

Sermon Transcript  
October 28, 2012



Kingdom Life is a Gracious Life  
Truth, Sacrifice and Love  
Matthew 5:33-48

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**Scripture Text**  
**Matthew 5:33-48**

<sup>33</sup> “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ <sup>34</sup> But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

## Introduction

Today we consider some statements that are very familiar to us. These words of Jesus, I would suggest, are even familiar to people who aren't necessarily religious. I would say that most nonreligious people would consider these words to be admirable, and yet at the same time, thought by many to be a bit unrealistic. When people hear these words, they are attracted to them for sure, but most people may be quick to add that they are not true to the way people tend to live. And sadly, my hunch is that they would question whether these things are even true among the people who claim to follow Jesus. Consider the words we will hear Jesus say this morning.

*“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.”*

*“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”*

*“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Now let me tell you two words that are going to pop up in your mind time and time again this morning throughout the entire sermon. The two words you are going to be tempted to say throughout this sermon are the words, “Yeah, but . . .” You are going to hear the words of Jesus and the ideals of the kingdom of God and you are going to be tempted to challenge what you hear by asking, “Yeah, but what about this scenario or what about that scenario?” Let me put your critical mind at ease and assure you that Jesus will not be asking you to throw “wisdom” out the window when it comes to figuring out how to apply these statements to your life.

However, as I processed these things with Pastor Gregg this week, I thought he made a perceptive observation. He said that the “yeah but” often comes about because we are prone to look for an out when it comes to keeping the spirit of what Jesus says here. I think that is true. We all think that our situation has a loophole in it when it comes to living up to these kingdom norms posed to us by Jesus. It is easy for us to find justifiable reasons as to why these words may not completely apply to our situation, when in reality, Jesus is calling us to something that is truly otherworldly. We should expect kingdom values to stand in stark contrast to what we see lived out among us day in and day out. So try to put your “yeah buts” aside this morning and just listen to what Jesus is calling you to as he invites you to a way of life.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying?

- We are not to be angry with our brother
- We are not to lust after another man's wife
- We are to honor marriage
- We must be trustworthy with our words and life

- We should sacrificially respond to others
- We should love and pray for our enemies

What is Jesus saying about life in his kingdom through this series of statements that begin with an authoritative “*But I say to you?*” I would suggest to you that there are two things Jesus is telling us about kingdom life through these six statements.

The first thing is this. The way of life in God’s kingdom is a way of love. When asked to summarize the Law of God, Jesus did so by simply saying it is all about loving God and loving others. As a rabbi, Jesus is interpreting Old Testament Law for his disciples. He is showing them how to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” Do you want to love your neighbor? This is what it looks like. This is what a life of love looks like.

I am struck by something Jesus says at the end of our passage this morning in verse 45. After telling his disciples to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them, Jesus adds, “*so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*” In other words, the love we are being asked to express is simply the same love that has been expressed to us by God. We are showing ourselves to be children of God when we love this way. The capacity to love comes from the reality that God has loved us. Some of the things you are going to be called to do this morning go beyond your natural capacity to do. You are going to look at what Jesus has to say and your first reaction will be, “I can’t do that.” But Jesus isn’t asking you to do anything he hasn’t already done for you. It is his love that gives us that capacity to love. Life in God’s kingdom is an invitation to a life of love.

The second thing I want you to see about life in the kingdom of God is something we touched on last week. The reason we are to love people with this radical love Jesus has called us to is because every person is created in the image of God. Think about this. God chose to reveal himself in this world through those who bear his image. When man was created, he was called to represent God in this world. Tom Johnston said this week, “If you love another person, you are honoring and respecting a representative of God.” Therefore he concluded, “This blows up the ‘us verses them’ categories.” We have a lot of “us verses them” categories, don’t we? Democrats and Republicans to name one! A careful look at this list in Matthew 5 reveals how Jesus is intent on “blowing up any sense of us verses them.”

- Anger against a brother is an us verses them
- Sexual lust that turns women or men into objects is an us verses them
- Marital and family strife is an us verses them
- Words that are said to deceive others for your own gain is an us verses them

- Retaliating against someone who wrongs you is an us verses them
- Hating your enemy is an us verses them

The way of life in the kingdom of God is a life of love that tears down dividing walls and sees every person as someone created in the image of God and therefore worthy of love. Regardless of how fallen someone may be, Jesus is calling us to be careful with how we treat those who bear his image and represent God in this world. Do not dishonor what God honors. The way of life in the kingdom of God is a life of love that is born out of God's love for us and is demonstrated to all of humanity. With this in mind, we are ready to consider these three challenging statements.

### **Trustworthy Words**

Starting in verse 33, Jesus says, *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’”* In the Old Testament, it was not uncommon for someone to make an oath or take a vow in service to God. But if an oath was taken and the person swore to God that they would do something, they were required to do so. In Leviticus 19:12 it says, *“You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD your God.”* In Numbers 30:2 it adds, *“If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself with a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”*

When a person makes a vow to God and swears to God that he will keep his word, he is making himself accountable to God. This is no small matter. By swearing to God, you are saying that you will follow through with what you promise to do. D. A. Carson says of this, “these oaths are designed to encourage truthfulness, or to make truthfulness the more solemn and sure.”<sup>1</sup> Even today, when someone is trying to convince you that they are being honest they say, “I swear to God what I am saying is true.” Or, “I will put my hand on a stack of Bibles (as if one is not enough) and swear that what I am saying is true.”

But then Jesus comes along and says, *“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all.”* What is up with that? It seems as though in the Old Testament there was room for vows and oaths and now Jesus is saying you shouldn't take an oath at all. And yet, Paul took oaths and vows and swore to God to demonstrate what he was saying was true. Several times he appeals to the truth of his word by saying, *“God is my witness.”* We take oaths when we say our vows on our wedding day and when we swear in the courtroom to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So help me God.” So are we not to do that? Are we not to take any oath or vow or pledge in the name of God?

Jesus is not reacting to the teaching of the Old Testament here, rather he is reacting to the abuse of his day. Remember, as a rabbi, Jesus is clarifying the intent of the Old Testament and reacting to the misinterpretation of the rabbis of his day. Jesus was addressing an abuse that encouraged deceit and allowed loopholes for people to not keep their word. In fact there was an entire section in the rabbinical writings on the issue of oaths and what was binding and what was not binding. So the thought went like this, “If I can swear by something other than God, then I do not have to keep my word.” To swear by something other than God allows me an out when it comes to keeping being trustworthy. So they would swear by heaven or by earth or by Jerusalem instead of by God and consequently did not feel compelled to keep their word. It was not as binding as one who swore by God. It was there form of “crossing their fingers.”

And so Jesus says, “*But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*” Jesus is basically saying, “That doesn’t cut it!” Heaven belongs to God. Earth belong to God. Jerusalem belongs to God. Even your head and the hair on your head is governed by God! No matter what you swear by, God is behind it. So don’t think truth is a side issue to God and only involves God when you invoke his name. God is truth. God cares deeply about truth. God calls us to a life of truth. And so Jesus says, “*Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.*” You shouldn’t need to rely on an oath or a vow to tell the truth.

God is truth. The Devil is the father of lies. When you deal in the realm of truth, you deal in the realm of God. All truth is God’s truth. When you deal in the realm of lies and deceit you are dealing in the realm of evil. James says, “*Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’*” “True disciples do not need to give oaths in order to confirm their trustworthiness, because their faithful lives repeatedly confirm the reliability of their words.”<sup>2</sup>

I am struck by how Psalm 15 describes the righteous person. He is someone “*who speaks truth in his heart, who does not slander with his tongue. . . nor takes up a reproach against his friend . . . who swears to his own hurt and does not change.*” Aren’t you tired of political debates and having to wait for the end of the debate for the “fact checkers” to tell you where the candidate was not completely truthful and where he or she was twisting truth to his or her advantage? Jesus calls us to be people of our word. He calls us to be trustworthy. There should be no need for a fact checker in your life. We are called to be trustworthy with our words.

This is a love issue. At the heart of deceit is selfishness. We twist truth to benefit

ourselves and to get an advantage over others. I love how John Piper puts it. He says, “We look to oaths to do what love does not do.” He explains what he means by saying, “For truth to hold sway, love must hold sway. If we were not selfish or unloving to others, we would not break our word or tell lies or act hypocritically. Truth would hold sway. But love does not hold sway in the world, and so oaths have arisen to compensate for what love should do.”<sup>3</sup>

And so Jesus calls us to a different level of truthfulness and it is sorely needed. I don’t think the gospel of God’s kingdom will advance without God’s people being trustworthy. One of the number one reasons people reject the church and consequently Jesus, is because of our hypocrisy. People are looking for authenticity. Our world is not really seeing much difference between the way we live and the way our world lives. They hear us say one thing and watch us do another thing and then we have the gall to point the finger and judge others for doing the very things we do. May God help us to be people who keep our word and live by what we say. May we simply be trustworthy. May your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’

### **Sacrificial Response**

Jesus goes on to say in verse 38, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’*” In the Old Testament, to promote justice and purge evil from the people of Israel there was a system of retribution that said “*But if there is harm, you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” That is what is says of old in Exodus 21:23-25. Most commentators doubt whether this was meant to be kept literally. It was a metaphor conveying that a punishment ought to fit the crime. It also protected the guilty party from excessive and undo punishment, which we know happens often when emotions are running high. And furthermore, this law of retribution was to be carried out by legal authorities. It was put in place to discourage private revenge. Proverbs 20:22 says, “*Do not say, ‘I will repay evil;’ wait for the LORD and he will deliver you.*”

The Jews during this time lived under an oppressive Roman government and they wrestled with where to draw the line with personal revenge for wrongs committed. The system didn’t always work for them. So how does one get justice in a situation like this? And so Jesus comes along and introduces his kingdom to his disciples by calling for them to drop their insistence for personal retaliation and instead sacrificially serve the one who oppresses them. He calls for a sacrificial response to the one who offends us. Jesus gives four illustrations of what this might look like.

Jesus says, “*But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you*

*on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*” To be slapped on the right cheek was considered a high insult and an affront to one’s dignity. Jesus says, when you are insulted do not retaliate. Do not return an insult for an insult. Just take it and rest secure in who you are in Christ. There is only one thing that happens when an insult is returned for an insult. Wounds go deeper. You always have the choice to turn the tide and stop the downward spiral that exchanges insult for insult.

In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey talks about the years and years of conflict between the Serbs and the Bosnians. Their story is the classic example of what happens when retaliation is the law of the heart. For decade upon decade seething resentment has existed and survived generations of hatred. Yancey calls this the law of “Ungrace.” It is not an easy cycle to break.

Listen to the pain in the words of a translator, who asked Yancey to write a preface, specifically for the people of Croatia in his book translated into their language. He writes, “You have referred to the Croatian/Bosnian/Serbian experience during the recent war,” he said. “Although the war ended over 15 years ago, the wounds are still here and we are very far from true reconciliation.” He went on to say that Christians in the Balkans are still struggling with truth and justice, and wonder whether grace can apply without the prior steps of truth and justice. The Balkan countries still celebrate war criminals as heroes of the nation, often with the church’s approval. Rapes, tortures, concentration camps, ethnic cleansing—these memories of war still haunt the landscape. The translator asked, How can we “do grace” in such a setting? More, how can we keep another Balkan war from breaking out again in several decades?”

Here is what Yancey said in response, “Grace is the only force I know of that can block the toxic influence of a painful past on the present and the future. As Volf says, “For in the light of Christ’s self-sacrifice and resurrection, the future belongs to those who give themselves in love, not to those who nail others to a cross.” For years the Balkans have been a laboratory of what I call “Ungrace,” the law in relationships that echoes one in physics: Every action causes an equal and opposite reaction. You have lived with the deadly consequences of that law for centuries. Can the modern Balkans become instead a laboratory of grace?”<sup>4</sup> What would the story be today if a generation ago, someone learned to turn the other cheek?

Jesus adds three more illustrations of sacrificial response. He says, “*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*” These are not so much commands as they are illustrations. It is here where the “yeah buts” begin to rise up

within us and no doubt, you need to take all of Scripture to understand how to respond to situations with both grace and wisdom. This does not mean that every time you are asked for money you give it. But I hesitate to acknowledge the “yeah buts” because I do not want to soften what Jesus is saying here because it does call us beyond where most of us rationally would go. In each example, Jesus is calling us to “go the extra mile” and do beyond what others would think necessary. We are to be sacrificial in our response to those around us. “True disciples are so secure in their transformed kingdom identity that when they are wronged, they do not merely adhere to legal retribution but use every opportunity to serve others, both good and evil people, so that the reality of God’s grace in their lives woos them to the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>5</sup>

On October 2, 2006, we saw an example of this kind of love in living color. On this day, Charles Roberts walked into a one room Amish school house and opened fire, taking the lives of five children and injuring five others before turning the gun on himself. What shocked the world was the way the Amish community responded with grace and forgiveness. If you don’t think the world stood up and took notice of this incredible display of grace, consider the fact that within a week 2,400 media stories around the world wrote of the incredible display of grace in the midst of terrible pain.

One of the fathers who lost a daughter in the schoolhouse and had another one seriously injured said, “Our forgiveness was not in our words, it was in what we did.” What did they do? How did the Amish enact forgiveness? . . . One of the most striking expressions of forgiveness occurred at Charles Roberts’s burial on the Saturday after the shooting. . . . Over half of the people in attendance were Amish. They spontaneously decided to attend. Some had just buried their own daughters the day before. After the burial they hugged the widow and the parents of Charles Roberts. It was a remarkable act of grace. The funeral director supervising the burial said, “I realized that I was witnessing a miracle!” The Amish families bestowed other gracious acts of kindness on the family of Charles Roberts. Some sent meals and flowers to his widow. At Christmastime children from a nearby Amish school went to the Roberts home to sing carols. That is the spirit of what Jesus is after here.

Three men wrote a book about this story called *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcends Tragedy*. They interviewed three dozen Amish people and asked them “What is forgiveness?” The whole world was stunned to learn that the Amish quickly expressed forgiveness to members of the gunman’s family within hours of the tragedy that left five girls dead. But what, for the Amish, is the definition of forgiveness?

The most frequent response they received was that “forgiveness means giving up a grudge.” When members of the Amish community spoke to the widow and parents of

the gunman who killed himself after shooting the girls, they were, in their words, saying, “We won’t hold a grudge against you. We hope that you stay in the area. We want to continue to be good neighbors to you.” One Amish farmer told me, “Acid corrodes the container that holds it. That’s what happens when we hold onto bitterness.” For the Amish, forgiveness means letting go of grudges, getting rid of bitterness.

An Amish father who lost a daughter in the schoolhouse offered a slightly different definition: “For me, forgiveness means giving up my right to revenge.” His statement points out the countercultural nature of forgiveness. In mainstream culture we assume that each individual has the right to retaliate if someone does them wrong. We talk about “payback time,” “getting our due,” “teaching someone a lesson,” and “hiring a lawyer to milk someone far beyond the value of the damage.” To speak about giving up the right to revenge flies in the face of contemporary cultural values.<sup>6</sup> But this is what it looks like to turn the other cheek. This is what it looks like to sacrificially respond to hurt and insult. This is how Jesus calls us to love others. It is, no doubt, hard emotional and spiritual work. But it is the work that we can do when the Spirit of God resides in us. It is the work we pledge to do when we pray, “*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*” Jesus calls us to a sacrificial response to those around us.

## **Love Your Enemy**

We now come to the final thing Jesus says in our passage and you can just feel the tension mounting as you consider what it is that Jesus is calling us to. And it climaxes with this final statement in Matthew 5. In verse 43, Jesus begins by saying, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’*” Really? Is that really what it says of old? Were we invited in the Old Testament to hate our enemies? In the Old Testament you see God hating evil and consequently those who perpetrate evil were considered enemies of God. And at the same time, there is no command for Israel to hate their enemies. In fact, Moses in Exodus 23:4-5, says that they were to assist their enemy in need.

Here was the problem Jesus was dealing with. By the time Jesus came onto the scene, Israel had forgotten why God had made them a people in the first place. When God called Abraham and told him that he was going to form him into a people for God he told Abraham that through Israel God would bless the nations. The people of Israel forgot their calling in this world. And so during the time of Jesus, the average Jew thought that his “neighbor” was the one who was like him. It was his fellow Jew. That is the one he was called to love. Gentiles were considered dogs. Do you remember the question Jesus was asked that led to the story of the Good Samaritan? The question was, “Who is my neighbor?” The answer Jesus gave was unmistakable. Your enemy is

your neighbor and so you are obligated to love your enemy because Leviticus 19:18 directs us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The radical thing Jesus introduces here is that broadening definition of who our neighbor is. It includes your enemy.

So Jesus says, *“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. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

As we approach November 4, and we have opportunity to vote for the next President and other leaders, nationally and locally, I am struck by how divided our country feels when it comes to politics. It is not just a ideological divide. There really seems to be a lot of disdain for those on the opposing side of wherever you fall. May I remind you that Jesus is not a Republican and Jesus is not a Democrat. As Christians, we can freely engage in the issues. Just make sure you don't fall into the trap of demonizing the one who does not agree with you. When you demonize someone you attack the image of God in them and it becomes easy to make your enemy an object of hate. I am not so sure, we as Christians have walked this line very well.

Eric Metaxas gave an incredible speech this past year at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D. C. with all the national dignitaries sitting before him. It was an incredible speech not just because of the content, but because of the winsome way this modern day prophet spoke to his audience with a tone of love. He was speaking about the difference between phony religion and real religion. He referenced people like William Wilberforce and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, men who were moved to action because of their love for Jesus. Wilberforce was the leading voice in ending slavery and Bonhoeffer stood against Nazi Germany for the plight of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Metaxas said that Bonhoeffer preached “that Jesus was the man for others.”

Metaxas then asked rather boldly who are the “forgotten” of our day who need someone to speak for them, like Wilberforce did for the slave and Bonhoeffer did for the Jews? In front of all these political leaders of many different stripes, he said it was the unborn who need a voice today. That is a divisive political issue, no doubt. But I want you to hear what he said next. He said that the reason one is prolife is because Jesus has given us the ability to see the sanctity of life. So how are we to respond to the one who does not yet see that? Here is what he said, “Those of us who know the unborn are human beings are commanded by God to love those who do not yet see that. We need to know

that apart from God we would be on the other side of that divide fighting for what we believe is right. We cannot demonize our enemies. If you believe abortion is wrong you must treat others on the other side with the love of Jesus. Today if you have a biblical view of sexuality, you will be demonized by those on the other side who will call you a bigot. Jesus commands us to love those who call us bigots, to show them the love of Jesus. So finally, Jesus tells us we must love our enemies. That, my friends, is the real difference between dead religion and living faith in the God of the Scriptures.”<sup>7</sup> Keep that in mind, the next few weeks, as you engage in the political discourse. Remember, your ultimate allegiance is not to a political party or even our country. It is to the kingdom of God. Love your enemies!

“True disciples not only love what God loves and hate what God hates, but they have the renewed heart of God that enables them to love the world of sinners for whom Jesus will eventually give his life.”<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

May God form his kingdom of love in us that tears down the “we versus them” mentality and sees every person as a representative of God in this world. Therefore, be truthful with your words for the good of others. Go the extra mile even with the one who insults you. Do not retaliate insult with insult, rather love the one who insults you. In doing so, ask for grace to love your enemy. This is the evidence of Christ in us. In this way, you begin to look like your Father in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 47

<sup>2</sup>Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 257

<sup>3</sup>John Piper *What Jesus Demands From the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006) 297

<sup>4</sup>Philip Yancey [www.philipyancey.com/archives/2301](http://www.philipyancey.com/archives/2301) February 16, 2011

<sup>5</sup>Wilkins, 257

<sup>6</sup>Amish Country News, <http://www.amishnews.com/amishforgiveness.html>

<sup>7</sup>Eric Metaxas, <http://www.ericmetaxas.com/>

<sup>8</sup>Wilkins, 257