

“Winning Through Losing”
Matthew 5:33-48
August 9, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus is the expert on the Old Testament law, and in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, he is instructing his hearers on the correct interpretation of that law. He does so by contrasting the popular but incorrect understanding of the law with his correct understanding. So we saw him last week reject the view that says the sixth commandment was only meant to forbid the act of murder. Jesus taught that it also required a heart attitude that was free of anger, and it was just as concerned to keep your neighbor from anger as it is to keep yourself from anger. In this week’s passage, we are looking at three more Old Testament laws that were misunderstood in Jesus’ day. They were the laws about taking oaths, about retaliation and about attitudes toward one’s enemies.

All three of these areas require a willingness to lose in order to win. Perhaps you’ve seen a team sporting contest in which a team loses most every aspect of the game except on the scoreboard. The same thing happens in military efforts, resulting in the cliché of losing the battles but winning the war. One of the most well-known examples of that are the battles won by Hannibal. In 218 B.C. he marched his army over the Alps from Spain and invaded Italy. The Roman army came out to meet him and were soundly defeated. Every year, new Roman armies would muster and seek to drive Hannibal out of their nation. The Romans lost every single battle. But eventually they won the war, as Hannibal had increasing difficulty staying in a foreign land, far from his support lines and against the wishes of Italy’s citizens. He finally left when his situation became impossible to sustain. The Romans won the war even though they lost every battle. Many missionary stories follow the same path. Missionaries are sent to a nation opposed to the gospel, and many end up being martyred. They lose the battle, but eventually win the war as the gospel takes hold. And, of course, the most famous example of that is the cross of Christ, in which Jesus seemed to lose and Satan appeared to have won. But it actually turned out just the opposite.

In these three commands, Jesus commands what feels like losing to us. Some of the most well-known sections of his sermon are found in these verses, including the commands to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies. The losing Jesus is commanding is not the losing of losers, but the losing of victors who are so confident in their cause and their power that they are willing to lose in order to love people well. This has broad and relevant application to us, applying to our work of telling of the love of Jesus to those who are currently enemies of the gospel, dealing with conflict in your marriage when you think

your spouse has become your enemy, and just dealing with evil people in our lives. Let's look at the three ways Jesus commends losing to us.

I. Losing the Ability to Shape Reality

There were several Old Testament commands forbidding false swearing. To swear an oath means to invoke God's name in a statement or promise one makes in order to insure its truthfulness. To attach God's name means essentially that you are calling upon God to judge you if what you are saying is untrue. By the time of Jesus' day, it had become common to interpret this law in an overly technical way by clarifying whose name was attached to the statement. If you swore to something by God's name, then, it was concluded, you were bound to state the truth. But if you swore by other lesser things, such as the temple or the city of Jerusalem or your own head, then you were not bound.

How should we understand Jesus' words here where he says, **"Do not take an oath at all"** (v. 34)? Some have understood him to forbid all oath-taking, even that done in an earthly court. I'm pretty sure that's not what Jesus meant, because he himself testified under oath (Matt. 26:63-64). Also, the apostle Paul, and presumably other early Christians, took oaths (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23). We should not understand Jesus to be forbidding oath-taking, but to be forbidding dishonesty in any form. He does so by elevating all language to the level of swearing. **"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil"** (v. 37). Since you can't swear by anything that is not attached to God, all language is spoken in his presence and in his name. In other words, truth is sacred. Even the simplest of words, a "Yes" or a "No," is packed with significance. So what Jesus means here is not that oaths are forbidden, but that they should be unnecessary.

People speak falsely for a variety of reasons, but they all boil down to the desire to shape reality as I want it to be rather than facing reality as it is. In the reality that I want, I desire to be the kind of person who always follows through on his commitments. So when someone asks me about a commitment I've made and the reality is that I haven't yet done it, there is a strong temptation to dishonesty. For most of us, we seek to be clever in our dishonesty by saying something that may be mostly true but gives a false impression. So someone asks me, "Have you finished that project you agreed to do?" and the truth is that I haven't even started on it. But I might say something like, "I'm still working on it," giving the false impression that I've been hard at work on it but not quite done.

What's so bad about bending the truth just a little in order to feel better about yourself? Doesn't everyone do that? What's so bad about it is that words are powerful things, having the ability to shape us and others. That's because

we are created in the image of God, and he is a speaking God who uses words. So the writer of Proverbs says, **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits”** (18:21). Words can bring death, not only to others, but to oneself. If your pattern is always to attempt to shape reality by your words of untruth, you will soon lose the ability to even recognize the lies you are telling. You will start to believe your own lies to the point that you can no longer even see that you are lying. That brings death to you because it cuts you off from Jesus, who came for real sinners who are willing to tell the truth about their sin, not pretend sinners who live in unreality. So there is life also in the power of words, because when we speak words of truth, even recognizing the ugly truth of our own sinfulness, it takes us close to Jesus.

Let me offer an example of two kings, each ruling over an entire nation. One of them, in a moment of pride and passion, committed adultery with his neighbor’s wife and then plotted to have his neighbor killed in order to cover up the pregnancy resulting from his affair. Surprisingly, though, it was said of this man that he was “a man after God’s own heart.” Contrast him with his predecessor, whose sin seemed relatively minor by comparison. When God told him to execute God’s judgment upon the Amalekites, he indeed went to fight them and defeated them. But he stopped short of full obedience by failing to destroy all their possessions, as God had directed him. His partial obedience resulted in the loss of the kingdom, his family and his life. What was the difference between these two kings, David and Saul? It was their relationship to the truth. When Saul was confronted with the truth of his sin, he refused to lose the ability to shape reality as he wanted it to be and stood firm on his reality that he had obeyed perfectly. When David was confronted with his sin, he was willing to submit to reality as it was rather than what he wanted it to be. As a result, he cast himself as a needy sinner upon the mercy of God, and God will never turn away the person who does so.

II. Losing the Satisfaction of Retaliation

Jesus next quotes a phrase that appears several times in the Old Testament: **“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”** (v. 38, i.e. Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). Jesus was not saying that this principle was wrong, but that the way it was being used in his day was wrong. We need to understand first the meaning of this phrase in the Old Testament. Two things are important to recognize about it. First, it was given to Israel’s rulers to guide them in their duties of civil justice. Second, it served to limit punishment to that which was equitable. If an eye was lost, no more than an eye could be taken in return. What it forbade, then, was taking the law into one’s own hands by taking vengeance oneself. Such vengeance always escalates and can turn eventually into full-scale feuds.

What Jesus was speaking against here wasn't this Old Testament restriction, but its misuse in his day. They were using it to justify personal revenge, even though the law explicitly forbade this. **"You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people"** (Lev. 19:18). What would Jesus have us do, though, when we are the victims of evil people? By the way, it needs to be pointed out that our versions correctly translate verse 39, unlike some older versions. **"Do not resist the one who is evil"** is better than the King James' "resist not evil." The pronoun is masculine, not neuter, and speaks of an evil person. He is not saying, as some have misunderstood him, that Christians are to be pacifists. According to Romans 13, there is clearly a place for governments to fight evil through their armies and for policemen to fight evil with force. Jesus is talking not about the response of civil authorities to evil, but the response we are to give to evil people in our lives.

Jesus gives four illustrations of the response we are to make to evil people. In every case, what he recommends is answering their evil with unexpected kindness. So if someone **"slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."** Jesus isn't speaking so much here of a violent act as of an insulting act. It is likely the backhanded slap Jesus is referring to, one intended as an insult. He is telling us both not to retaliate in kind by returning an insult, and also to stay in the relationship and make yourself vulnerable to still another insult. How would this apply to a wife who is being physically abused by her husband? It is saying that she should not retaliate against her husband by buying a gun and shooting him. She could call the police and have him arrested, which would be my recommendation. But at the same time as doing that, she should look for ways to show continued kindness to him.

We don't have the time to consider in any detail the other three illustrations Jesus gives, but all of them speak of the need to respond to evil people with unexpected kindness. Is Jesus calling us to be doormats and let evil people have their way with us? Not at all. I like what John Stott says about this.

Jesus' illustrations and personal example depict not the weakling who offers no resistance. He himself challenged the high priest when questioned by him in court. They depict rather the strong man whose control of himself and love for others are so powerful that he rejects absolutely every conceivable form of retaliation.

Jesus is teaching us that the most effective way to respond to evil people is the way Jesus responded, the way of kindness and mercy. To do so is a militant act that has great power. It is the way Jesus responded on the cross. The Jewish police spat on him, blindfolded him and struck him in the face. The Roman soldiers then did the same. They mocked him by making a scepter of reeds and putting on him a robe they pretended to be a royal robe. Then they jeered, "Hail, King of the Jews!" before striking him again and again. How did Jesus

respond? He did so with the only kindness he was able to show. He prayed for them even as the spikes were being hammered home through his hands and feet. **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”** (Luke 23:34). The tense of the verb is imperfect, suggesting that Jesus prayed this repeatedly, not just once. He answered evil people with kindness, which brings us to our next and final point.

III. Losing Cherished Hatreds

In this final section, Jesus corrects a misunderstanding that had developed concerning the law to love your neighbor as yourself. There are actually two misunderstandings in view here. The first is to leave off the phrase “as yourself,” thus lessening the rigorous demands of this law. Second, nowhere did the Old Testament command hatred for one’s enemies. So Jesus gives the correct understanding of this command by broadening one’s neighbors to include those we might regard as enemies. He commands love for enemies as well as neighbors, saying that to do less than this is just doing the natural thing that everyone does. It is natural to love those to whom you have a natural affinity, children, family and friends. But those who have been transformed by God’s power will love even enemies.

The expression of that love that Jesus recommends is to pray blessing upon them. **“But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”** When we do so, we give evidence that we belong to God’s family, because that’s the way he is. We don’t become his sons by loving our enemies, but reveal that we are his sons. To become God’s son is to realize that we were once God’s enemies who were loved to the uttermost by him.

Let’s apply this with a specific example. Suppose that your daughter begins dating a man who is nothing but trouble. He is a drug addict with no gainful employment and a history of broken relationships. For some reason, she sees something in him and they decide to get married. From your more objective and mature perspective, you know that this evil man will bring much pain to your daughter and to your entire family. What do you do? What does love for this enemy look like? It doesn’t mean that you can’t be honest, so you need to be honest with your daughter by warning her of what this will mean. But what if she ignores your warning and proceeds anyway? Let me suggest two responses. First, you respond without fear, because you believe in the sovereign power of God. Psalm 2 says that by this power God laughs at his enemies who want to do him harm. He laughs because all they end up doing is serving his greater purposes. Secondly, you respond with a love offensive, showing kindness and praying blessing, because that’s the way Jesus is.