BE PERFECT

Matthew 5:31-48

Key Verse: 5:48 “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Today’s passage covers four antitheses on the Sermon on the Mountain. In this passage, Jesus teaches us the true meaning and value of marriage, oath, and love as children of God. Jesus also teaches us to be perfect. Let us study what Jesus meant when he said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

First, God protects marriage (31-32) Let us read verses 31-32. “***It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.***” Divorce is one of the most common and controversial social issues today. We’ve all heard that 50 % of marriages in the U.S end in divorce. According to a recent report by the New York Times, the divorce rate among those who married in 1990s and 2000s is slowly dropping. Still, the United States is number one in the world in divorce rate in 2014, and South Korea, number eight. Today, what does Jesus teach us about divorce? Jesus forbids divorce except for marital unfaithfulness, which means sexual immorality. In Deuteronomy 24 the Lord gave a marriage law to his people through Moses. “*If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house*…” (Deut 24:1) Here something indecent indicates marital unfaithfulness. The law allows divorce because of the hardness of men’s heart. It protects divorced women and prohibits a man’s remarriage to his former wife who had remarried to another man. Thus, the allowance of divorce certificate is to protect marriages by discouraging abrupt divorces caused by men’s sinful nature.

Marriage is sacred. Hebrews 13:4 says, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” Marriage was created by God in the beginning. When the first man Adam was alone, God took out one of the man’s ribs and made a woman as his suitable helper. When Adam saw her, he said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh…” (Ge 2:23) So, a husband and a wife become one flesh. In Matthew 19 Jesus blessed marriage by saying, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mt 19:4-6) This is the reason why a husband and a wife make a marriage vow under oath before priests or pastors, who are the representatives of God.

There is another reason why we must discourage divorce. God hates divorce. In Malachi 2:15-16a God says, “Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. “I hate divorce,” says the Lord…” God hates divorce because divorce breaks a marriage vow. Our God is faithful. God wants his people to be faithful to their marriage vow in all situations. These days people divorce for many reasons other than marital unfaithfulness, such as desertion, abuse, financial hardship, illness, difference of characters, and so on. In 2 Corinthians 7:15 the Apostle Paul allows divorce when the unbelieving spouse leaves. This is because marriage is not a bound condition like slavery, and God has called his people to live in peace. God also hates divorce because he cares for children. The major victims of divorce are children. When their parents separate, children’s hearts are torn apart. The younger they are, the more they hurt. Many children suffer thinking that their parent divorce because of them. God wants to protect marriage, family, and children. No matter what grounds of divorce may be, separation hurts all and leaves deep wounds and brokenness to our children. Divorce also gives negative impact to society and may undermine the unity of a nation. Therefore, as people of God we must protect our marriage, family, and children by keeping our marriage vows. Amen!

Second, say simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. (33-37) Look at verses 33-37. “***Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black; All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.***” Making an oath or pledge is affirming the truth. So in the courts of America, before witnesses testify, they make legal oaths in front of judges as an affidavit. In the Bible there are about 30 references about oaths, most of them in the Old Testament. In Numbers 30:2 Moses says to the Israelites, “When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.” Deuteronomy 23:21-23 also says that a man who makes a vow before God must keep it in order to escape the guilt of sin.

But today Jesus said that we must not swear an oath at all, either by heaven or by earth or by Jerusalem or anything else. He wants us to say simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ not adding any vow or oath. There are reasons why Jesus forbids making oaths. First, we don’t realize or understand the consequence of rash oaths which we make out of immaturity or impatience. For example, Jephthah was a valiant general in Israel. Before leading his army into the battle field against the Ammonites, he made a rash vow that he would give to the Lord as a burnt offering whoever first came out of his door to meet him if he returned home as the victor. When the Lord granted him victory, the one who came out to meet him was his daughter, his only child. Jephthah remembered his vow and offered her to the Lord. (Jdg 11:28-40) What a foolish and sad story! Second, Jesus forbids us to make an oath because we are unable to know for sure whether we will be able to keep our vows. Jesus said, “*you cannot make even one hair white or black*.” (36) We also don’t know what our future will be. Only God knows.

What does it mean when Jesus said that we need to say simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’? Our simple answer, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ is sufficient to affirm our truthfulness in our daily conversation. Jesus emphasizes on speaking truth, not telling false testimony.

Third, *lex talionis* .(the principle of retribution) Look at verses 38-42. “***You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.***” The prescription in the Old Testament, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” was not given to foster vengeance, but discourage crime by establishing the judicial system (Ex 21:24, Lev 24:19-20, Deut 19:21). It is the same token as the law exists to keep order and protect life. In fact the Lord forbids vengeance. (Lev 19:18) The words ‘*lex talionis*’ in Latin means ‘the law of retaliation.’ *Lex talionis* was instituted to curb evil because of the hardness of men’s hearts (Mt 19:8). It also protects the innocent and the weak.

Jesus teaches us not resist an evil person. Rather he teaches us to win over evil by doing good. Striking someone’s face with open palm is insulting. Striking the other side of his face with the back of the hand is more insulting. Jesus teaches us to endure and to be more active overcoming evil with good. A shirt is an undergarment. If anyone wants to take our shirt, we are to hand over our coat as well. If anyone forces us to go one mile, we have to go with them two miles. Jesus did not teach us to win over evil by retaliating with the same, but by doing good. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (5:5) Abraham Lincoln said that there are two ways to remove his enemies; first to kill them, second; to make them into friends. Abraham chose the second. After he became a president, Abraham appointed his most notorious critic Edwin Stanton as his secretary of war, one of the most important positions in his cabinet. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Alfred Plummer said, “To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.” Do you have anyone who really bother you or gives you a hard time? Do not resist them, but overcome them by doing good for them all the more. Make your enemy into your friend! Those who practice Jesus’ divine nature are mature Christians and they are true winners. Amen!

Fourth, be perfect (43-48) Let us read verses 43-45a. “***You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven***.” The command “Love your neighbor”( Lev 19:18) and “hate your enemy” is worldly consensus. Without special teaching, children know how to love their friends and hate their enemies. But Jesus gave us new command, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Here enemies are those who persecute us. It is not easy to love our enemies. Buddha taught his disciple to avoid their enemies. But Jesus taught us to love our enemies. Is it possible for you to love your enemies? Yes, it is possible when we look at Jesus on the cross. On the cross Jesus loved his enemies and prayed for them saying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Lk 24:34) Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He is the Promised Messiah. What he did as the Messiah was to preach the kingdom of God, heal the sick, and help the poor. He was a good shepherd for the lost, a father for the fatherless, a friend of tax collector and sinners. He opened the eyes of the blind, healed the lepers, drove out demons, and raised the dead. He fulfilled the law by loving sinners. He had no reason to be arrested, tried, and crucified. Still, Jesus did not open his mouth to defend himself. He became a silent Lamb of God to be a perfect sacrifice for the atonement of men’s sin.

Jesus did not hate those who persecuted him and nailed him to the cross. Rather, he prayed for them to be forgiven. We can’t love our enemies by our own will power. We cannot pray for and bless those who persecute us. We can do this when we look at Jesus on the cross and hear his prayer. Then we have to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to be set free from all power of evil spirits in us and fills us with new strength and hope through Jesus Christ. (Ro 8:1,2) Jesus took all our pain, contempt, insults, hatred, anger, pride, bitterness, shame, and guilt in his body, and died. With his death all these elements of evilness in us died and are no more. The blood of Jesus washed away all our unrighteousness and transgressions. God forgave us of our sins by crucifying his son on the cross in our place. Since we are forgiven and freed from all condemnation from sin, we can forgive our enemies. No matter how much evil they do against us, we forgive them and love them. St. Stephen did so. He forgave those who were stoning him by saying, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Ac 7:60)

Why do we have to love our enemies and bless them? Because our God does so. Look at verses 45b-47. “***He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that***?” There is no discrimination in God’s love. God sends sun and rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. John Calvin called this love of God ‘common grace.’ Sometimes we are not happy to see evil people enjoy this common grace. Some may think that it is not fair. Still, God gives favor to both the evil and the good. This is God’s divine character. When we acknowledge God’s character, we can practice the divine love of God.

What is Jesus’ concluding message? Let us read 48. “***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***” What does it mean when Jesus said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”? As the conclusion of loving our enemies, Jesus teaches us to be perfect in love. Jesus wants us to be perfect by practicing his unconditional and indiscriminative forgiving love. Here, the word “perfect”, “*teleios*” in Greek has the meaning of “mature” or “full-grown.” “Be perfect” means grow in the full measure of God. This means the perfection of God. Jesus did not teach his disciples something that was impossible for them to achieve. Jesus saw the unlimited possibility of his disciple’s spiritual growth. They can reach God’s standard when they learn of Jesus and are filled with the Holy Spirit.

The word ‘perfect’,(*teleios*) has also the meaning of ‘holy’ or ‘blameless.’ In Leviticus 19:2 the Lord says, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” God wants us to be holy as he is holy. As the conclusion of these whole antitheses Jesus teaches us to be perfect; perfect in love, perfect in obedience, and perfect in holiness. Furthermore, the words ‘Be perfect” implies our total commitment to God. We become perfect when we obey God’s command, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:37-39) May God help us to be perfect as the Lord Jesus is perfect. Amen.