

Q & A with Jesus, Part 2

Q & A with Jesus, Part 2. Part 2, because today we're picking it up right where we left off last week in the Sermon on the Mount. Q & A, because the Sermon on the Mount is hard. It raises a lot of questions – questions about how to put these words into practice in our Christian lives. How do you live the kingdom reality that anger is murder, that lust is adultery, that marriage is sacred? How do you do that? Lots of questions, lots of answers. That's why Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount; and that's why today we have Q & A with Jesus, Part 2.

Starting with this question: Jesus, you said, **"I tell you, do not swear an oath at all."** So, are you saying that all oath taking is always wrong? Answer: no, there are some oaths that are appropriate to take. For example, when you get married, you make a vow of faithfulness. When you are in a court of law, you make a vow to tell the truth. When you are confirmed in the church, you make a vow of faithfulness to the Lord. And even God takes oaths. Acts 2: **"God had promised [David] on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne" (30).** So, if there are some oaths that are appropriate to take, then why would Jesus say, **"Do not swear an oath at all"?** Answer: because way too often people make frivolous, useless oaths, or they make promises they have no intention of keeping. Here's the background: some of the Jews at Jesus' time would say that if you swear an oath by the Lord, that's binding. But if you swear an oath by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by your head, that oath is a little less binding. You could find a way to weasel yourself out of it – kind of like crossing your fingers behind your back. And Jesus says that's bogus; it's juvenile; it's a clever way of lying! And Jesus wants none of it – for two reasons. 1) God's will is that his people are thoroughly honest, consistently truthful, people of integrity. And 2) These casual, nonchalant references to our Father in heaven are just disrespectful.

So, here's a question for you: are a person of integrity? Are you thoroughly honest and consistently truthful? Or have you gotten in the habit of lying? Here's another question for you: do you use the Lord's name reverently and respectfully? Or in your day-to-day discourse do you casually, nonchalantly take the Lord's name in vain? Answer those questions for yourself, but realize that Jesus here is touching on the Eighth Commandment (**"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor"**) and on the Second Commandment (**"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God"**). And both have to do with our words, our integrity of speaking. When you take an oath, make sure it's a serious one. Enough with the casual "I swear this; I swear that." And please, please stop the irreverent use of our Lord's name. It is way too common for Christians to drop holy names for pointless purposes. "Oh Lord, look at that! Jesus Christ, you scared me! Oh my God, this is delicious!" What! You're not even thinking about it! But that's taking the Lord's name in vain. Jesus says, **"All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."** And the book of James reiterates the same point: **"Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple 'Yes' or 'No.' Otherwise you will be condemned" (5:12).** Speech matters. As a Christian, say what you mean, mean what you say, say it with integrity and respect, and honor the Lord's name. That's being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Another question: Jesus, you talk about turning the other cheek and giving people your stuff. But come on! That's just not fair! Do you really expect all Christians to be doormats, to let ourselves be taken advantage of by any old scoundrel? How is that fair; how is that justice? Answer: there's a big difference between justice and vengeance. Justice is a matter of law; vengeance is a matter of rage. And on the scale of justice and vengeance, when you are wronged, where are you more likely to fall? Your sinful nature is much more likely to seek vengeance than justice. When we feel like we or our family or our children have been wronged, it evokes within us the fiercest of wrath. And what are we much more likely to do? Retaliate, get even, get revenge, make them pay, nurse a grudge, hope they suffer, celebrate their downfall. That's not justice; that's vengeance. And here Jesus is saying that in the kingdom of God, there is no room for vengeance. This whole **"eye for eye, tooth for tooth"** thing – yeah, it is in the Old Testament. But it was meant to provide a system of justice, not permission for vengeance.

So, the real question is: Jesus, how do I put these words into practice in my life when I am wronged? Answer (and this is a hard one!): sometimes you've just got to let it go. Sometimes you've just got to turn the other cheek. Sometimes you just have to be the bigger person and show a little grace! Turning the other cheek doesn't mean letting someone beat you up. Going the extra mile doesn't make you a doormat. Loaning someone your stuff doesn't mean you can never get it back. But it does mean that sometimes you've just got to relax and show a little grace and let it go. I know that's a hard answer, but it is Jesus' answer. And remember what we heard in Romans 12: **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge... 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (19).** So as difficult as it may be, try to overcome your kneejerk reaction toward vengeance and instead, a little more often, turn the other cheek.

Natural follow-up to that: But Jesus, what about the people that hate me, or the people that hurt me? Jesus, you cannot possibly expect me to show love to my enemies, right?! And with a calm but serious demeanor, Jesus looks us in the eye and answers, "I do." **"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."** Now just let that sink in for a second. The ex that ruined your marriage? The drunk driver that killed your friend? The coworker that talks trash about you? The classmate that constantly picks on you? The kid that picks on your kid? The person who makes your life so difficult? Love them!? Really!?

Maybe the question now is not how do I do this but why should I do this? Why should I love these awful people? Jesus, this is probably the most counterintuitive thing I have ever hear you say. Look, I can follow you on the whole anger thing, and the lust thing; I get what you're saying about swearing and about vengeance. But this is too much! Love your enemies? Why?

And the answer that cannot leave any of us unmoved is that Jesus loved us even when we were his enemies! You were an enemy of God when you were an unbeliever. But Jesus didn't consider you an awful person. He loved you; he came into this world for you; he suffered and died on the cross for you, to redeem you and forgive you, because he loved you, even when you hated him. Romans 5: **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (8). 1 John 4: **"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"** (10). When Jesus says, **"Love your enemies,"** it's not just a command. It's a window into the very heart of God. If you are astounded that Jesus would actually ask you to do this, then be astounded at the fact that he actually did it first! Jesus didn't die for people who loved him; he died for people who hated him, because he loved them. And he loves you. Jesus turned the other cheek when the soldiers beat him, for you. He gave up his clothing to be crucified in shame, for you. He went the extra mile to bring salvation to you. So, the question is not, why should I do this. The question is, why would he do this. And the answer is: because he loves us.

And that love is what motivates us to live these challenging words, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... that you may be children of your Father in heaven."** And finally, because of Jesus, that is what you are. You are a baptized believer; you are a child of God. He calls you **"children of your Father in heaven."**

Are you **"perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect"**? Well, no. Do you always love your enemies and turn the other cheek and speak with integrity and turn from adultery and cool your anger perfectly? No. Do you always live the words of the Sermon on the Mount in your life perfectly? Obviously not. But **"your heavenly Father is perfect,"** and you are **"children of your Father in heaven."** And your Dad loves his kids; and your Brother loves his siblings. So let the perfect love of the Lord move you to live the perfect will of the Lord. That's the point of the Sermon on the Mount. You may have more questions; and Jesus will have more answers. But let there be no question about this: your perfect heavenly Father loves his children, including you. So, **"Rejoice and be glad;" "[yours] is the kingdom of heaven"** (Mt 5:12, 3).

Matthew 5:33-48

³³ "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.' ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.