Jesus was under no illusion that upon his announcement all use of oaths would cease; instead, he was after a people who learned the power of integrity. Truth-telling Jesus style is a communications revolution, and in each week I offer my latest sample. I aim to retell the truth of Scripture in love without flinching. You ought to try it some time. It’s a bracing discipline.

We all have temptations to lie, to engage in evasion, in false exaggerations, and in spinning things to make us look better than we are. And when we give in, something is lost that’s hard to recover. When I fudge the truth I feel pain in my conscience, and when I ask, “Why did I do that *again*?” the answers are typically two: fear or pride. I would often rather look good than be truthful. The words we speak have implications for everyone around us as their effects extend out like rings from

⁹ "The Power of Promises," *A Chorus of Witnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

a stone dropped in a pond. So let the words of Jesus' prick your conscience and let the Holy Spirit monitor your commitment to seeking up and speaking the truth in love. When we dwell in the truth of Jesus Christ, we become potent agents of the kingdom of God, and that, after all, is what Jesus is after. In the world of the blind, the one-eyed man is king; and in a world of lies and half-truths, truth-seekers and truth-tellers have effects all out of proportion to their numbers. Truth is influence.

Meeting Abuse Not With Retaliation But With Kingdom Service (5:38-42).

It's best to admit from the outset that friendship with Jesus Christ means the utter transformation of who we are, and change is always painful. The fancy word is *sanctification*, which is the process of our becoming more like the Lord in our responses to the world within us and the worlds around us. It takes a long time, in fact a lifetime, though but there may be breakthroughs that lift us quickly to a new level. We stick with it because it's the program of the One to whom we owe our lives and who keeps pouring his energies into us to keep us encouraged. He doesn't love us because we do these things; he loves in order that we may do them.

A mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that pulling hair hurts." He nodded, and she left the room.

As she started down the hall the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?"

The little boy replied, "She knows now."¹⁰

You don't have to teach people the primitive justice of revenge; it's part of being a fallen human being in a world where the logic of self-defense reigns, and in that sense perfectly natural. With children the consequences are small, but with adults with real power- say guns and artillery and armies and lawyers and corporations and old scores to settle from a thousand years back- damage is massive. Cities and families and nations are ripped apart by escalating cycles of revenge long after the originating circumstances are irrelevant. Who will break the cycle? Who will respond out of God rather than out of their hurt? Kingdom people who have been practicing in a thousand little tests, that's who, people who believe Jesus' wisdom of non-violent creativity is more powerful than all the hatreds of the world.

¹⁰ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 5:38-42.

A South African woman stood in an emotionally charged courtroom; she listened as white police officers acknowledge the atrocities they perpetrated in the name of apartheid.

Officer van de Broek acknowledged his responsibility in the death of her son. Along with others, he shot her 18-year-old son at point-blank range. He and the others partied while they burned the body, turning it over and over on the fire until it was reduced to ashes.

Eight years later, van de Broek and others arrived to seize her husband. Shortly after midnight, van de Broek came back to fetch the woman. He took her to a woodpile where her husband lay bound. She was forced to watch as they poured gasoline over his body and ignited the flames. The last words she heard her husband say were "Forgive them."

Now, van de Broek stood before her awaiting judgment. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission asked her what she wanted.

"I want three things," she said calmly. "I want Mr. van de Broek to take me to the place where they burned my husband's body. I would like to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial.

"Second, Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him.

"Third, I would like Mr. van de Broek to know he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. I would like someone to lead me to where he is seated, so I can embrace him and he can know my forgiveness is real."

As the elderly woman was led across the room, van de Broek fainted. Someone began singing *Amazing Grace*. Gradually everyone joined in.

This woman understood that to be reconciled with God and with neighbors and enemies is to be free. She refused the path of vengeance and showed herself to be a citizen of another world, the kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.¹¹ She never set out to be a heroine; it's just who she had become in following the Lord in the middle of her great pain, and when the moment came, God put a new kind of human being on public display. She was an opening to a bright, new world, and grace enough to make a old racist, murderer faint. How we respond to little hurts determines how we eventually respond to big ones. Does our love overcome the worst that is in people? Becoming that kind of person is what Jesus is ultimately after.

Nothing is more natural than the impulses of vengeance and retaliation. You

¹¹ *The Canadian Mennonite*, September 4, 2000, 11.

Matthew 5:33-37, 38-42 14

hurt me; I want to hurt you back. You insult me; I insult you back. Justice must be done and balance restored. But no one is freed in that world. The law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was once a very good idea. It aimed at assessing liability, equal justice, and proportionality. It was a law not to encourage retaliation but to limit its effects. If you knock out one of my teeth, I don’t get to knock out all yours! It recognized the escalating nature of revenge and sets a limit for the good of all. No more inter-generational blood feuds, which if we could stop them even today would make our world a much more peaceful place. Think Sunni versus Shia!

But Jesus gave a different standard for his followers, “But I say to you, Do not resist (violently) one who is evil.” If I let your actions towards me determine my response to you, you’ve not only hurt me, you’ve turned me into an evil person like yourself, and I don’t want to give you that much power. I want my character to be more and more shaped by Jesus Christ, not by what you do to me.

The four examples Jesus gives in verses 39 through 42 are small in scale and face-to-face, the kinds of confrontations that took place in villages like Nazareth. They are not about international law or government policies. Jesus had seen such things take place; perhaps they’d happened to him or his family.

If I’m facing you, and if you are right handed, and if you strike me on the *right* cheek, it means that you did it with the back of your hand, which in that culture was an extreme insult and act of humiliation done in public for maximum effect.¹² It’s a calculated insult, not a mugging with a weapon. And if you are my social superior, what am I to do? If I do nothing, I accept your estimation and live with the shame. But if I am a kingdom citizen, I turn the left cheek. To hit me now you must use an open hand or fist, but then you are revealed for who you are, an evil man. There is always a kingdom response to be made, and Jesus gives power to the humiliated. Humiliating another human is always an act of evil, so if you are tempted, run from it, because if you humiliate others, God will humiliate you, and God has the power to do it permanently.

The second example is not in the street but before a magistrate. Perhaps I have a debt I cannot quickly pay. Jewish law permitted the inner garment to be taken as

¹² For a creative reading of Jesus’ four examples, see Walter Wink, “Reclaiming Jesus Non-Violent Alternative,” *Living Pulpit*, 7, No. 4, 40-42; also his longer “Just War And Pacifism,” *Review and Expositor*, 89, No. 2, Spring 1992, 197-214.

Matthew 5:33-37, 38-42 15

short-term collateral, but not the outer, since it was the only covering on a cold night.¹³ What recourse does a poor follower of Jesus have when pressed in this manner? They still have the option of kingdom creativity. Don't only give them what they ask for; give them your outer cloak as well, which means you now stand before them and the court naked which in Israel was a horror. Show them to be the greedy and cruel person they are, one with no care for the poor. Expose evil by creative non-violence.

It was then that Jesus took it up a notch into the politics of Jewish nationalism. Roman soldiers had the right to impress people into temporary service for a thousand paces; it's what happened when Simon of Cyrene was grabbed off the streets to carry Jesus' cross. Only a thousand steps was required, but Jesus said go two thousand. Refuse to be a victim; refuse to hate; in the power of the kingdom love the enemies of your people. Live out of the kingdom's endless supply of love and creativity, not out of the brutalities of this world. Do things that are so different and wild and unexpected that people have to ask, "Why are you doing this?" Then tell them about the kingdom in which you live and the name of its prince.

The fourth example stands apart from the previous three. There it was an evil person using power over me, but in verse 42 it is I who have the power to help and must decide how to use it, "Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you." I have resources, and the question is, Are they available to God? If all four examples have to do with not taking vengeance, then we have to assume that the one who now comes to me for help is the same one to whom I earlier went for help and turned me down. When he comes back in need, I am not to retaliate by refusing him because he first refused me.¹⁴

If we turn these four examples in rigid laws, they lead to silliness. Jesus' examples are meant to stir our imaginations and cause us to think outside the box of habitual responses. The kingdom and its resources are always at hand for those who seek God. Bad and painful things happen to us all. The question is, How will we respond? In vengeance and in anger, or will we choose the kingdom way because Jesus is wiser than them all?

Jesus was speaking to inter-personal small scale confrontations, not the foreign

¹³ Exodus 22:25-27, Dt. 24:10-13, 17.

¹⁴ Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 88-93.

policy of nations. Some want to take this passage and extend it into policies of strict pacifism, as with some Quakers, Mennonites, and peace churches. As much as I admire their witness, I'm not a strict pacifist, and neither is our church.¹⁵ We abhor war; we hate it; it's an absolute last resort. It is for this reason that the Christian ethical tradition since the fifth century with Augustine has developed just war criteria which act as moral brakes.¹⁶ Jesus will not be wrapped in any flag, and we must be exceedingly careful about claiming his approval for our agendas. And when wars end, the church still has the task of sending missionaries into danger and teaching the life and lessons of Jesus.¹⁷ What would it mean to evangelize Yemen?

CONCLUSION

G.K. Chesterton got it right, "The Christian ideal," he said, "has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried."¹⁸ Speaking simple truth in real love, giving up the right to hurt others: what could be more demanding? But it's the only path Jesus offers, and if we desire his company, this is his agenda: to make us a new people, people who give credible witness to the coming kingdom by showcasing its effects in present difficult circumstances. And if you wish to eat with such a one and be strengthened in this work, his table is open.

I'm glad you believe in Jesus; I'm glad I do, but are we willing to actually do what he says and to support one another in learning the skills of the kingdom? This is how life makes a difference.

¹⁵ *The Book of Discipline 2012*: 138-140.

¹⁶ For a treatment by one of our theologians, see Steve Rankin, "Wesley and War: Guidance For Modern-Day Heirs?" *Methodist Review*, Vol. 3 (2011), 101-139.

¹⁷ For a critique of Christian political Group-Think, see George Hunger III, *Christian, Evangelical & Democrat* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2006).

¹⁸ www.chesterton.org/the-christian-ideal.
