

# The Sermon on the Mount

## Matt 5:21-48: The antitheses, continued

1. The view of the law in the Sermon on the Mount appears to differ from that in Paul's epistles. In the Sermon, the law is maintained, and none of it will pass away. For Paul, while the law itself is "holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12), because of our sinful nature the law is for us a curse and captivity (Gal 3:10+).

Despite this difference in perspective, there are close parallels between the Sermon and Paul.

The Beatitudes and the Antitheses paint a picture of a disciple's character which is similar to the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." And just as Jesus warns of hell for those who don't follow him, Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the "works of the flesh": "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these," which appropriate eternal consequences: "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Jesus issues a strict warning against adulterous thoughts, implying they can lead one to hell. Paul too condemns sexual immorality, as well as other dangerous sins: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)," warning, "On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient."

If Paul's epistles are famous for their articulation of God's grace, Jesus' life and teaching also teach grace. Though Jesus threatens hell in this passage and many others for specific offenses and more generally for "all who do evil" (Mt 13:41), in this Sermon he also promises the Father's forgiveness for all sins of those who forgive others, and (later) for all sins except those against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31). In John, Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Craig Keener adds:

"Most Jewish people understood the commandments in the context of grace; given Jesus' demands for greater grace in practice (including in material that appears specifically Matthean: 9:13; 12:7; 18:21-35), he undoubtedly intended the kingdom demands in light of grace (cf. Mt 6:12/Lk 11:4; Mk 11:25//Mt 6:14-15; Mk 10:15). In the Gospel narratives Jesus embraces those who humble themselves, acknowledging God's right to rule, even if in practice they fall short of the goal of moral perfection (5:48). But the kingdom grace Jesus proclaimed was not the workless grace of much of Western Christendom; in the Gospels the kingdom message transforms those who meekly embrace it, just as it crushes the arrogant, the religiously and socially satisfied."<sup>1</sup>

So much for the similarities. How are Paul's and Jesus' articulation of life by the Spirit (of the law) different? In what way might this be because of their different audiences, Matthew writing with an eye toward Jewish converts, and Paul writing to Gentile Christians being pressured by Jewish converts? What else might explain the differences?

2. *Swearing Oaths*: The OT allowed swearing of oaths, even using the name of God, but required that vows in God's name be fulfilled:

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 161-2.

When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Num 30:20; cf. also Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; Deut 23:21-24; Eccl 5:5).

Several times Paul swears by the name of God, as in 2 Cor 1:23, “But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth” (see also Rom 1:9; Gal 1:20; Philip 1:8). In fact, even *God* swears on his own name: “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you...” (Gen 22:16-17). The author of Hebrews tells us why God did this:

In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath... (Heb 6:17)

In Jesus’ day, the warnings in the OT led Pharisees to argue over which oaths qualified as swearing on God’s name, and which therefore were binding. “For example, one rabbi says that if you swear *by* Jerusalem you are not bound by your vow; but if you swear *toward* Jerusalem, then you are bound by your vow.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus puts the kibosh on this wrangling casuistry by pointing out that all things are related to God in one way or another (cf. Mt 23:16-22; James 14:6). Jesus instead instructs his disciples to avoid oaths and be true to their words.<sup>3</sup>

- a. The Anabaptists, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and later the Quakers, read this passage to forbid giving evidence under oath in a court of law. Is this a valid reading of this passage? (See Mt 26:63.)
- b. While modern Christians rarely swear oaths for emphasis or to gain credibility, Stott argues this injunction is still relevant:

“As A.M. Hunter puts it, ‘Oaths arise because men are so often liars.’ The same is true of all forms of exaggeration, hyperbole and the use of superlatives. We are not content to say we had an enjoyable time; we have to describe it as ‘fantastic’ or ‘fabulous’ or even ‘fantabulous’ or some other invention. But the more we resort to such expressions, the more we devalue human language and human promises. Christians should say what they mean and mean what they say. Our unadorned word should be enough, ‘yes’ or ‘no’. And when a monosyllable will do, why waste our breath by adding to it?”<sup>4</sup>

What do you think of Stott’s application? Is Jesus advocating not just fidelity, but tame language?<sup>5</sup>

- c. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, wrote of the Essenes, of which John the Baptist was likely a member,

“They are eminent for fidelity and are the ministers of peace. Whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath. But swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount* (2004), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, just before Paul swears by God’s name in 2 Cor 1:23 (“I call God as my witness”) he spends eight verses trying to convince the Corinthians that he wasn’t equivocating when he said he was going to visit them on his way to Macedonia and that his “yes” really meant “yes”.

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> The *Didache*, says, “Do not equivocate in thought or speech, for a double tongue is a deadly snare; the words you speak should not be false or empty phrases, but fraught with purposeful action” (1:2).

perjury, for they say that he who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God is already condemned” (*War*, 2.8.6).

The Essenes lived by a strict code. Is it possible outside such a ruled environment to foster such a reputation for honesty and integrity? What can we do, as individuals, a small group, or as a church, to bring God glory through our uprightness in speech?

- d. Chrysostom sees Jesus as abrogating the OT law by forbidding something it allowed:

“Our understanding of the principles of virtue has advanced beyond the time of Moses. Therefore divorce is now seen to be adultery and the necessity of an oath to be from the evil one. If the earlier laws had been devilish from the first, they would never have resulted in such goodness. Had Moses’ laws not been forerunners, Jesus’ teaching would have been so easily received. Don’t require a present excellence from past laws, when their usefulness has now been surpassed.” (*The Gospel of Mt, Homily 17.5-6*)

Menno Simons also sees Jesus as introducing a new, stricter law:

“Christ Jesus does not in the New Testament point His disciples to the Law in regard to the matter of swearing—the dispensation of imperfectness which allowed swearing, but He points us now from the Law to yea and nay, as to the dispensation of perfectness... To swear truly was allowed to the Jews under the Law; but the Gospel forbids this to Christians.”<sup>6</sup>

Are Menno and John right? Was Jesus describing the spirit of the law, or laying down a new, stricter law? Where does this leave Paul?

3. Read 5:38-48. In 5:38 Jesus quotes Lev 24:20 (// Deut 19:21), “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This, the law of retribution, or *lex talionis*, “was standard ancient Near Eastern law..., except that most legal collections besides the OT varied the punishments according to one’s social class.”<sup>7</sup> So the code of Hammurabi (196-199), from c. 1770 B.C. Babylon, reads

If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. If he break another man’s bone, his bone shall be broken. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mina. If he put out the eye of a man’s slave, or break the bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

All versions of the law were meant to prevent feuds by limiting retribution and putting it in the hand of the state. (Lev 24 is written for magistrates administering the law.) The OT version further leveled class distinctions.

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<sup>6</sup> Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561* (Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pa.), 1956, pp. 518-19, quoted in Richard Gardner, *Matthew*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Craig Keener, *Matthew*, 196.

Sages have warned against seeking revenge for various reasons:

<b>Akkadian (before 700 B.C.)</b>	So as not to benefit an enemy	“But if it is really your own quarrel, extinguish the flame; for a quarrel is a neglect of what is right, a protecting wall for the nakedness of one’s adversary; whoever stops it is thinking about the interests of a friend.”
<b>Plato (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.)</b>	Since one should never do evil at all	“And we ought not even to requite wrong with wrong, as the world thinks, <b>since we must not do wrong at all.</b> ”
<b>Seneca (1<sup>st</sup> c. A.D.; <i>On Anger</i>, 3.5.8)</b>	Detachment is a sign of greatness	“Revenge is the confession of a hurt; no mind is truly great that bends before injury. The man who has offended you is either stronger or weaker than you: if he is weaker, spare him; if he is stronger, spare yourself. <b>There is no surer proof of greatness than to be in a state where nothing can possibly happen to disturb you.</b> ”
<b>Prov 24:29</b>	It isn’t wise	“Do not say, ‘I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done.’”
<b>Prov 25:21-22</b>	Kindness to enemies is the best revenge	“If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; <b>for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.</b> ”
<b>Sirach (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. B.C.; Jewish; 28:1-7)</b>	To avoid God’s wrath, and obtain his forgiveness	“The vengeful will face the Lord’s vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins. <i>Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? ...If a mere mortal harbors wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?</i> Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.”
<b>Paul (Rom 12:19; Deut 32:35)</b>	Vengeance is the Lord’s prerogative	“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, <b>‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’</b> ”

What reasons does Jesus give in this passage, and in 6:14-15?

- Jesus lists four examples of non-retribution. The first of these was turning the other cheek. The back-handed slap was an extreme insult used by a superior on an inferior in Jewish culture: The Jewish law “specifies the various fines for striking an equal: for slugging with a fist, 4 *zuz* (a *zuz* was a day’s wage); for slapping, 200 *zuz*; but ‘if [he struck him] with the back of his hand he must pay him 400 *zuz*.’ But damages for indignity were not paid to slaves who were struck.”<sup>8</sup>

This passage has been understood in various ways, including:

- “Don’t trade insults” (Blomberg)
- Let go of wounded pride in order to break the cycle of hostility (Richard Gardner; John Calvin)
- Respond to gross insult with generosity of spirit, causing utter amazement (Michael Green)

<sup>8</sup> Walter Wink, *Louvain Studies* 18 (1993), 3-20, quoting Mishna tractate *Baba Qamma* 8:1-7.

- “Turning the other cheek summons disciples to neglect their honor and let God vindicate them when he wills.” (Craig Keener)
  - This is not merely non-resistance. We are not to avoid further abuse, but to actively open ourselves to it. (Robert Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth*, 70)
  - Present the right cheek, indicating you are an equal, not an inferior, in effect saying, “Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter than fact. You cannot demean me” (Walter Wink, 9)
  - “By freely offering one’s other cheek, one demonstrates that one does not value human honor. In a sense, this could constitute a form of resistance by showing contempt for the value of the insulter’s (and perhaps the onlookers’) opinions.” (Craig Keener again)
    - a. How did the Suffering Servant respond to abuse in Is 50:6; and Jesus in Mk 14:65; 15:16-20?
    - b. How do you read this passage?
    - c. Have you ever had occasion to follow this instruction?
    - d. Wink and Keener see an element of non-violent resistance in this passage. Is it possible to act out of love toward your aggressor, while showing contempt for his or her opinions (Keener) and presenting yourself as his or her equal (Wink)?
    - e. Is this advice you would give to a child?
5. Spurgeon interprets “turn the other cheek” to mean “We are to be the anvil when bad men are the hammers.”<sup>9</sup> Stott says of this,
- “Yes, but an anvil is one thing, a doormat is another. Jesus’ illustrations and personal example depict not the weakling who offers no resistance. He himself challenged the high priest when questioned by him in court [Jn 18:19-23]. They depict rather the strong man whose control of himself and love for others are so powerful that he rejects absolutely every conceivable form of retaliation.
- ...Christ’s illustrations are not to be taken as the charter for any unscrupulous tyrant, ruffian, beggar or thug. His purpose was to forbid revenge, not to encourage injustice, dishonesty or vice. How can those who seek as their first priority the extension of God’s righteous rule at the same time contribute to the spread of unrighteousness? True love, caring for both the individual and society, takes action to deter evil and to promote good. And Christ’s command... teaches not the irresponsibility which encourages evil but the forbearance which renounces revenge. Authentic Christian non-resistance is non-retaliation.”<sup>10</sup>
- a. Can you think of an example from your own life, or that of another, where Stott’s non-resistance/non-retaliation distinction was clear? What did you, or the other, do?
  - b. Did Harrison Ford’s character in *Witness* do the right thing in responding to the taunting non-Amish youth by slugging him?

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Stott, 107.

<sup>10</sup> *Christian Counter-Culture*, 108.

- c. Having thought about cheek-turning, which historical interpreter do you most agree with? (E.g. Bonhoeffer, Calvin, Menno Simons, et al.)
6. In 5:38, “Do not resist” uses the verb *anthistemi*, meaning “to be in opposition to, set oneself against, oppose” (BDAG). This is the same verb used to describe the sorcerer who opposed the Paul and Barnabas in Paphos in Acts 13:8; Paul’s opposition to Peter in Gal 2:11; resistance of the Devil in James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9.

Carson argues that Jesus is not telling his disciples they shouldn’t resist an evil person attacking a third party; Jesus is telling us not to resist when we are under attack. So Carson gives the example of intervening between a violent drunk and the victim of his anger, and doesn’t believe this was a violation of Jesus’ teaching.

Did Jesus resist the Pharisees? Did Paul resist the idol-makers in Ephesus? Where in the lives of Jesus and the apostles can you draw the line indicating when it’s appropriate to offer no resistance to evil doers?

7. Jesus used hyperbole when he told his followers to hate their fathers and mothers (Lk 14:26). We understand Jesus as meaning that *he* should have greater priority than their parents in the lives of his disciples. In fact, we know from Matt 7:10+ that Jesus upheld the importance of honoring parents.

Carson points out that in the Antitheses Jesus is using a characteristically Semitic form of hyperbole:

...this categorical and antithetical way of speaking is typical of much of Jesus’ preaching, and reflects, I think, a Semitic and poetic cast of mind. It is something we shall wrestle with repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount... Indeed, it is important to let this antithetical and categorical form of statement speak, in all its stark absoluteness, before we allow it to be tempered by broader considerations. (p. 43)

Is Jesus speaking hyperbolically in the Antitheses? If so, how?

8. *Leftover question on Murder and Anger*: James 4:1-12 addresses divisions as well as speaking “evil against” one’s brother or sister in Christ (4:11). How does the advice in this passage contrast with Jesus’ advice in the Sermon on the Mount? What did James see as the central message of Mt 5:21-26?<sup>11</sup>



*Fun quote*: “One of the most absurd [interpretations of ‘resist not evil’] is ‘the crazy saint’ whom Luther describes, ‘who let the lice nibble at him and refused to kill any of them on account of this text, maintaining that he had to suffer and could not resist evil!’” (Stott, 108)

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<sup>11</sup> The other early commentary on the Sermon, the *Didache*, interprets this passage to mean: “You are to have no malicious designs on a neighbor. You are to cherish no feelings of hatred for anybody; some you are to reprove, some to pray for, and some again to love more than your life. Keep away from every bad man, my son, and from all his kind. Never give way to anger, for anger leads to homicide. Likewise refrain from fanaticism, quarrelling, and hot-temperedness, for these too can breed homicide” (1:2).