

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 2, 2016)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Life, the Jesus Way
(Studies in the Sermon on the Mount)

Taking the World by...Surprise!

(Matthew 5:33-48)

Study #6

Introduction: Strategic surprises...

The 1957 NCAA basketball Finals pitted the University of North Carolina against the University of Kansas. North Carolina had a great team. But Kansas had Wilt Chamberlain and Chamberlain was unstoppable. He was 7 feet, 1 inch, extremely athletic, and as dominant as any big man has ever been in basketball.

The North Carolina team knew that they weren't playing Kansas. They were playing Wilt. So every second of the game was designed to counter Wilt.

North Carolina used several ploys to take Wilt out of the game and those ploys were pretty successful. They were successful, in large part, because Wilt was off-balance from the game's start.

When he made his way to center court for the opening tip-off, he was joined in the circle by Tommy Kearns. Kearns was a 5 foot, 11 inch guard.

It was a surprise move that said, "*Wilt, we know you and what you can do. But you don't know us and what we will do.*"

That strategic decision to do something surprising, counter-intuitive led the way to an historic victory for the University of North Carolina over Wilt Chamberlain and the University of Kansas.

Surprising moves can win the day in business, in military battles, and in parenting. This morning, we will listen as Jesus commands us to surprise the world with radical love.

Review...

After giving us the Beatitudes, Jesus proceeded to "fulfill" the Law. He interpreted it and then He applied it in fresh ways that go straight to the heart.

Murder is wrong - but so is the anger that leads to murder. Adultery is wrong - and so is the lust that desires someone who is not our wife, not our husband.

This section of clarifying the Law on deeper, heart and soul levels, continues through the rest of Matthew, chapter 5. And this morning, we're going to watch Jesus "take on" more Old Testament laws and listen as He gives us His own "take" on them.

Right off the bat He draws our attention to the practice of making vows with a familiar introduction.

Promise Rules (5:33-37)

Promises, Promises... (v. 33)

[33] "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told,¹ 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.'

The original command (Leviticus 19:12)

We first read a command like this in the Mosaic Law. Quoting God, Moses writes, ***[Leviticus 19:12] You shall not swear² falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.***

¹ Same as v. 21 - "*The ancients were told.*"

² The term "swear" does not refer to what we would call today, cussing. The issue is making and keeping (or not) promises.

The common practice of promise-making

Vows and promises are common today. They are an important part of weddings, legal proceedings, and business deals. Vows and promises were common in Jesus' day, too, and in the centuries before Him.

In ancient Israel, there were Jews who lived under what were called "Nazirite" vows. A Nazirite was either commanded to or voluntarily promised to never eat anything unclean, never drink alcohol, and never cut his hair.

Samson is the best known Nazirite and the most famous Nazirite offender. He broke all three vows and ruined his life.³

Others in Scripture took vows to not drink wine, to fast, and to live in tents.⁴

The Apostle Paul put himself under a vow, ending it with a haircut at the city of Cenchrea.⁵ (Acts 18) And even Jesus testified before the High Priest under oath. (Matthew 26)

As common as vows were and are, though, making promises is fraught with danger. Wise King Solomon picked up on the theme of promise-making in the book of Ecclesiastes and issued a warning.

A word to the wise (Deuteronomy 23:21, 23; Ecclesiastes 5:2-5)

[Ecclesiastes 5:2] Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few...[4] When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it;

³ See Judges 13-16 for the whole story of Samson.

⁴ See Jeremiah 35 and his dealings with the Rechabites, who kept the vows under which their forefather had placed them, generations earlier. The Rechabites' faithfulness served as a rebuke to the nation of Israel who wouldn't keep the vows they had made to the Lord.

⁵ See also Paul's "*God is my witness*" sayings (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:5, 10)

for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! [5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

To promise falsely is to make a promise without being serious about keeping it. And the Bible doesn't see a "false promise" as a minor slip-up. It's a sin. It's even considered blasphemy since all promises are made in God's sight.

So here's what Jesus says about taking binding vows

No Gaming the Promise Rules (vv. 34-36)

[34] "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. [36] "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

One of the reasons Jesus gave a wholesale rejection of oath-making was because, in His day, the rabbis had developed an elaborate system for oaths, vows, and promises.

Depending on how you made your vow, it was either binding or non-binding.

If you swore by God's Name (which you weren't allowed to say out loud, anyway), it was binding. If you swore by heaven or by earth, it was not binding.

If you swore *toward* Jerusalem, your vow was binding. If you swore *by* Jerusalem, it was not binding.

They said that if you swore by your own head (or by your "life") that was not binding because your vow made no direct mention of God.

The whole system surrounding oaths and vows was very much like children making promises with their fingers crossed, or legal contracts written with technicalities designed to deceive. It was filled with "gotcha's".

By whatever someone might swear - heaven, earth, Jerusalem - Jesus said, *“Don’t do it. Don’t invoke something or someone to attest to the truthfulness of whatever you’re saying or to whatever you’re promising to do.”*

Instead of making loophole-proof vows, Jesus recommended something much simpler.

The Gold Standard of Integrity (v. 37)

[37] “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’;⁶ anything beyond these is of evil.

The need for an oath

The need for oaths “by someone” or “by something” is obvious. Binding oaths are required because we (all of us!) can be, at times, untrustworthy. It is the lack of integrity that makes necessary placing our hands on Bibles and raising our right hands.

That’s why we are put “under oath” at court. We are binding ourselves by our promise and if we lie “under oath” we are guilty of perjury and are liable for jail time.⁷

The Lord imagines His people, though, never needing to be placed “under oath” at any time, under any circumstance, for any reason.

No need for an oath

We are to be people of such unimpeachable integrity that no one would dream of us doing anything but telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

He wants us to imagine a scene where a dozen people are being placed under oath - and all of the Christians are exempted because, as everyone knows, followers of Jesus don’t lie...

God has always required truth, integrity, from His people. And that is what Jesus is saying here. It’s not that we’ll only tell the truth or keep our promises when we are bound by the possibility of a fine or prison. No. We tell the truth. Period. We are, at the core, people of the truth. No vow needed.

A dream come true for me and for you would be that we are so closely following Jesus - who is the truth - that no one would ever require an oath from us.

The first scene, then, is of Christians possessing stunning integrity. The second shows the call on Jesus’ followers to a surprising response to suffering injustice with four separate illustrations.

Retaliation Rules (5:38-42)

Avoiding a Sightless, Toothless World (vv. 38-39)

The law of retribution (v. 38)

[38] “You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’

Vengeance widespread

So, we are to picture vengeance. Someone wants revenge on someone else for a wrong suffered. It happens all the time.

America has its Hatfield/McCoy feud and Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet had their Montague/Capulet feud. Feuds between people groups - think the Balkans - can last centuries.

Vendettas between tribes and peoples lasting generations was not unheard of in biblical times. In fact, these feuds and the practice of retaliation for wrongs suffered was common in the Ancient Near East.

⁶ “Yes, yes” and “No, no” is not to be seen as the exact terminology Jesus now wants His disciples to use. That would just be a new formula.

⁷ Would Jesus have objected to our taking oaths in court? My sense is that He would not at all be opposed to our submitting to the governing authorities’ requirements for giving legally binding testimony.

And the nearly uniform trajectory of such feuds is of increasing in violence over time.

The trajectory of vengeance

There is a famous scene in the movie, “The Untouchables” where Sean Connery, playing the street-smart Chicago beat cop, tells Kevin Costner’s character, the Treasury agent, how to get Al Capone.

Connery says, “*You want to get Capone? Here’s how you get him. He pulls a knife, you pull a gun; he sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That’s the Chicago way.*”

That’s history’s way. The violence escalates. Things get worse.

The law’s intent

So, God’s command of “***an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth***” was not given to ensure vengeance. It was given to eliminate escalation. It promoted a measured response.

Then, in one of His more famous lines, Jesus speaks to that command.⁸

Turn the other cheek (v. 39)

[39] “But I say to you, do not resist⁹ an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

The slap

Jesus doesn’t tell us why we are slapped. He does say it is given by “***an evil person.***” So, there was either no reason for the slap or the reason is unjust opposition for being a disciple. I think Jesus wants us to be thinking here of a persecution scenario.

⁸ I see most - if not all - of these illustrations being lifted from a persecution scenario.

⁹ Antistaynai (Greek: *αντι + ιστημι*) - to stand against.

The back-handed slap was not so much meant to injure, but to insult. And in the Near East culture of shame/honor, such an act would be an affront requiring at least a slap in return.

Jesus’ response to the Old Testament “***eye for an eye***” standard sounds radical to us. It would have sounded even more radical to His original audience.

The response

Absorb the slap. Accept it without retaliation. Turn the other cheek.

The Apostle Paul - who got slapped around a lot for following Jesus - caught the Lord’s meaning.

[Romans 12:17] Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. [19] Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. [20] BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK, FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD. [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We’ll come back to this toward the end this morning and think about applying what Jesus says.

But I will tell you now that when I think of “***turning the other cheek***” one of the images that comes to my mind is of the members of the Charleston, South Carolina AME church who forgave Dylan Root, the young man who gunned down nine of their friends and family members at a Bible study to which he had been welcomed with open arms.

Stunning. Shocking. What a loving and God-honoring response to horrific evil.

They did just what Jesus said to do.

And immediately, Jesus takes us to another scene of injustice. This one looks like it could be taken from the news, on or about October 2, 2016.

The Shirt Off Your Back (v. 40)

And in what I'm about to say, please understand that I'm not condemning the responses of some people who have been sued, recently, in America, for their biblical convictions and have taken their case to court. I'm really not.

I'm confident that our brothers and sisters who have been sued for their Bible-based convictions are aware of Matthew 5, wrestled with it, and prayed about their response. I'm not judging them for their course of action.

Each one has to come to his or her own convictions before God when it comes to applying God's truth to their own lives and situations.

Here is what Jesus says.

[40] "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

Jesus probably has in mind a lawsuit that has come against you because of your Jesus-following ways. Before it ever goes to court, you settle. And you don't put up a fight, legally.

The fight is over the name of Jesus. It's over an issue of righteousness. And in the name of Jesus, you give not just the shirt that was demanded, but the coat that was not.¹⁰

Again, a stunning response. Jesus' audience was probably checking their ears to make sure they were hearing correctly.

Here's the third scene.

¹⁰ Under the Law, the outer cloak was deemed essential - it kept one warm at night. Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:13.

Walk [two] Miles in His Shoes (v. 41)

[41] "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

In the first century, Jews could be required to carry a Roman soldier's load if the soldier demanded it. But, the Jew could only be required to carry it one mile.

That would have been one long, long mile.

You can imagine how this would have made any first-century Jewish person feel.

Already he is oppressed by Roman taxes and is offended by Roman customs. Now, he has to carry the burden of the soldier who enforces the taxes and customs.

How humiliating!

Jesus says, "*Keep walking. Double the service. And instead of walking one mile with bitterness and resentment, walk two with grace and cheer.*"

You can bet that this command was not at all well-received by Jesus' audience on the mount. Picture mouths hanging open.

And then, one more.

He has already told us to be generous with our time. Now, Jesus advises what may sound like foolish generosity with your money.

Give, Lend (v. 42)

[42] "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

Be generous with your time and energy. And be free with your money.

Notice the absoluteness of Jesus' words. Note that there is no exception clause. Again, His audience can't believe what they are hearing. They are surprise and beyond surprised.

Each one of these four illustrations are extreme. Turn the other cheek to the one who insults you. Give the extortionist the shirt off your back. Walk a second, humiliating, mile. Give away and loan away, freely.

Take a moment and let all of that soak in. Just consider what all of this would look like, applied to your world.

And we're still not finished. Having given rules governing vows and retaliation, Jesus now lays down the law on love.

Love Rules (5:43-47)

Love and Hate (?) (v. 43)

Love (v. 43a)

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR....'

There are lots of places in the Old Testament that urge God's us to love.

Leviticus 19 says it explicitly - **[Leviticus 19:18] You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.**

We're not surprised. God is a loving God and we would expect Him to expect us to love.

The whole verse, though, does surprise us.

Hate? (v. 43)

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'

Really?

Now, it is true that the Old Testament did speak of holding certain people's guilty for their shameful treatment of the Jews.¹¹

But I looked. "**Hate your enemies**" is never found in the Bible.

It was taught by some of the rabbis of Jesus' day. Some of them evidently thought that "**hate your enemies**" was a logical corollary to "**love your neighbor.**"

Jesus knew that everybody listening to Him up on the mountain had heard rabbis tell them that they should be really, really friendly with their fellow Jews and that they should hate the Romans. "**Love your neighbor and hate your enemy**" resonated.

Here goes Jesus, again.

Love and Love (v. 44)

[44] "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

That's radical - but it wasn't new.

Moses commanded the Jews that if they saw their enemy's ox wandering away, they were to return it to its owner. If their enemy's donkey was crushed under a heavy load, they were to relieve it of its burden. (Exodus 23:4-5)

But Jesus' words here are counter to anything first-century Jews were hearing. And Jesus urged more than loving action. His words, as always, went straight to the heart.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 23:3-6 holds the peoples of the Ammonites and Moabites guilty for their shameful treatment of Israel during the days of Balak, when they hired Balaam to curse Israel.

[44] “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

You instinctively pray for those you love. I do. We all do.

But you end up loving those you pray for. Jesus wanted His followers to put their enemies on their prayer lists, knowing that the prayer list will grow as the enemies list shrinks.¹²

When we love those who do us dirty, we bear good fruit for God. Listen.

Love’s Fruit

Family resemblance (v. 45)

[44] “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Loving enemies doesn’t *make* anyone a son or a daughter of God any more than any good work will give us eternal life. We become God’s children as a gift of His amazing grace when we place our faith in Jesus.

But we are *recognized* as God’s children when we love our enemies.

People will see a family resemblance to our heavenly Father when we love our enemies. Outsiders will see our love for those who oppose and link us to our Father who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...

There is no reward for loving those who are nice to us. But Jesus promises God’s reward when we love those who aren’t.

¹² John R. W. Stott: “If the cruel torture of crucifixion could not silence our Lord’s prayer for His enemies, what pain, pride, prejudice or sloth could justify the silencing of ours?”

Reward (v. 46a)

[46a] “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?

Every time you put aside retaliation and extend grace, you are storing up treasure in heaven. Your Father knows how to reward His people and He will reward you when you love your enemies and the enemies of Jesus.

Distinctively like Jesus (v. 46-47)

[46] “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?¹³ [47] “If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Yes. Matthew was a tax collector. And he recorded Jesus saying that tax-collectors were the sort of people who would be least likely to love the way they are supposed to love.

It would be like any of us writing our own lives into the verse (“*Do not even pastors do the same...?*”)

Truth be told, I can be pretty tax-collector-ish. It’s really not all that difficult for me to be nice and friendly to those who are nice and friendly to me. I do well at that.

The challenge comes when you’re not nice to me. To say nothing of overt persecution, when I’m snubbed, dismissed or disrespected, that’s when the rubber meets the road - for me and maybe for you.

The good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable probably could have looked back on a lifetime of having been laughed at by Jews and made fun of by Jews. The Jews discriminated against him and all Samaritans.

¹³ Perhaps, in recording these words, Matthew smiled at his recollection of the self-centered life from which he had been redeemed.

But when he saw a Jew lying helpless, beaten and bloody on the side of a road, he felt compassion for the Jew and loved the Jew. That's why Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of that story.

And Jesus lived this out, too. Read the narrative of Jesus' death on the cross and among the last things He said was, **[Luke 23:34]** ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

Radical love. That's what Jesus taught. That's how He lived and that's how He died.

Jesus' conclusion to this whole section is pretty radical, too.

Conclusion:

[48] *"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Pressing on to maturity

No. Jesus is not requiring moral perfection as the way to earn God's favor. He's not even holding out the possibility of perfection in this life - in terms of vows, retaliation, or love.¹⁴

Yes, the word we translated "perfect" can mean "perfect." But the sense of Jesus' call here is *"Grow up!"*¹⁵

You are I are to press on toward righteousness, taking the commands of God and applying them just as Jesus has given them to us.

¹⁴ The old belief in perfectionism surfaces from time to time and it dies hard. But it is not pessimism that convinces us against perfectionism, but realism. Growth and change are possible in Christ, but Jesus made provision for sin in the lives of His followers for a reason. (See 1 John 1:9 and the invitation to confess our sins) We press on toward maturity, here and now, in the confident hope of perfection in glory when we see Him face to face. (1 John 3:2)

¹⁵ Exactly Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse in *The Message*. That is the way "τελειω" is rendered in many places in the New Testament, and is certainly the sense in Philippians 3:12.

And now that we are here at the end, how do we apply what we have heard Jesus tell us to do today?

Wrestling with Jesus' teaching

It's a good question. Serious Christ-followers have wrestled with what to do with what we've just heard ever since Jesus first said it. This morning, we'll figure it all out (right...).

As you walk out of here today, what is your action plan? In what way will you ***"turn the other cheek"*** and walk the second mile?

You have no doubt heard many people say that we can't take Jesus "literally" here. Actually, at least on one level, I agree.

I've never been slapped for following Jesus. I've never yet been sued. No soldier has ever demanded that I carry his pack.

Some of Jesus' words speak pointedly only to a first-century Jewish context.

This past week, I read in commentaries, *"This does not mean that we are to give money away to every person or institution who asks"* and *"The spirit of the Lord's words do not advocate us becoming doormats"* and *"Taking the Lord's words at face value would reduce us all to poverty and nakedness."*

Again, I agree.

But if we don't take Jesus exactly literally, we do take Him completely seriously. And here is how I think we should approach His high standards of living as lined out in Matthew 5.

Shock the world with love

Everything to which Jesus called His disciples would have devastated the instincts and the worldview of His original audience. It would have all sounded ridiculous. Surprising.

They would have been shocked that He would even suggest that they add a mile to their walk with a Roman soldier, that they turn the other cheek, that they give away their money to anyone who asks.

It sounds crazy, like sending a point guard to jump against Wilt Chamberlain.

But, then, Jesus made a career out of that kind of surprise. Outrageous love was His trademark. Surprising love was the theme of His parables.

And unexpected love - like Christians offering forgiveness to a man who killed their friends - is still the kind of surprise that opens doors and hearts to the amazing grace available in the Gospel.

So...

How about you and I get as lovingly creative as we possibly can be and think of the most shockingly compassionate responses we could possibly give to those who oppose us for Jesus' sake?

Perfect.