Jesus Addresses Abuses
Matthew 5:33-48

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh)

0. Back to Sound Words
1. The Abuse of Vows and Oaths
2. Vows Used to Make Artificial Distinctions
3. Vows That Are Acceptable
4. The Abuse of Retaliation
5. Personal Vengeance Unacceptable
6. Generosity Expected of Believers
7. The Abuse of Love and Hate
8. God’s Generosity Toward His Enemies
9. The Paradox of Love and Hate
10. Our Responsibility

The Sermon on the Mount reveals the character and conduct of those who will be part of the kingdom Christ will establish on the earth. Some of the material in the Sermon on the Mount is directly related to the kingdom that Christ will set up, but the sermon gives the general description of believers at any time.

Believers who are alive today will be part of that kingdom, but we are not anticipating the kingdom as the next event in church history. Instead we are anticipating the Rapture of the Church. Seven years after the Rapture of the Church, we will be in the kingdom in glorified bodies. In this section of Matthew, Jesus is addressing Jews who are anticipating going into the kingdom in physical bodies, which is the condition for Jewish believers who will survive the seven years of Tribulation and who will be alive when Christ returns to set up His kingdom.

Solomon said centuries ago that there is nothing new under the sun, and that is true regarding sinful conduct as well. Certain kinds of sinful conduct have flourished at different times in human history. In fact, some sins seem to go in cycles. Sinful conduct which seems to be prevalent at one period of time seems to die out and to be replaced with another kind of sinful conduct. As an example, during the time of the Greek and Roman empires, homosexuality became open and widespread, especially as those empires were deteriorating. That was followed in history by a time when even unbelievers looked disparagingly on homosexuality. Today, members of the homosexual community push their lifestyle on society, which is probably another mark of the decay of this nation, and people seem to accept it as a viable lifestyle. Such an approach to homosexuality is not new. It is simply evidence that society goes through cycles where certain sins are more acceptable than others.
There have also been changes in the views of society toward marriage and divorce. This subject was also discussed in Matthew 5. The statistics of divorce and subsequent remarriage today are evidence of a tragic trend. But this is nothing new. In Jesus' time, divorce and remarriage flourished as well. A major segment of Judaism taught that you could be divorced for any reason, including if you found someone prettier than your present partner. Such cycles in the manifestation of sin are not new. One sin may go into recession for a time while another takes its place. Society today is not unique from that standpoint. But with the passing of time, there is a general deterioration and decadence as the effects of sin lead to greater decay.

After discussing in the sermon the subject of marriage and divorce, a practice which was prevalent in Jesus' day, Jesus moves on to another area particularly pertinent to the Jews. Jesus shows that those who are going to be part of the kingdom will not be abusing God's Law and the Old Testament in general as was the practice of many Jews in His day.

Much of the Sermon on the Mount is pulled out of context and misapplied today. Keep in mind that the Sermon on the Mount is descriptive of the conduct of individual believers. It is not given to tell nations how to conduct their affairs of government; it is not given to structure society into a certain mold. It is given as a description of how the children of God are to conduct themselves. If we try to make the government submit to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, we will create great chaos in society. The principles of the sermon will be operative for all people when Jesus Christ rules and reigns in His kingdom in the Millennium, that is not the case today. One of the problems with the amillennial approach to Scripture is that amillennialists do not understand that we are not in the millennial kingdom today. When Jesus Christ reigns as the perfect ruler of a perfect kingdom, these principles will be in force and will govern society. But the application of these principles today is to individual believers and personal situations.

1. The Abuse of Vows and Oaths

The first abuse which Jesus addresses is the taking of vows, the making of oaths. Jesus introduces the subject in Matthew 5:33: "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.'" This reference is to several Old Testament passages, among them Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-24. All of these passages speak to the matter of making a false vow. It is forbidden in Scripture to make a vow or take an oath that you will not carry out.

Before moving further into Jesus' instructions about oaths, it is necessary to understand the situation He is addressing. The Jews had built up a whole system regarding oaths. For them the emphasis was no longer that you should not take an oath falsely, but there were certain kinds of oaths to which you were obligated and others to which you were not obligated. They had made the taking of an oath to be the opportunity for lies and falsehood. In view of these abuses, Jesus clarifies the individual's responsibility in Matthew 5:34-37: "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil."
Like Children's Games. The Jews of Jesus' day were handling oaths similar to the way kids do among themselves today. One may tell his friend about some unbelievable thing he did. "You didn't really do that, did you?" the friend responds. "Well, I had my fingers crossed." The fact that he said something with his fingers crossed supposedly meant he was not really obligated to tell the truth. Last week I told my kids something we were going to do and they were surprised we were going to do it. "Do you have your legs crossed?" was the response. This implies that you can undo what you said if it is said in a certain context or under certain conditions.

"Do you swear on a stack of Bibles?" is another familiar statement along with "cross your heart and hope to die." These statements indicate a feeling that it is important to support what is said with something spectacular in order to verify that it is true. Unlike children, adults generally say what they mean and assume there is no need to add oaths. But the Jews were carrying on this kind of childish foolishness in a serious manner.

Jesus spoke more directly to this issue in Matthew 23 when He told what the Jewish leaders were saying about the subject. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?" (vs. 16,17). God had said not to swear falsely or to make a false oath. The Jews said you could make a false oath if you swore by the temple; but if you swore by the god of the temple, you were obligated. "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.'" (vs. 18). In this second example, if you swore by the altar, you were not obligated because the altar did not count. But if you swore by the offering on the altar, then you were obligated.

Jesus rebuked those religious leaders for their teaching on this practice: "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it." (vs. 19-22). The point of Jesus' statement is that you cannot separate God or put Him into little boxes. He is involved in everything. When you take an oath, no matter what the foundation for the oath, you have bound yourself before God and are obligated to carry out your oath. The Jews had made up a bunch of rules saying that if you bind yourself before God in one area, you can break it, but if you bind yourself in another area, you have to keep it. The whole process became a way of not having to keep your word. After all, how could you keep up with the rules? If someone swore to you by the temple, you would have to sit down and think, "Now, let's see, does the temple count, or is it the gold of the temple, or is it the altar that counts?" It got to be ridiculous.

2. Vows Used to Make Artificial Distinctions.

Jesus said that all of these things are artificial distinctions, but many people do the same thing today. Some people who would not think of swearing, smoking or drinking in a church auditorium, have no problem doing it anywhere else. They have segregated things into little
boxes. They have forgotten that "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, Watching the evil and the good." (Prov. 15:3). If something is evil and sinful, it is just as wrong in the building next door as it is in the church building. The Jews had made that kind of foolish distinction with their oath.

The point of Jesus' comments in Matthew 5 is that our word ought to be enough. God's children should be characterized by truth because truth is characteristic of God's character, and we should be like our Father. Is God reliable? Does He tell the truth? Is He faithful? Yes. Then should the people of God be characterized by the truth? Yes. The word of God's children ought to be binding.

If I say that I will do something or that I will not do it, then I am obligated to do all within my power to honor my word. It is not wise for me to take an oath when I tell you I will do something, because circumstances may arise over which I have no control. I may tell you that I will meet you for lunch Thursday at noon. Then on the way to lunch, I may have an accident and end up in the hospital. If I had taken an oath, then according to the Old Testament there are no excuses. I had better get wheeled in my hospital bed to lunch! If you take an oath, it is unbreakable. That is why we are warned in Scripture against taking oaths. We should be especially cautious about taking oaths regarding the future. We have no control over tomorrow. I may tell you what I will do, circumstances permitting and God willing. But an oath is binding and obligatory. Our word ought to be just as good as an oath.

Today, the world does not take the truth seriously. The court systems require people to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If they lie under oath, they are accountable for it. The assumption is that if you are not under an oath, you will probably tell a lie. That is why the courts require witnesses to take an oath. The likelihood of falsehood is assumed without an oath.

Even business relationships are often not based on truthfulness. "Well, you just can't get ahead in business if you are going to tell the truth all the time," some say. "Do you mean that if I sell cars, I have to tell the customers that the clunker will fall apart two blocks away?" The common approach is to tell the customer that it is a good car, driven to church every Sunday by a little old lady. But as a believer, I must be honest. God's character is reflected in my honesty. That is the point Jesus is making and the reason why He is telling us we cannot play this game. For those who are truly God's children, their word is supposed to be good and binding.

3. Vows That Are Acceptable

Does this rule out oaths in every area? Does it mean that we ought not to swear in a courtroom? I have personally vacillated on this issue at various times, but I believe you are safe if you do not take an oath. Our court system allows you to affirm your word, a point which becomes a technicality since you are still under the same restraints. But you do have that option.

On the other hand, there are several reasons why I believe that this passage does not forbid oaths in a courtroom situation. The first reason is that Jesus is talking about personal conduct and practice. He is not legislating guidelines for governments and courts.
Jesus Responded to an Oath. Secondly, Jesus Himself responded to an oath in a courtroom situation. That causes me to think that the emphasis of this passage is the general conduct of our lives in our everyday affairs rather than a specific reference to a courtroom situation. Jesus is on trial in Matthew 26 preceding His crucifixion. Caiaphas, the high priest, heads the court, and Jesus will not respond to the questions of the court. "The high priest stood up and said to Him, 'Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?' But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, 'I adjure you by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God'" (vs. 62, 63). "I adjure you by the living God," is an oath. The high priest calls on God to witness this; in other words, he calls an oath in a courtroom situation admonishing Jesus to answer before God. The narrative continues in verse 64 as Jesus responds to the oath that has been called: "Jesus said to him, 'You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.'" If the oath had been wrong, Jesus would not have been a part of it. There is obviously no question that Jesus' word is good and reliable. But in this courtroom, kangaroo court that it is, He responds to the oath that is placed before Him by the high priest and answers accordingly. The purpose of an oath is to guarantee the reliability of what is said. It is a confirmation of truthfulness.

Paul Took an Oath. Thirdly, the Apostle Paul himself took oaths on occasion. We sometimes overlook the oaths that are recorded in Paul's writings because they are not in the form we are accustomed to for oaths. One such oath by Paul is recorded in Romans 1:9: "For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness." That is a form of an oath, swearing before God. Paul called God to witness that what he was saying was the truth. He is going beyond simply stating that he is telling the truth. He is calling God to witness and testifying before Him that what he is saying is true. It is like saying, "I swear before God that what I am telling you is the truth." Paul takes similar oaths in a number of other passages, among them are 2 Corinthians 1:23 and Galatians 1:20. In these passages he takes an oath to guarantee how solemnly true and reliable his words are. Surely Paul would not have done that if Christ had been forbidding all oaths in Matthew 5.

James 5:12 gives similar warnings about taking an oath. "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment." In order to determine what Scripture says for every circumstance, we must compare Scripture with Scripture. In doing so, we find out that in our general conduct of life, our word ought to be good enough. There may be occasions when we are called upon to give the added guarantee of reliability through an oath. The courtroom would be one of those situations since it is generally assumed in the world that people do not tell the truth. Taking the oath in the courtroom is an added guarantee necessary for the reliability of the word of the one speaking.

God Took an Oath. Scripture also records an occasion when God Himself took an oath. Of course, God never needs to validate His word. The fact that He says something is good enough. Yet on this occasion, He took an oath to show the absolute reliability and to confirm the truthfulness of what He was saying. An oath is given to confirm the truthfulness of something. Hebrews 6:17-18 says, "In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the
promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us." God wanted to make sure that the people to whom He was speaking understood that His promise was unchanging, so He stated with an oath what He had promised. By two unchangeable things, the descendants knew the promise was settled. One, God had said it. That was good enough. But then He confirmed it with an oath, just to emphasize its absolute reliability. Of all people, God would never need to take an oath. His word is truth by the very fact that He says it. But on occasion, He did show the absolute reliability of His word in this way.

Christ in Matthew 5 is forbidding the use of oaths in our personal conduct. Our word ought to be enough; we ought not to have to swear to everything. A child of God should tell the truth. We are obligated as believers to keep our word, no matter what the inconvenience or the pressure. As much as is possible, we are to honor our word and follow through with it. That is why believers need to be careful in areas such as bankruptcy. We have promised to do something; we gave our word that we would pay. We are obligated before God to do that. We do not have the option of seeing if we can find a legal way out of our responsibility.

To summarize, we must be careful as believers about committing ourselves in areas where we do not have control. If we make such a commitment and then cannot follow through, our word becomes unreliable. We are to manifest God's character in all areas of our lives. Always telling the truth is obviously part of God's character we are to represent. There may be special situations where we are called upon to confirm the truthfulness of something, such as in a courtroom. I do not believe that an oath is out of line in such circumstances. Jesus is not speaking in this passage to the courts or to governmental practice. He is speaking of the way believers live their lives on a daily basis. In these situations, our word ought to be good enough.

4. The Abuse of Retaliation

Jesus moves on to another area of abuse in Matthew 5:38, the matter of retaliation: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'" Some passages in the Old Testament which speak to this issue are Exodus 21:24, 25; Leviticus 24:20; and Deuteronomy 19:21.

Equity in Punishment. The purpose of this law in the Old Testament was to guarantee equity in punishment. If a person cut off someone's hand, it was not equitable as punishment to cut off his head, that would have been inequitable punishment. By the same token, if a person cut off someone's hand and the offender happened to be a friend of the judge, the judge could not say, "Let's forget it." That would be inequitable too. In addition to guaranteeing equity in the punishment, this law also provided guidelines for the courts.

The Old Testament specified that the punishment was to be carried out in public by the courts. This surely relates to punishment today and is especially relevant in relation to capital punishment. The question is often raised, "Is capital punishment a deterrent to crime?" The Old Testament testifies that public punishment is a deterrent. There is some indication of that today as evidenced by how people scramble and fight for their lives when they are sentenced to
execution. For the most part, offenders would rather spend their lives in prison than to be executed.

**Punishment as a Deterrent.** The Old Testament indicates that public punishment was given as a deterrent. In seeking to understand this section in Scripture, it is necessary to note that this is a provision to guarantee equity in punishment which is to be carried out in public by the courts. Deuteronomy 19 says: "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days" (vs. 15-17). In this kind of situation, justice is carried out in a formal courtroom matter by those the Lord has appointed -- the priests and judges. The responsibility of the judges is outlined in verses 18 and 19: "The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you." Then note the instruction of verse 20: "The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you." This public punishment is to be carried out with visibility so that the rest of the people will know what is going on and be careful not to repeat the same offense. Then the statement of equity is made in verse 21: "Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." No one was allowed to come into the courtroom saying, "Oh, I feel sorry for him. Let's not carry this out!" You may say that such an approach is hard and cruel. No, it is equitable.

**Inequitable Punishment.** If you look at the system of justice in this nation today, you will see what has happened as the system has moved away from such a direct approach. There is a lack of equity and fairness in the punishment which is meted out. The approach outlined in the Old Testament guaranteed that the punishment would not be overly harsh nor would it be too soft. It was to be carried out publicly by the courts of Israel on the basis of equity.

Some say that Jesus is indicating in Matthew 5 that government ought no longer to carry out punishment. That is not the case because Romans 13:4 states that government "does not bear the sword for nothing," speaking of the government's responsibility for capital punishment, and that responsibility has not changed.

**5. Personal Vengeance Unacceptable**

Jesus was addressing the issue of personal vengeance. It was never intended that "[a]n eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," should give a person the right for personal vengeance on other people. Jesus goes on to explain the intent of this in Matthew 5:39-42: "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you." The general emphasis of this passage is that you do not have to have your own way or insist on your own rights. The Jews had taken "[a]n eye for an eye" to mean that they could insist on their rights down to the last little point. That
was not the purpose of the law. Its purpose was equity, not to provide for personal vengeance.

As a believer manifesting the character of God, I am not to be seeking vengeance for my personal rights. I am not to allow bitterness to settle in when I do not get my way. Unfortunately, that is what happens to many believers today. If others wrong us, we go to bed at night thinking of the awful things that ought to happen to them. We pray about the situation and indicate we have left the matter in the Lord's hands, but we are really waiting for the Lord to step on them! Then when the Lord does not do that in a week, a month, or a year, we think that there is no justice with God. We conclude that we should have run over them with our car, then the vengeance would have been repaid. And if we see them at a restaurant laughing, we think of what wretched people they are and feel that God should be making them miserable instead of allowing them to enjoy themselves. Such an attitude is an indication that bitterness has been seething on the inside. We think we are going to be spiritual about the issue and say nothing, but when God does not pay them back in our time frame, then we get impatient. We wonder what God is waiting on. Doesn't He know how bad they really are? Doesn't He know how wrong it was? Jesus is saying in Matthew 5 that we are not to allow that kind of attitude to characterize us. We do not always have to insist on our rights. We can suffer wrong and injustice.

Paul talks about the same thing in Romans 12:17-21: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 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. '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.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." There is no room for personal vengeance. I do not have to have my way or insist on my rights.

Perhaps you may feel that such an approach may permit abuse or allow you to be taken advantage of. It does. But that does not mean that we do not have rights as citizens. However, we need to be careful in the pursuit of these rights that we are not seeking personal vengeance. We must not allow bitterness and vindictiveness to settle into our spirit.

Praying for Our Enemies. Keep in mind that our desire and our goal is to produce Christ's character in us. Peter addressed this issue in the context of suffering. He indicated that believers sometimes suffer wrongly, not because they have done something unjust or unrighteous, but because people oppose them as a result of their relationship with Jesus Christ. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2: "For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (vs. 20-23).

Jesus Christ had done no wrong; never once had He committed a sin. Yet He was abused and mistreated. Even in those circumstances, He never uttered any threat. During His trials, He never tried to threaten his accusers with His coming wrath: "Wait until you go to hell. You will
"find out who is Lord!" No, you will never find that in Jesus' life. In fact, He prays for those who are mistreating Him during the time of His crucifixion. "But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'" (Luke 23:34). Jesus showed no vengeance, bitterness or hatred; no desire to get even or to have justice.

As Stephen was being stoned in the Book of Acts, he revealed a similar attitude in his prayer: "Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Stephen manifested the same character Christ did even to those who were mistreating him to the point of taking his life. That is the thrust of Jesus' statements in Matthew 5. We see a similar idea in the same context when Luke records the same events in Luke 6:31: "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you." That is the kind of attitude which should be manifested in our dealings with others.

It is also important to see that in the context of Matthew 5, Jesus is not dealing with the subject of capital punishment or war. Many people today try to make this application. But to apply these principles to the subject of capital punishment or war or to the conduct of governments in general is totally out of context. Jesus is speaking in the context of the behavior of individual believers. Quite frankly, I do not believe these principles are even applicable for the unbeliever.

6. Generosity Expected of Believers

Jesus continues with the same subject in Matthew 5:42: "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you." He is saying that we ought not to be characterized by greed. The attitude of some people toward their possessions is, "It's mine!" They feel that if you had been as smart as they have, you would have some too, so why should they give you any of theirs. For unbelievers, I think that this is a good attitude. They ought to get all they can and enjoy it as much as they can while they can, because for them there is no future. But for believers, it is different.

Jesus is not saying that I ought to give a buck to everyone who asks for one. If He were saying that, I could walk up to you and say, "Hey, why don't you loan me a hundred dollars, and while you are loaning me a hundred dollars, why don't you loan me a thousand?" You would have to mortgage your house again, because before long you would not have anything. Everyone would have found out about your generosity. If Jesus were saying that this should be our approach, then when some drunk staggered up to you on the street and said, "Hey, give me twenty-five dollars for a cup of coffee," then you would be obligated to give it to him on the basis of this interpretation. Obviously, there is something wrong with such an approach. Jesus is talking about the attitude we convey.

Keep in mind that in the kingdom Christ will establish when He rules and reigns on earth in the Millennium, these principles will be carried out down to the finest detail. No injustice will be tolerated. Jesus will be ruling and judging in righteousness. The actual carrying out of these principles down to the last letter will occur in the Millennium. But as believers we are to be manifesting that character and attitude in our lives now. These things should be true now of us who are going to be part of the kingdom in the Millennium in the future.
Caution With Loans. The Book of Proverbs gives clear warnings about loaning and borrowing money. Proverbs 11:15 warns about being a cosigner for strangers: "He who is surety for a stranger will surely suffer for it, but he who hates going surety is safe." In other words, if you are going to be the cosigner for strangers, you are going to get into trouble, because you will become responsible for their debts. Proverbs 17:18 says, "A man lacking in sense pledges and becomes surety in the presence of his neighbor." So it is not just with strangers that you may get yourself in trouble. You may have problems with anyone's debt. If you cosign, you, in effect, become the one responsible for the debt. If the other person does not pay it, you are obligated to do so. Proverbs 22:26 says, "Do not be among those who give pledges, among those who become sureties for debts."

These passages are warnings regarding people who want to borrow. But that does not change the fact that believers ought to have an attitude of generosity. What I have is not mine because I have it, it is the Lord's, and He has entrusted it to me. Some may come with a need, and I ought to be open to give to them and to loan to them as well. When I do so, I loan with the recognition that I may not get it back, but in such circumstances I have to be open to those who need to borrow from me if it is within my means.

Such an approach is in direct contrast with the views of the world. The world's idea is that if you have earned it, it is yours. And too bad for those who were not as smart or as fortunate! Such an attitude should not characterize believers. We ought to be characterized by generosity.

Caution With Lawsuits. We need to take the same approach when it comes to the matter of lawsuits. That does not necessarily mean that if someone is suing me for my house, I should tell him he might as well take the car too, because it is in the garage. Jesus is not saying that. The emphasis of the passage is that I do not have to insist on my own rights. I do not always have to be consciously trying to defend myself. If someone is after me, I can give in. I can allow him to have my top coat and my suit. I can suffer the loss without bitterness or resentment. The believer is not to have the attitude that what he has belongs to him and he has to have his rights.

The believer can only do that in the power which the Spirit gives. We are all humans with a fallen, sinful nature. That sinful nature wants revenge and justice in a perverted sense. Only if we submit to the Spirit and allow Him to produce the character of Christ in us can we be willing to suffer loss and experience rejection.

The Lord wants us to have the attitude which Jesus portrays in this passage. As believers, our lives should be characterized by willingness, generosity, a lack of retaliation and vengeance and not having to have our own way. It is not ours to say, "It's my right." You may have a good case legally, but you have to decide before the Lord whether or not your pursuit of the case will be a good testimony as God's child. Do you pursue your action with the right motive and the right intention? That is the concern Jesus is expressing in this passage.

7. The Abuse of Love and Hate

In the last section of Matthew 5, verses 43 through 48, Christ closes out with what is perhaps an overriding concern of this entire passage. The subject is love.
Jesus said in verse 43, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" When the Jews approached this command, "You shall love your neighbor," it was necessary for them to define who their neighbor was. They determined that their neighbor was a fellow Jew, so Jews were the ones they were supposed to love. They concluded that they were to hate everyone else. So that became their practice; love fellow Jews and hate everyone else.

Jesus continued in verse 44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Remember in Luke 23:34 that while Christ was on the cross, He was praying for those who were crucifying Him. He was not praying for their destruction or for fire to come down from heaven, but praying for their salvation. This was also true regarding Stephen in Acts 7.

Jesus said we are to pray for those who persecute us "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:45). A son ought to manifest the character of his father. This means we are to be manifesting God's character.

8. God's Generosity Toward His Enemies

How does God deal with those who are His enemies? Verse 45 gives the answer; "For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." When you go out in the sunshine in your yard, did you ever notice that the sun is shining on your unbelieving neighbor's yard too? Did you ever notice that the rain falls on his lawn too? That indicates that God manifests His love toward the unbeliever as well as toward the believer.

Jesus continues, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (v. 46). The tax collectors were at the bottom of the line where the Jews were concerned. It was much worse than today. One got to be a tax collector in biblical times as positions were auctioned off by the Romans. Those Jews who were especially greedy would bid for the positions. The Romans awarded the job to the one who indicated he could get the most for the government in taxes. Let's assume that the highest bid for a particular area was fifty thousand dollars per quarter. The Romans gave the tax collector the privilege of keeping whatever he collected over the fifty thousand dollars which he had bid for the taxes. So if he could get a hundred thousand dollars, fifty thousand dollars went to the Romans and the tax collector had fifty thousand dollars for himself. You can see what such an approach did to the position. Those who occupied this position were despised Jews. First, they had sold themselves to the Romans. Secondly, they were extortioners of their own people. So they became an example of the lowest kind of people as far as the Jews were concerned.

When Jesus said, "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (v. 46), He was saying that these religious people were just like the tax collectors -- those the Jews despised the most. Tax collectors would speak to other tax collectors, but they did not talk to the other people. They only talked to their own friends. So for a Jew to talk only to another Jew, he was being just like the tax collectors. That is what Jesus was talking about when He referred to our relationships.
with our enemies.

Jesus made the application for these Jews in verse 47: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" In other words, if this is your approach, you manifest the character of unbelievers, not God's character. The summary of it all is in verse 48: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We are to manifest God's character as instructed in the Book of Leviticus which tells us that we are to manifest God's character to the unbeliever as God does. God has brought blessing upon the unbeliever by the rain and by the sun. He has provided the ultimate blessing by letting His Son, Jesus Christ, come to earth. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Apostle Paul wrote, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). We are to manifest God's character in this way.

9. The Paradox of Love and Hate

I believe that there is a paradox here. We sometimes say that God loves the sinner but hates his sin. I do not believe the sinner and his sin can be disassociated in this way. The Bible indicates that God loves the sinner, "For God so loved the world..." But in the last study we saw that the Bible also says that God hates the sinner. God is not going to send sin to hell, He is going to send sinners to hell. Sin and sinners cannot be disassociated. If all the sinners were removed from the world, there would be no more sin. There is no sin without people present to manifest it.

God hates sinners. And God loves sinners. This is the seeming paradox. God hates sinners as those who are in rebellion against Him. He loves them as those for whom He has provided salvation and forgiveness. David said he hated the enemies of God with a perfect hatred, yet he was to manifest the love of God to them as well.

The responsibility is the same for us. We are to hate sinners as the enemies of God, as those who are opposing Him and resisting Him in every way, but we are to love sinners as those for whom Christ died. They are sinners without hope, but they can be the children of God for all eternity if they will believe in the salvation God has provided.

Paul provided a great example of this kind of love in Romans 10 when he said that, if it were possible, he would be willing himself to become accursed of God if it would be the means of Israel's salvation. That is the kind of love we are to have for sinners. It is agape love, a self-sacrificing love. The Bible never says that God has phileo love, a family-kind of love for unbelievers. Family love for God is limited to those of His family. But He has agape love, a self-sacrificing love, for those who are not in His family. "For God so loved the world, that He gave..."

10. Our Responsibility

As believers, we are not commanded to have a phileo love for unbelievers. We have no family
relationship with them, but we are to have agape love for them, a self-sacrificing love. We must be willing to do whatever is necessary that unbelievers might come to know the salvation that is available in Jesus Christ. We are to be moved by that burden because we are to manifest God's character, and He has that burden which produced action on His part. He was willing to have His Son die for them.

It is sometimes easy for us as believers to develop a cloistered attitude, a mentality where we pull back and close ourselves in to our own world. After all, we conclude that unbelievers are disgusting, so we do not care to be with them anyway. They get on our nerves, and we just do not want to be around them. Such an attitude does not manifest the character of God or of Christ. We are to love unbelievers and be concerned for them.

It is amazing that we can read a passage like this and find professing Christians in the world who still draw a racial line and see a distinction among races. If you realize anything that is being taught here, you should understand that the distinction has been broken down by Christ. I must see myself as God sees me -- a sinner. But I am a sinner who has been the recipient of the special saving grace of God. We refer to this as efficacious grace. That is what makes me different from the unbeliever. The difference is not because I am better, not because I am less depraved. I am different because I have experienced the salvation God has provided in grace. The unbeliever is vile, wretched and lost. That would be my condition except for the grace of God. My desire for the unbeliever is that he might come to the salvation that is available in Jesus Christ which will transform his life and bring him into a personal relationship with God.

We must view unbelievers as God does -- as His enemies. We hate them as enemies of God, those who are opposing Him. But we must love them as those for whom Christ died, who have the potential to be the sons of God if they accept the grace of God and believe in Jesus Christ. If they trust Him as their Savior, we will be joined together as sons of God in God's presence for all eternity.

Christ has been saying that God's children should manifest God's character. Our word ought to be truth. We ought to be faithful in the way we live and the way we talk. We should not be desirous of personal vengeance and retaliation. Rather, we should be willing to suffer loss and leave these matters in God's hands to be taken care of in time or in eternity, however He sees fit. We are not to be concerned with vengeance on our enemies or with retaliation for those who mistreat us. Rather, we are to be concerned with loving them, recognizing that there is hope for these people in Jesus Christ.

What a high standard! God does not call us to do anything that He does not enable us to do. "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48). What a standard! We cannot expect to meet it fully in this life, but God forbid that we should cease to strive for it. In Philippians 3, Paul talked about pressing on "toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." That needs to be our goal.