Love Your Enemy

Matthew 5:31-48

Key Verse 5:44: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

People say that Sermon on the Mount is Christian ethics or the Heavenly Constitution. Jesus reinterpreted Moses’ law and taught us to fulfill the spirit of the law, which is love. Today’s passage continues Jesus’ teaching about divorce, oaths, and other Moses’ law.

First, God hates divorce (31-32) Look at 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 divorce woman commits adultery***.” Divorce has been a sensitive issue for all generations. When we read Deuteronomy 24:1, Moses allowed divorce among the Israelites. “*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*.” A marriage is sacred. As we studied last week, a marriage is done under God’s sovereignty and his blessing. So, Jesus said, “*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate*.” (Mt 19:6) A marriage is the life-long process for unity between two imperfect human beings. If one part lacks something, the other part supports. A wife was created as a suitable help for her husband. This is the biblical marriage. Therefore, even though they can’t agree on everything, they endure for each other and live together until they are buried under the ground.

But Moses’ day was a male-dominant society. If his wife did something to displease her husband or did something indecent, it became one of the reasons for divorce. For example, if she overslept and missed meal time for her husband, she might be kicked out. The reason why Moses allowed a certificate of divorce was to protect women from their abusive husbands. Many violent and merciless husbands abused their wives verbally and physically. According to Matthew 19:1-9, some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked a question, “*Why then, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.*” Moses allowed the certificate of divorce because their hearts were hard. No love, no mercy and no patience. Thus, the certificate of divorce was to protect women and give them a chance for a new life.

Jesus rebuked their wrong motivation for divorce. Jesus allowed divorce if only there is sexual immorality or marital unfaithfulness. Divorced people bring many excuses for their divorce, such as disagreement of character, financial inequality, different interests, and so on. But the main reason for divorce is sexual immorality. Husbands cheat their wives, and wives have affairs with other men. So, violent and immoral husbands in Moses’ day gave a certificate of divorce to their wives when they cheat them.

Whatever we do, our motivation is judged by God. We may cheat people, but not God. God knows everything in us. God sees our deepest thoughts and desires. He measures our motivation whatever we plan, we do, and we go. Joseph, a husband of Mary, wanted to divorce Mary secretly when he found her pregnant. Through divorce Joseph wanted to protect Mary and her baby even though he must have felt betrayed. Let us pray that God may protect families in this country so that America may become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Amen!

Second, simply say, ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’(33-37)  As verses 31-32 about divorce is the reinterpretation of 7th Commandment “*You shall not commit adultery*”, verses 33-37 about oaths is the reinterpretation of 3rd Commandment, which is “*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.*” (Ex 20:7,14) 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 vow 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 God’s 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***.” In the Bible we find many people swore oaths under God. Abraham swore an oath with the king of Sodom (Ge 14:22), with Abimelek and Phicol at Beersheba (Ge 21:31) Abraham swore an oath with his servant before he sent him to find Isaac’s wife. (Ge 24:9) Jacob’s vow at Bethel is well known. (Ge 28:20) Rahab swore an oath with two spies to protect her family when Joshua and his army invaded Jericho. (Jos 2:12) The purpose of swearing an oath is to proclaim truthfulness. By swearing an oath, we assure our duty to fulfill our promise with God and with people. But Jesus said that we must not swear an oath at all. (34) There are a few reasons. First, by breaking our oath, God’s name is defiled. God said in Leviticus 19:12, “*Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD*.” Also, in the 3rd Commandment God said, “*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.*” Second, we cannot keep our oath. Verse 36 says that we cannot make our hair white or black. Every beginning of the new year we make a resolution for the new year. Raise your hand if you keep your resolution 100%. We break most of them, and some do not even remember what their resolution is. Third, we often swear foolish or false oaths. Such oaths come from our empty pride or thoughtless ambition. Do you know the story of Jephthah who swore a foolish oath and sacrificed his unmarried daughter as a burnt offering? At that time the Israelites were tortured by the Ammonites. Jephthah, a judge, made a vow to the LORD. “*If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me…I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.*” (Jdg 11:30) God answered his prayer and gave the Ammonite into his hand. But when he returned from the war, the first one who came out of his house was his daughter. OMG! Jephath cried and cried because she was his only child who didn’t marry yet. Jephath couldn’t break his vow, and finally with the consent of his daughter he sacrificed her as a burnt offering. What a sad and tragic story to all fathers who have daughters including me! In the New Testament, King Herod also made a foolish vow before his people for the sake of his daughter who danced for him, and finally killed the righteous man John the Baptist. (Mt 14:7) Therefore Jesus told us not to swear any oath, but just to say simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. He meant that we simply admit our weakness and ask for God’s mercy. We must believe that the LORD God is our Father and we are his children. Our God Father knows our needs and provides all things necessary before we ask. Instead of making an empty oath or foolish vow, we must trust in God and seek his kingdom and his righteousness first. (Mt 6:33)

Third, give to the one who asks you. (38-42) When you visit the courtroom, you will find a picture of a scale, which symbolizes justice and fairness. It says that all people are equal before the law. The main point of verse 38 is a message for equality, not for revenge. Look at verse 38. “***You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth***.’ This verse is written in Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21, as well as in the law of Hammurabi. The main message for this verse is to practice equality in judgment, not to revenge our enemies. Leviticus 24:19-20 says, “*Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.*” People have a tendency to take revenge on their enemies more than they receive. If someone strikes us one time, we want to strike back at him two or three times.

What was Jesus’ teaching about this law? Look at verses 39-42. “***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 to take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone who 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***.” Jesus teaches us not to take revenge on an evil person, but show them more mercy than just forgiving. Paul said in Romans 12:17-21. “*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone…Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” Paul meant here that we trust in God who will judge accordingly and fairly and that we must love our enemies as Jesus did.

Fourth, love your enemies. (43-38) Look at 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.***” Leviticus 19:18 says, “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*” It is common sense to love our neighbor or own people, and hate those who hate us or stand against us. But Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. He explains the reason why we must do so in 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***?” The first reason why we must love our enemies is that God loves them, too as he loves us. God gives light on the evil and the good equal and sends rain on our enemies and on us the same. To the eyes of God, our enemies are also his creatures even though they grew wrong or evil. How blessed you are if you have only kind, obedient, faithful children! But the reality is not all we expect. We sometimes have conflicts with our children who have different ideas and different directions. Still, we love them, respect them even though they don’t agree with us. This is because they are our children.  It is the same reason why God gives the light to the evil and the good equal and sends the same rain alike.

Jesus showed the example of how he loved his enemies. On the cross Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers who flogged him and nailed him. Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*!” (Lk 23:34) Jesus forgave their ignorance and violence and asked God to have mercy on them. In the book of Acts Stephen also had the same prayer as Jesus did when he was being stoned to death. (Ac 7:59,60) Forgiving our enemies and feeding them when they are hungry and giving them water when they are thirty is agapeic love, the highest level of love which we human beings reach. The two sons of Rev. Yangwon Sohn were killed by a communist. The murderer was captured and sent to the military court. He was about to be executed at any moment. But the pastor asked pardon for the murderer and asked the judge to set him free. More than this he adopted him as his own son who later became a pastor after him. Rev. Sohn followed the example of Jesus, who loved his enemies and prayed for the forgiveness of sin.

What is Jesus’ conclusion for his teaching? Let us read verse 48. “***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect***.” How can we become perfect as God is perfect? Jesus’ command sounds a mission impossible. But what is impossible with men is possible with God. Jesus opened the way for us to go and to grow. Jesus is the perfect God and the perfect man. When we simply trust in him and follow his footstep, we can be perfect as he is perfect. Do not remove your enemy from your heart. Instead, make them your friend.  There was a political opponent of Abraham Lincoln named ‘Edwin Stanton’ who constantly criticized Abraham saying “If you want to see an African gorilla, visit Springfield Ill and find a man named Lincoln.” At the presidential election Mr. Lincoln got elected and Mr. Stanton lost. But Lincoln appointed Mr. Stanton as a secretary of war in his cabinet. All the people around him were shocked and said, “Isn’t he your enemy?” Mr. Lincoln said, “Yes, he was. But there are two ways to remove your enemy. First is to kill him. Second is to make him your friend. I chose the second.” Later Mr. Stanton became one of the most faithful supporters for Lincoln, and he was the person who was with Lincoln at his last moment when he was assassinated. Lincoln did so because he followed the way of Jesus. I pray that we all may make our enemies friends so that we may become a peacemaker like Jesus, Stephen, Rev. Sohn, and Mr. Lincoln. Amen!