

Character Traits of a Christian

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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Text: Matthew 5:33-48

Purpose: Jesus Christ is giving his followers instructions as to how they are to live while still in this world. The opening teaching in this passage began with what is called the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes. Jesus is emphasizing our inner character traits that have real life applications. Jesus is calling His followers to take the higher road, take the Ten Commandments to a higher standard of application. Jesus is guiding us to become more Christlike instead of more worldly minded. Jesus is calling us to a live up to a perfect standard.

A 6th grade teacher posed the following problem to one of her arithmetic classes:

"A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-fifth is to go to his wife, one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get?"

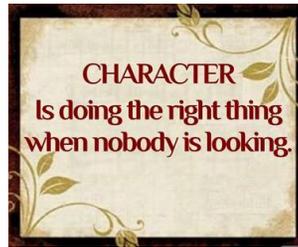


After a very long silence in the classroom, one little boy raised his hand and with complete sincerity in his voice, answered, "A lawyer!"¹

¹ Mikey's Funnies, March 9, 2021 – An Estate Funny

The United States of America is attempting to be all things to all people. We have assumed the role of the world's policeman, the world's financial rescuer, and keeper of the most powerful military in the world. All of this comes at a great cost and the world is changing around us. As a nation we are attempting to provide housing, food, and medical care for untold millions of people, living on the national purse. Yes, we need to help our neighbor, but how much help is too much? There are a lot of things wrong in our nation. Almost every wrong thing about our country is a result of a failure in character. Almost everything wrong with our nation is a result of turning our back on God's word and living according to the desires of our selfish will.

But there is still a glimmer of hope for our country. That hope lies within its people. Our nation will rise and fall based upon the character of its people and its leaders. Your character is who you are when no one is looking. Good character is demonstrated consistently even if it costs you something. A person of good character always seeks the best for others. As D. L. Moody once said, "Character is what you are in the dark."



Our relationship with God is intimately tied to how obedient we are to what He teaches us. Our good character is formed as we conform to the high moral standards put forth in God's word. In the last few chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses stands before the people and lets them know that if they are



obedient to the teachings God handed to Moses, they will be a blessed people. If they heed the words of God and obey what it says, all of the blessings of God will be poured out on them. Yet if they do not obey the words given to them, then all of the curses mentioned by Moses will be poured out on the nation. The blessings and punishments of God come directly from obedience. Israel lived with the abundant blessings of God for many generations. They also experienced the agony of the curses because they failed to live by God's holy standard.

Jesus calls His followers to the same kind of obedience. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will do as I have commanded you."*



Over the past few months, we have been examining the Book of Matthew. In chapter five of this book, we have encountered one of the longest passages of teaching by Jesus. The opening of this passage began with what is called the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes. Jesus is calling His followers to focus on the inward character traits and their inward attitudes. How we live out our life and the expression of our inner walk with God is a vivid demonstration to the watching world.

Jesus is calling His followers to take a higher road, take the Ten Commandments to a higher standard of application. Jesus is guiding us to become more Christlike instead of being more worldly minded. Jesus is calling us to strive to live up to a perfect standard.

Jesus begins this chapter by reminding His followers of the character they are to possess as citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are to be poor in spirit, ones that mourn, that are meek, ones that hunger and thirst after righteousness. The citizens of Christ's kingdom are to be merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers. (Matthew 5:1-9)



Jesus warned His followers that if they lived like that, they may very well be persecuted. After all, if they persecuted the prophets in the Old Testament and Jesus, the Son of God, surely, they will come after us. But if we remain true and live righteous before an unrighteous world, we will actually be as salt and light to a decaying world. Our saltiness adds seasoning, preservation, healing, and cleansing. Our light leads them to the one that can redeem them. (Matthew 5:10-16)

As Jesus is sharing the principles for this new kingdom, He reminds them of echoes from the Old Testament. As we discussed in a previous sermon, Jesus talked about murder being more than just killing someone. Jesus equated our hatred of someone as being murder. Jesus talked about adultery as being more than a sexual physical act outside the bonds of marriage. He elevated adultery as something that occurs in our heart as we think lustfully about another person. Jesus talked about the topic of divorce and elevated marriage to its



rightful place. Divorce was not to be taken lightly as so many do. (Matthew 5:17-30)

You see, Jesus is turning the obedience tables upside down. The Jews had mastered the art of outward obedience during Jesus' day. They tithed of everything, even from the smallest herb in their garden. They kept the letter of the law but they did not keep the spirit of the law. Jesus is concerned about forming Christlikeness within His followers.

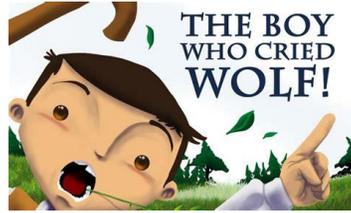
The passage of scripture we read earlier covers the last three areas Jesus wanted to address as found in chapter five.

Swearing (Matthew 5:33-37)

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord. But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne: nor by the earth, for it is His footstool: nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no,’ ‘no.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

Why would Jesus take the time to tackle an issue such as this? Why is truth telling so important?

We all have heard the story of the Little Boy Who Cried Wolf. A young boy was given the task to watch over the sheep on the outskirts of the city. He was supposed to cry out if a wolf came near to scatter or eat any of the sheep. The young boy got bored, which seems to be the curse of every age, and decided to have some fun. He cried out wolf and the town's people came running. The little boy thought that was so funny. They scolded him and threatened him with punishment if he did it again.



Sometime later, the boy became bored again, and cried out once again. The people again came running and the little boy had a great laugh once again. His parents strongly warned him if he continued to do this the people may not come to his rescue and a real wolf may come and it could cost him his life.

Once you begin to lie, the lies come so much easier again and again. The boy cried out for fun a third time, but only a few came. They left shaking their head while the boy lost all respect of the villagers.

Later in the week, the boy spotted a wolf coming near the sheep. He became startled and began to cry wolf. The town's people heard him, but ignored the call of danger. This wolf was not satisfied with sheep, instead he wanted the young boy, and got him.

How important is truth telling? Jesus reminds us that the *"Truth will make us free."* I guess the opposite of that is *"A lie will make us a slave."*

During Jesus day, the Pharisees and Sadducees knew the law of God. In Leviticus 19:12, they were told by God, *"And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."*

I guess to force people to tell the truth, or determine if someone was telling the truth, they would be forced to swear to its truthfulness. Maybe you have heard someone say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles." Or "I cross my heart and hope to die." Or how about, "I swear on my mother's grave." Or, "I swear to God." I guess truth telling has always been a problem.



A twelve-year-old boy was an important witness in a lawsuit. One of the lawyers, after cross examining him severely, said, "Your father has been telling you how to testify, hasn't he?"

The boy said, "Yes."

The attorney asked the boy, "What did your father tell you to testify to?"

The boy modestly said, "My father told me the lawyers would try and tangle me up in my testimony; but if I would just be careful and tell the truth, I could tell the same thing every time."

In the end, it was the boy's truthful testimony that prevailed in the case.²

² Practical Bible Illustrations, From Yesterday and Today, p. 194, #530

In Jesus' day, when you made an oath on YHWH's name, it became a binding oath. But if you swore on heaven, on earth, on the temple, or on your own head, you could wiggle out of those oaths. That is why Jesus pointed out all of the oaths they were making actually go back to God. After all, God made the heavens and the earth, the city of Jerusalem is His, and the hairs on your head are determined by God. These oaths should be just as binding. Jesus sought to do away with all of this foolish swearing.

Jesus simply wants our conversation and words to be truthful no matter the situation. Your "Yes" answer should be truthful. Your "No" answer should be truthful.

James 5:12 even says, "*Let your yes be yes and your no be no, lest you fall into condemnation.*" We will have to give an account for our words before God. He hears as we pledge to do certain things. We need to be promise keeping citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Retaliation – Matthew 5:38-42

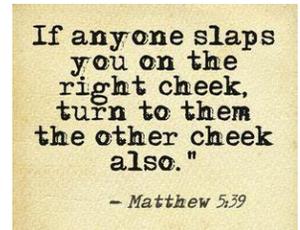
A second character trait of a follower of Jesus has to do with the principle of retaliation.

The Old Testament justice could be summarized as, "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*" The purpose of this rule was not meant to exact equal retribution. Instead, it was intended to limit the amount of retaliation. If someone caused you to lose your



eye, you could not kill them as repayment. There was a limiting factor to repay wrongs. These violations were not to be carried out personally, instead the court was the one that meted out the punishment.

Instead, Jesus wants His followers to adopt the strangest way of seeking retaliation. Is someone slaps you one the cheek, you should absorb the blow and actually turn the other cheek and let them give you a second one. No retaliation is mentioned here. Are you willing to do that?



It would be bad enough to get slapped. But to turn the other cheek means to get slapped with the back of the other person's hand. In Jesus' day, that was a complete insult! It would mean you might get the full force of someone's ring right on your face. Jesus is radically causing His followers to seek a path of restoration and not retribution.

Jesus goes on to say that if someone sues you and takes your outer garment as a pledge, be willing to give them your shirt as well. If someone like a Roman Soldier were to come up to you and compel you to carry a burden for a mile, be willing to go the second mile. According to the laws during Jesus' day, a Roman Soldier could compel a person to carry something for up to a mile. That is why when Jesus fell under the weight of the cross, the soldiers compelled Simon to come a carry the cross the rest of the way. As a Christian, Jesus is building the character of His followers by going above and beyond what is required of us by the law or community.



An illustration of a farmer going above and beyond what is required by law.

A farmer bought a field next to a farmer who had been engaged in a long-standing dispute with the former owner about the exact boundary line between this field and his



own property. When the new owner saw the farmer near the fence one day, he greeted him with the words, “I’m your new neighbor; and I would like to talk with you about the boundary line between our properties.”

The farmer assumed a belligerent attitude and said, “What about it?”

“How much of this field do you claim as belonging to you?” asked the new owner who was a Christian. “I claim that your fence is a good two feet over on my property.” replied the farmer.

“Well then, I want you to reset the fence four feet back on my side.” said the Christian. This completely took the fight out of the farmer and was the beginning of a new spirit of concession on his part also.³

Jesus is giving us a pattern for life if we are to live according to the Kingdom of God. If you are called to go to court, we are strongly encouraged to settle with our enemies

quickly. If our case goes to court, we may make a mockery of our faith before an unbelieving world.

Jesus tells us to resist evil. Resist sin. James 4:7 says, “*Submit yourselves therefore to God and the devil will flee from you.*” We are not supposed to strike back. We are called to absorb the blow. This doesn’t mean we are supposed to be passive and non-resistant in every situation. It means we are to not yield to evil and we must seek the good of others in order to win some to Christ – even if it costs us.

There was a British soldier that shared this testimony about his Christian conversion. He told of being stationed in India, where it was hot and dusty. There was a rain and he came in late, drunk, with his boots covered with mud. As he climbed into his bunk, he saw a fellow soldier on his knees praying beside his bunk. He pulled off the muddy boots and threw them on the head of the praying man, and fell asleep in his bunk. The next morning, he found the boots beside his bunk, cleaned and polished. He could have understood it if the muddy boots had been hurled back at him, but he could not understand how one so mistreated could react with such kindness. When he asked the man, who had been praying about what made him do it he told him he was a Christian. The soldier then was open to Christian witness and wanted that kind of religion, and became a Christian.⁴



³ Illustrations of Bible Truths, #914, A Generous Concession

⁴ Illustration from Ray Hodge’s sermon on the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus also wants us to be ready and willing to offer a hand when we asked. He said, *“Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.”* This doesn’t mean we should give in each and every situation. But we need to listen to that still small voice and help when possible.

Through the years I have given to someone who needed gas in their car. I have given food to people that said they were hungry. I have bought gas to heat their home in the winter. But there were times I have turned people down when they called. We need wisdom to help as God directs.

Your Enemies – Matthew 5:43-48

If Jesus hasn’t gotten you thinking yet, the last one will be the icing on the cake. First, we saw that Jesus wants us to stop lying and live truthfully in all of our conversations. Remember, if you always tell the truth, you won’t have to remember which lie you told to which person!

Secondly, we learned we are to go above and beyond what is asked of us by others, the court or the law. Justice and retribution belong to God. We are to walk circumspectly in all the things of life.

Our third point this morning, which is the icing on the cake, is *“Love your enemies.”*

Matthew 5:43-44 says, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your*



enemies, bless those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

If this is the first time you have heard this, you might be tempted to say, *“Wait a minute! Jesus is asking me to forgive my enemies – ok I can do that. But now He wants me to “LOVE” them! But Jesus you don’t know how they have treated me. You don’t know all the mean things they say about me at school or work. But Jesus, you want me to not only love them but to be a blessing to them?”*

Jesus’ response is *“Yes! Love your enemy. Bless those that hate you. Pray for those that persecute you.”*

If you look at the life of Jesus, didn’t He do the same thing? Is Jesus asking you to do more than He did Himself? When Jesus was on the cross and they spat on Him and cast insults at Him, what did He do? He forgave them. He prayed for them. He even welcomed one beside Him into paradise!



There is an old story of a slave in the West Indies, called Caesar by his master, who had gained his freedom and also became a Christian. One day his former master took him to the slave market in search of new slaves. After securing all he wanted the owner was surprised to see Caesar begging him to purchase an older, very tired, sick slave.

He replied, *“Why would I want to buy him? What use can this man be?”*

Caesar insisted he buy this one for him. The purchase was made and the old man went with them to the plantation. Soon afterward the old slave became sick and Caesar looked after him as if he were his father.

He washed him, waited on him, and nursed him in every spare moment he had.

Finally, the master asked, “Caesar what is your connection with this old man that has caused you to care so much for him? Is he a relative or close friend?”

Caesar replied, “No, he is not my father, not a relative, nor is he even a friend.”

The master asked, “Who in the world is this man?”

With tears in his eyes, Caesar replied, “He is my enemy. When I was just a child, this man kidnapped me from my family and sold me into slavery. Now that I am a Christian, I am to love my enemy. Master, I must love this man even after all he has done to me.”⁵

Are there undone things in your relationships?

Has your heart been convicted about the habit of lying?

Has someone come to you and asked you to do something and you are harboring a resentful attitude? Is Jesus asking you to go the extra mile in that situation?

Is there an enemy of yours that you need to forgive? Jesus is asking you to not only forgive them, but actually “love” them.

The world outside is watching you to see if you are the real deal. The unbelieving world can spot a phony in a minute. The unbelieving world is judging your Jesus by the way you live, act, and respond to the stresses of life.

In loving like God loves, we can be called the children of God.

LET US PRAY



⁵ Heartwarming Bible Illustrations, page 224, #567, Loving Our Enemies