

UNIT 1: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Lesson 2

March 15, 2026

The Christian's Morality:

Christlike morality is required of all who are citizens.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

When Jesus spoke about righteousness, He surpassed the legalistic standards of the scribes and Pharisees by emphasizing a heart-led transformation over mere adherence to the Law. He did this in Matthew 5:21=48 by addressing the following issues.

- Anger and lust, wherein internal anger equates to murder and lust to adultery, stressing the importance of purity in heart.
- Faithfulness in marriage and truthfulness in speech, upholding the sanctity of marriage against casual divorce, and calling for sincerity over deceitful vows.
- Loving our enemies by promoting nonretaliation and unconditional love.

These form the essence of God's kingdom.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus highlighted the necessity of possessing righteousness surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter God's kingdom. He employed a rabbinic teaching style, using six contrasting examples to clarify His message. By engaging deeply with the Law, Jesus demonstrated His authority in unveiling its true intent and significance, challenging conventional interpretations. His teaching prioritized understanding the spirit behind the commandments rather than rigidly adhering to them. This emphasized the life-altering nature of righteousness, calling believers to pursue a higher standard that embodies God's kingdom values.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. AVOID ANGER AND LUST: Matthew 5:21-30.

- A. Anger Danger, (21-26)
- B. Lust is Sin, (27-30)

2. FAITHFUL IN MARRIAGE; TRUTHFUL IN SPEECH: Matthew 5:31-37.

- A. Faithful in Marriage, (31-32)
- B. Truthful in Speech, (33-37)

3. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES: Matthew 5:38-48.

- A. Be Generous of Spirit, (38-42)
- B. Love Like God, (43-48)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. AVOID ANGER AND LUST: Matthew 5:21-30.

A. Anger Danger, Matthew 5:21-26.

The first example Jesus gave deepened His audience's understanding of the commandment that prohibits murder (Exodus 20:13) by addressing anger and contempt (Matthew 5:21-22). The first corrosive work of brooding anger is contempt. Jesus mentioned two insults that jeopardize the well-being of the person who uses them; (1) "raca," which was an Aramaic swear word that dubbed the recipient of the insult as an empty-headed imbecile; (2) "fool," which was to cast aspersion on a person's character. Note the progression; Brooding anger leads to contempt for the person, which depersonalizes them and removes their moral dignity. Throughout this progression, Jesus noted the different judgments one would be subjected to – the judgment of the local council, the highest court (the Sanhedrin), and "hell fire." Essentially, Jesus said hating others is a path to judgment.

Jesus cared about the vitality of the relationships in the community. He used two examples that show how one ought to behave rather than cultivating anger and contempt. In the first, Jesus pictures a man who travels to Jerusalem, passes through the various courts of the temple, and makes it through a line of worshippers to offer his sacrifice to the priest (vv. 23-24). There, he recalls a fractured relationship with his "brother." Jesus, said this person should leave his gift there and make things right with his brother first. This is even more striking when we consider that Jesus was talking to people in Galilee who traveled for days to get to Jerusalem. We cannot expect God to receive worship and forgive sins when we refuse to make things right with a fellow believer.

In the second example, Jesus spoke of two people on their way to court (vv. 25-26). It was common for a debtor to accost a delinquent debtor and drag them into court. Before going to court, Jesus instructed them to make things right. Notice that He did not merely say that one should pay his debts, which is assumed. Jesus went further, using language that indicates the two should "be reconciled" as friends (v. 24). The vision of Jesus is clear: if we are righteous, we will make every effort to be in right standing with others. If not, we will face judgment, and God is ultimately the Judge of all peoples.

B. Lust Is Sin, Matthew 5:27-30.

In this passage, Jesus presents the deeper meaning of the prohibition against adultery (Exodus 20:14). Adultery begins in the heart with "lust" (Matthew 5:28). Jesus was not speaking here of temptation; He was speaking of the decision to gaze upon someone and entertain lust in one's heart. The idea is to look at another person while imagining sinful with them. Such gazing breaches the devotion of the heart to one's spouse and violates the trust between them. Also, those subjected to lustful stares are depersonalized into objects for the imagined satisfaction of the offender.

This teaching is relevant in today's climate of easily accessible pornography and a barrage of sexualized images in the media. Pornography is not a harmless vice. It destroys the viewer, erodes their relationships, and depersonalizes those who willingly participate. The matter is so severe that Jesus used an extreme example (hyperbole) to illustrate how someone ought to guard against this sin. He said one would be better to pluck out the lustful eye, cut off the unfaithful foot, and sever the hand that acts than to allow lust to go unchecked (vv. 29-30).

Anger and lust begin as seeds within the heart, eventually surfacing through words and actions if left unhealed. It's essential to ask the Lord to examine our hearts, revealing any areas where these emotions may reside, so that we can experience healing and transformation. Take time to pray for yourself and others who may be struggling with anger or lust, asking for strength and guidance to overcome. A healed heart brings peace and fosters kindness in all who do.

2. FAITHFUL IN MARRIAGE; TRUTHFUL IN SPEECH: Matthew 5:31-37.

A. Faithful In Marriage, Matthew 5:31-32.

The third example Jesus employed involved divorce, which followed His discussion on lust and adultery. Here, Jesus elevates the sanctity of marriage. In first century, Israel, it was not difficult for men to obtain a divorce according to the Law (Deuteronomy 24:1). Jesus clarified the matter of divorce by explaining that only actions that so violate the marital bond as to destroy it (such as adultery) qualify as grounds for divorce (Matthew 5:32). By doing so, He reminded His hearers of what the Law said. Therefore, any illegitimate grounds used for divorce actually caused the spread of the sin of adultery. The climate of easy divorce and adultery eroded the fabric of the human community by profaning the most foundational and intimate of all human relationships.

This teaching raises painful questions today. Many within the church have been divorced and are now remarried. Keep in mind that divorce and remarriage were common in Jesus' time. Rather than seeing this as a reason to condemn and exclude those who are divorced and remarried, the church should see this as an invitation to confess previous sins and commit to treating their marriage as a sacred trust. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from "all unrighteousness" that we "confess" to Him (1 John 1:9). The church should unapologetically uphold Jesus' teaching regarding marriage, while also extending mercy and grace to all who have missed the mark in this area.

B. Truthful in Speech, Matthew 5:33-37.

In the fourth example, Jesus dealt with the question of oaths. Again, Jesus took His hearers back to the Law and went to the intent behind one's speech (Leviticus 19:22; Numbers 30:2). By the time of Jesus, there was a twofold problem that had arisen regarding the making of vows. First, it had become commonplace to make frivolous vows. The problem was such that rabbis stressed to the people that using oaths for simple statements was wrong because it undermined the solemnity of proper vows. The second problem was more serious. A system had arisen whereby one could get out of one's vows. It was understood that any vows involving the name of God made Him a part of the action. However, if someone swore by anything else (the heavens, the temple, one's own head, etc.), a person could break the oath because it did not involve God.

Jesus' teaching on vows accomplished two things. First, it eliminated the idea that anyone could swear by anything in creation without involving God. Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His city, and only He can make the hairs on our heads. Any oath sworn by anything in creation automatically includes God. All words and actions are lived before Him. Therefore, there is no need to swear by anything (Matthew 5:34-36). Second, Jesus directed His audience to be the kind of people who do not need to make an oath. A Christian's life should so align with their speech that a simple "no" or "yes" will be enough to settle any matter (v. 37). This also eliminates the use of vows to deceive or manipulate others.

Should believers ever take an oath? Jesus was not nullifying the Old Testament teaching on oaths, and the New Testament contains examples of oaths (see Matthew 26:63; 2 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20). Jesus was teaching His audience to be the kind of people who do not need to rely on oaths, even if, at times, they may be required in transactions and courts. The reason for such oaths is the corrosive work of sin that often makes human words unreliable (Matthew 5:37). Followers of Christ may use oaths when required, but for Christians, the oath make no difference. As Christ's followers, we are to speak truthfully and keep our word with or without an oath.

This passage emphasizes the importance of faithfulness for Christians, encouraging us to treat our promises as sacred. Jesus calls us to emulate the Father by being to the words we speak. Are there areas in your life where you could grow in faithfulness? If so, seek the Lord's guidance and strength to help you improve. Consider asking a trusted brother or sister in Christ to support you by holding you accountable in these areas. Faithfulness is a vital aspect of our walk with God, and with His help and the encouragement of fellow Christians, we can strive to honor our commitments and reflect His character in our lives.

3. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES: Matthew 5:38-48.

A. Be Generous of Spirit, Matthew 5:38-42.

In the fifth examples, Jesus addressed laws regarding retribution, known as the *Lex Talionis*, which has been dubbed the oldest law in the world. While found in the Mosaic Law (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21), it was also found in other cultures. The law was intended to limit retribution to the degree of the crime – for example, an eye for an eye. It was only to be practiced in formal courts by appointed judges. However, Jewish courts had translated the recompense into monetary values to avoid blinding and maiming people.

Jesus, however, taught His disciples to oppose evil through non-retaliation and offered four concrete examples of application. The first involved turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). Assuming most people are right-handed, to be struck on the right cheek by an opponent means that they were given a backhanded slap. According to the Jewish rabbis, this was a grave insult. Jesus taught His disciples to resist responding in like manner. In the second example, the Law forbade the seizure and retention of a cloak, as most people had only one and relied upon it for a covering at night (Exodus 22:26-27). Jesus said to refrain from demanding one's legal rights and offer one's shirt as well (Matthew 5:40). In the third instance, Jesus referred to the practice of Roman soldiers who could legally compel Jewish citizens to serve them in menial tasks. Jesus instructed His disciples to do this, and even to offer to do more (v. 41).

Finally, Jesus said His disciples ought to be generous, giving to those who beg and lending to those who ask (v. 42). This final example is a logical outcome of people who are so generous of spirit that they do not fight evil with evil. The same attitude will prompt them to do good deeds for those in need. Jesus was describing life for citizens of the kingdom of God. We realize our honor, rights, time, talents, and wealth belong to and are secured by God. We are free to follow the teachings of Jesus, for we are under the authority of God, who will ultimately make all things right.

B. Love Like God, Matthew 5:43-48.

In the final example, Jesus addressed relationships with one's enemies. The Law taught the Jewish people to love their neighbors (Leviticus 19:18). The statement about hating their enemies is not found in the Old Testament. The statement must have been a common one used at the time and likely was an interpretation of other Old Testament texts, such as Psalm 139:21-22. Thus, while Jesus upheld loving one's neighbors, He abolished the popular sentiment of hating one's enemies (Matthew 5:43).

In calling for His disciples to love, Jesus was not expecting them to drum up such feelings for their enemies. Instead, He called upon them to will and act for their enemy's good (v. 44). After all, this is what the Father in Heaven does. He acts for the good of all, even the wicked, by causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon all (v. 45). When we respond with Christlike character to our enemies, we resemble the Father. Jesus' goal for us as His disciples is to reflect the image of God. We need His help to do it. However, the fact that Jesus sets the goal indicates it is possible.

Jesus' teaching here speaks to everyone, reminding us that life often brings injustice, opposition, and even enemies, regardless of our attempts to be kind. Reflecting on your own experiences with offense or unfairness, how does Jesus' call to practice non-retaliation and show love to enemies influence your perspective? His words challenge us to respond with grace, fostering compassion even in difficult situations.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus wants us to be a different kind of people; people living as the image of God. It means making Jesus' way our way, and that means we take up our cross and follow Him.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Following Jesus' teaching requires the power of God. Take the time to pray for one another to be filled with His power and walk in His will.

WORKSHEET

Do You Know About the Sermon on the Plain?

Many Christians are not aware of the Sermon on the Plain, because it gets little attention in preaching and teaching, but Bible scholars are well aware of it.

The Sermon on the Plain is found in Luke 6:20-49, and contains parts of what is found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3 – 7:28. To give the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew says Jesus “went up on a mountain, and ...was seated” (5:1). For the Sermon on the Plain, Luke says Jesus came down from a mountain (6:12) “and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples” (v. 17).

While the Sermon on the Plain is like the Sermon on the Mount, it is much shorter, having only 30 verses, in contrast to the 109 verses of the Sermon on the Mount. The two sermons were given at different times and places, but we do not know exactly when or where either sermon was spoken.

“There are four Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-23), only half the number in the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12). Also, the Beatitudes in the Sermon of the Plain are followed by four “woes” (warnings of divine wrath) not found in the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:24-26).

The teaching of Jesus about giving, praying, fasting, and trusting God’s providence, found in Matthew 6, are not contained in the Sermon on the Plain. The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) is not found in the Sermon on the Plain, but in Luke 11:2-4, in an entirely different setting from the Sermon on the Mount.

All portions of the Sermon on the Plain that are like the Sermon on the Mount are found in Matthew chapters 5 and 7, including the conclusion, the story of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 6:47-49).

We conclude from the similarity between the Sermon of the Mount and the Sermon of the Plain, that Jesus repeated His teachings in whole or in part in various settings and at different times, like preachers and teachers do now.

Read the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20-49.

Moral Matters

1. Why do some people make statements like “I’ll swear on my grandma’s grave” and “I’ll promise with my hand on a stack of Bibles”?
2. If we do make an oath, what does God require (Matthew 5:33-36)?
3. Why can it be hard to follow Jesus’ straightforward instruction in verse 37?
4. Why did Jesus alter the “tooth for a tooth” (v. 38) approach to relationships?
5. Answer the questions in verses 46-47.

Looking for Completeness (Matthew 5:48):

A Mercedes dealer once told me of a doctor who brought his new car back because it had a flaw in the paint – visible only through a magnifying glass! Often, we think that God is scrutinizing us for flaws through His magnifying glass. Who could endure? God is looking for completeness in us – and we are complete only in Him. Thank God for the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from our “flaws.” – Keith Whitt.