

“Our Relationship with the Torah and Our Selves: Speak Truth, Resist Evil Nonviolently” (Matt 5:33-42)

By Pastor Jerry Truex

Sept 30, 2007

A. Introduction

Today, we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount. We are looking at the so-called “six antithetical sayings” in chapter five. In these six sayings, Jesus gives injunctions to stop certain vicious cycles of behavior that harms people.

Today, we will hear Jesus talk about:

- the importance of truth telling
- the importance of resisting evil with nonviolent action

B. Truth-telling

First, Jesus addresses the issue of oath-taking and speaking the truth in love. An oath is a solemn pledge to tell the truth, especially in a court of law. Jesus is not talking about “swearing” in the sense of saying, “Oh, my God!”—which is not unimportant, but it’s not what Jesus is talking about here.

Listen to what he says:

Matt 5:33-37. ³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear [oaths] at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (NRSV)

1. What problem was Jesus addressing?

What problem was Jesus addressing? Jesus lived in an oral culture. Oral cultures are based on trust and orally sworn statements. In contrast, we live in a written culture, which depends on written contracts. So taking oaths was a common and crucial practice during Jesus’ time.

However, there were two problems with oath-taking: On the one hand, taking an oath to guarantee what someone says is true implies that we can be less careful about telling the truth when we don’t say an oath. On the other hand, during Jesus’ time, some people were down right dishonest and deceptive when they took oaths. Worst of

all, they used God's name to back up their oaths, which broke the commandment not to misuse God's name (Exod 20:7).¹

Example: "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?" (Matt 23:16) (NRSV).

In this case, people made promises that sounded genuine, but actually had "their fingers crossed behind their backs" so to speak.²

Illustration: I remember when I was a kid. And my bother and I use to make deals. I'd say something like, "If you mow the lawn for me, I'll let you ride my new bike." Then, after he mowed the lawn, I'd go back on the promise. When he objected, I say something like, "I never promised *when* I'd let you use my bike." So he'd never trust me again until I specified *when*.

2. What's wrong with being dishonest?

What's wrong with being dishonest? The problem with dishonest is that it creates distrust. Distrust ruins relationships. Distrust creates disorder, insecurity, and anxiety. It ruins our inner and outer peace.

In contrast, trust builds healthy relationships. Trust creates a sense of order, security, and serenity. It gives us peace of mind.

What kind of world would you rather live in? What kind of world would you rather create? A world of distrust and dishonesty? Or a world of trust and truth-telling?

3. What injunction does Jesus give?

What injunction does Jesus give? Jesus says, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' and 'No, No'." In other words, tell the truth and oaths will not be necessary.

In the Hebrew mindset of Jesus, truth (*emeth*; אֱמֶת) is sometimes translated "faithfulness" (Deut 32:3). You could even say, *truth is faithfulness—faithfulness to facts* (speaking the truth) and *faithfulness to relationships* (being loyal).

Jesus invites his disciples to "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

- Speaking the truth creates right relationship (righteousness) with God and others
- Speaking the truth pushes back the darkness of dishonesty and deception
- Speaking the truth is a way to resist actively and nonviolently the deceptive evil that harms us and our relationships

¹ "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name" (Exod 20:7).

² Unfortunately, like Jesus' world, ours is infused with systemic distrust. The corporate culture often emphasizes profits as the one goal that counts. With profits as the highest value, honesty goes by the wayside and advertisers and salespeople border on deception to sell products and to get people to sign up for various services. Similarly, politicians often tell the voters whatever they think the voters want to hear in order to get elected. It is no wonder that advertising practitioners, salesmen, and congressmen are the lowest ranking professions (see http://public-healthcare-issues.suite101.com/article.cfm/nurses_are_most_honest_and_ethical).

4. More questions

Although all interpreters agree that the text requires truth-telling, there are still some unanswered questions.

a. What about oaths in the OT?

First, what about oaths in the OT? In the OT, we find people and even God swearing oaths. Abraham swore an oath to God in Gen 14:22. The Angel of the Lord swore an oath to Abraham in Gen 22:16. And there are many other examples.

So when Jesus says, “Don’t swear oaths at all,” do we have a contradiction between Jesus and the OT? Or would we understand Jesus’ injunction “not to swear oaths” as an example of exaggerate speech to make the point about telling the truth?

b. What about always honesty?

Second, what about always being honest? Should we always be absolutely truth? Are there times when we should not be truthful? Are there “permissible lies”?

Generally speaking, I think Jesus would say, “Be truthful.” Certainly, we shouldn’t intentionally deceive people to get what we want. I think the temptation to lie correlates with a lack of trust in God. We lie because we think God will not give us what we want or need.

There are advantages to truth-telling also. As Mark Twain said, “If you tell the truth you don’t have to remember anything.” You won’t get tangled in a web of lies. Edgar J. Mohn said, “A lie has speed, but truth has endurance.”

However, there might be one exception; when truth-telling leads to harming another person. For example, let’s say the Nazis came and demanded that we tell them where we’re hiding certain Jews. If we tell the truth, the Nazis will kill the Jews; if we lie, the Jews will live. So we choose the lesser of two evils and we lie. That’s the exception.

5. Anabaptists and oaths

Oath-taking has been a defining issue for Anabaptist. Early Anabaptist really wanted to do what Jesus taught. So, when they heard Jesus, “Don’t swear oaths,” they didn’t. They took Jesus’ words literally and seriously.

However, this caused serious problems for Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. At that time, people swore oaths to governing authorities when they joined guilds and when they were in court. Oaths held society together. To refuse to take an oath was to reject society.³

³ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press 1995); see 183-224 on “Sword and Oath,” especially 186.

Of course, this made Anabaptists very suspicious and outcast. Their commitment to Christ—as they understood him—put them at odds with society.

Today, many Mennonites refuse to swear oaths in courts of law, oaths of allegiance to governments, or oaths in secret societies.

C. Resisting evil with nonviolence

Next, we come to what has been called the law of nonresistance, which I think is a misnomer. I explain in a moment. Here is the text.

Matt 5:39-42. ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist [or *react violently against*] an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (NRSV)

1. What problem was Jesus addressing?

What problem was Jesus addressing? During Jesus' time, the Roman army occupied Palestine and exploited and oppressed the Jews that lived there, including Christian Jews. Many Jews considered violent resistance against the Romans. In fact, the Jews initiated war against the Romans in 66 C.E., which is called First Jewish Revolt.

There is good reason to believe that this saying of Jesus constituted his thought about armed rebellion against Rome and the Jewish Nationalism that advocated retaliation against the Roman occupation forces.

2. “Eye for eye”—*lex talionis* [Lat. “law of retaliation”]

What is meant by “an eye for an eye”? This principle is called *lex talionis* [law of retaliation] and goes back to the Code of Hammurabi (1700 BCE) and is found in many ancient law codes. The *lex talionis* was probably intended to restrain violent payback or revenge.

Jesus quotes the law of retaliation from Exod. 21:23-24: “If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for strip.”⁴

3. “Do not *antistēnai* an evildoer” (5:39)

Right after alluding to the law of retaliation, Jesus qualifies it by saying: ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ἀντιστηναὶ τῷ ποιηρῷ, “but I say to you do not *antistēnai* an evildoer.”

What does *antistēnai* mean? There are two views.

⁴ See also Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21.

a. Traditional: “do not resist an evildoer”

In the traditional view, *antistēnai* means “resist”. So Jesus is saying, “Do not resist or oppose evil.” Jesus is advocating *passive nonresistance* without retaliation.

b. Alternative: “do not react violently against and evildoer”

In the alternative view, *antistēnai* means “react violently against.” So Jesus is saying, “Do not react violently against an evildoer.”

The word, *antistēnai*, comes from *anti-* meaning “against” and *stēnai* meaning “to stand fast” (middle or passive). It was a military term meaning, “to stand ready for battle.” When *anti-* and *stēnai* are conjoined, we get *antistēnai*, which means “to stand ready for battle over against (an opposing force).”⁵

So, Jesus is saying, “Do not resist violently. Do not revolt. Do not offer armed resistance.” In this view, we are to resist evil, but not in violent ways.

This view is supported by four examples that follow—turn the other cheek, give your clothes, go the second mile, give to those who ask.

4. Four examples of nonviolent resistance

a. Turn your other cheek (5:39b)

In the first example, Jesus envisions a person receiving a back handed slap by a person of superior status.

To strike someone on the right cheek with the back of the hand was a humiliating insult. “A backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors. Master backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. *We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would be suicidal.*”⁶

Shockingly, Jesus instructs victims to turn the other (i.e., left) cheek. By turning the left cheek, the victim forces the oppressor to hit him or her a second time as an equal, not with a backhand, but with the right first, which acknowledges the victim as a peer. Note: The left hand would not have been used, because it was used for sanitary purposes.

[*Ask for a volunteer and demonstrate how this looks.*]

In this way, the victim regains dignity without violence. It is like the followers of Martin Luther King, who didn’t “retaliate against the segregationist racist, but marched nonviolently in the face of stones, police dogs, beatings, and fir

⁵ N.T. Wright and Walter Wink concur. See Walter Wink, “Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way Matt 5:38-42 par.” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, Willard M. Swartley (ed.) (Louisville: Westminster/John Know, 1992) 102-125; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 291.

⁶ Walter Wink, “Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way Matt 5:38-42 par.” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, Willard M. Swartley (ed.) (Louisville: Westminster/John Know, 1992) 105.

hoses.”⁷ It shocked the world into a new awareness of injustice and a new respect for nonviolent protest.

Jesus is not teaching retaliation, but to use creative and nonviolent ways to resist evil. Social psychologists tell us that aggression begets more aggression. Jesus’ strategy defuses aggression by breaking the cycle of violence.

b. Give your clothes (5:40)

In the second example, Jesus envisions a poor person being sued in court for his “inner garment” (*chitōn*; χιτών), no doubt because of unpaid debt.

Again, rather shockingly, Jesus tells the victim to give up his “outer garment” (*himation*; ἱμάτιον) as well. The victim gives away both garments and stands naked before the court and the oppressor.

In this way, the naked victim shames the greed creditor, who now stands with both garments in hand.⁸ Of course, it’s hyperbole. But it communicates the point that victims should protest against systems that lead to poverty.

Again, Jesus is not teaching retaliation, but to use creative and nonviolent ways to challenge and resist evil.

c. Go the second mile (5:41)

In the third example, Jesus envisions a Jewish person being forced to carry the belongings of a Roman soldier, who was part of the occupation force.

In first-century Palestine, Roman soldiers were allowed to force citizens to carry their gear.⁹ They could treat people like pack-animals. There is at least one inscription and several ancient texts that talk about Roman soldiers abusing this practice. So, there was a one-mile limit for how far soldiers could force people to carry their stuff.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t advocate armed revolt, but shockingly, he advocates going a second mile! Jewish Nationalist must have regarded Jesus as a traitor. But Jesus’ disciples understood what he was driving at. Offering to go a second mile puts the initiative into the hands of the victim.

Just like the first two examples, Jesus is not advocating retaliation, but resisting evil through nonviolent measures.

d. Give to everyone who asks (5:42)

In the fourth example, Jesus envisions a world of debt and economic inequality. In this example, Jesus tells us to give to everyone who begs or wants to borrow.

⁷ Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2006) 92.

⁸ Nakedness was a taboo in Judaism (see Gen 9:20-27)

⁹ For an example in the NT, see Simon of Cyrene in Matt 27:32.

During the time of Jesus, there were soaring interest rates and taxes. Many Jews were forced to foreclose on their property and go into debt. To give to people in need is away to protest against greed and economic in justice. Giving to everyone is hyperbole. But Jesus' hyperbole emphasizes the need for compassion over covetousness and sharing over hoarding.

In this final example, notice again that Jesus does not advise being passive or becoming a doormat for evil. Rather, Jesus is advising us to resist evil in creative and nonviolent ways.

5. Anabaptist and nonviolence

This text has been very important in the ongoing debate over pacifism, which has been a defining issue for Anabaptist. Since the sixteenth century, Anabaptists have understood that nonviolence and peace was the way of Jesus Christ.

Since then Anabaptists and Mennonites have understood that peace is not a goal that can be attained by any means whatsoever. Rather, if you want peace, peace is the way!

Of course, this has put Anabaptists at odds with society, which values revenge and war. Revenge and war is undergirded by the *myth of redemptive violence*—the myth of redemptive violence refers to that belief that violence and war can right the wrongs of the world.¹⁰

In recent years, our nation has gone far beyond simple retaliation and self-defense. Our nation has taken a stance of preemption—we need to strike first before they strike us. In this type of society, Anabaptist, who refuse to accept that view, are viewed as traitors and numbskulls.

The same happened to Jesus. Jewish Nationalist saw him as a traitor. The Roman military viewed him as a numbskull. I stand with Jesus.

For true followers of Jesus, using violence is out of the question. But that does not mean becoming doormats for evil. It means actively resisting evil and injustice in creative and nonviolent ways.

D. Reflections

The two sayings we looked at today—speaking the truth and resisting evil nonviolently—were intended to shock the imagination and instill a vision for what God is doing in the world to build the Kingdom of Righteousness.

To us has been given the legacy of Jesus, the nonviolent social prophet. We have been given the gift of speaking the truth in love and resisting evil nonviolently.

These gifts are difficult to bear. May God give us the faith, strength, and creative wisdom to receive these gifts.

¹⁰ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 42-62.