



## **Theme: The Sermon on the Mount**

### **“The Challenging Ethics of Jesus”**

**Weekly Memory Verse:** <sup>43</sup>“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.” –Matthew 5:43-44 (The Message)

**Family Activity for the Week:** Have you struggled with something in your life? It seems impossible or is something that you absolutely dread doing? I bet the children in your life feel the same way sometimes! Get out a few sheets of paper and some writing utensils – pens, pencils, markers, crayons, etc. – and draw a machine/robot that could help you with the problem at hand. Be creative and think outside of the box! Jesus offers us His hand in the hard places of our lives. He didn’t use machines to perform miracles, but when we look to Jesus in the hard places, we acknowledge that we cannot live life without Him. Miracles are things we cannot do ourselves, so shouldn’t every aspect of our life be a miracle as we look to Jesus and rely on Him?

**Monday, April 19** – We’re going to skip Matthew 5:13-16 and come back to that next week in the reading plan when the sermon is around those texts. For today, read Matthew 5:17-20. Do Jesus’ words here surprise you? They may—many Christians think Jesus came to do away with the law. Scholar William Barclay noted, “Again and again Jesus broke what the Jews called the Law...yet here he seems to speak of the Law with a veneration and a reverence that no Rabbi or Pharisee could exceed.” The passages that follow will show us that what Jesus challenged and refused to obey was a misunderstanding and misuse of “law” that had taken a deep hold among his day’s religious leaders.

- ▲ Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Jesus wasn’t intending to abandon the law and the prophets. Israel’s whole story, commands, promises and all, was going to come true in him... a way was opening up for Israel– and, through that, all the world–to make God’s covenant a reality in their own selves, changing behavior not just by teaching but by a change of heart and mind itself.” In what ways can you see that Jesus’ has brought about a change of heart and mind in you?
- ▲ The great Old Testament prophets said, many times, that God cares about the inner spirit behind our acts far more than any outward show of piety (see Isaiah 1:10–15; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21–24). That’s why Jesus said he hadn’t come to “do away with” the law. He’d come to apply the law to the true source of both good and bad: our (often hidden) inner self. Can you recall times when you realized that your outward behavior was not matching what was inside of you?

**Prayer:** *Eternal God, you were with King David when he wrote in Psalm 51:6, “you want truth in the most hidden places.” You taught that as you preached the Sermon on the Mount. Now plant your truth deep inside me. Amen.*

**Tuesday, April 20** – Read Matthew 5:21-26. Jesus quoted the sixth commandment we find in Exodus 20:13. He then widened it to apply to our thoughts, not just our actions. He said emphatically that contempt, anger, and words that tear down and destroy others are as morally vicious as the physical act of murder. They harm others, but also damage us greatly when we harbor those feelings and thoughts. And Jesus lived that truth. He didn't seek to kill his foes but was willing to lay down his life for them.

- ▲ Scholar William Barclay said Jesus rebuked, first, “the anger over which a person broods, and ... will not allow to die;” then the Aramaic *raca* [idiot], which is, “almost untranslatable, because it describes a tone... the whole accent of contempt;” and finally the Greek *mōros* [fool]: “To call a man *mōros* was not to criticize his mental ability; it was to cast aspersions on his moral character; to take his name and reputation.” How did Jesus' teaching bear on the heated words (spoken or written, often on social media) we see (and maybe join in) today?
- ▲ Jesus went far beyond the idea of, “Bite your tongue.” Scholar N. T. Wright noted, “What's the alternative [to seething anger]? Jesus offers two remarkably specific, practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends... it's impossible until you look at Jesus. Jesus himself refused to go the way of anger. Instead, he took the anger of his enemies within Israel, and of Israel's own enemies, the Romans, on to himself, and died under its load.” Jesus showed the way. Are you willing to let his Spirit keep reshaping your inner self to be like him?

**Prayer:** *Loving Jesus, I want to say, “You don't know the people I deal with.” But when I see how people defamed and hated you, that's silly. Chip away my resistance. Reshape my thoughts and feelings in your image. Amen.*

**Wednesday, April 21** – Read aloud Matthew 5:27-32. Next in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus took up the difficult topics of adultery and divorce. He clearly took adultery and marriage seriously. Casual sex was totally outside his frame of reference. But again, he clearly saw adultery and divorce as about far more than just physical actions. Like Israel's prophets, who had spoken on his behalf, he taught that faithless hearts (in much deeper ways than just faithless bodies) cause deep pain and brokenness.

- ▲ Jesus expanded the concept of betrayal. His teaching recognized that a person's heart (emotions and thoughts) can be faithless to a spouse, even without any overt act. How could that kind of “adultery” (with your career, a favorite hobby, or even children if you gave them a higher priority than loving your spouse) come about? How might a serious promise to be faithful to your spouse call for changes in your heart?
- ▲ Jesus was talking about our heart and mind and body as being connected. He wasn't telling us to mutilate our body in verses 29-30. Cutting off an offending member would not necessarily end one's sin. Jesus here uses hyperbole, or rhetorical overstatement, to graphically underline his point. We must do whatever is necessary to evade destruction. What can Jesus' shocking images teach you about your inner life? What changes could you make to take Jesus seriously by “amputating” hurtful habits or attitudes?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul would later call spouses to love each other the way you loved your church. Shape me into someone who can grow toward living out that scary selfless standard. Amen.*

**Thursday, April 22** – Read Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus took truth-telling very seriously. Some Jewish people tried to evade the curse incurred in broken oaths by swearing by something less than God. Our integrity shouldn't come and go, depending on how we anchor it to some vow like, “I swear I mean it this time!” Those who know us should always be able to depend on our inner honesty.

- ▲ Psychologists and linguists note that sometimes it's hard to make our statements or our questions direct. For example, “Do you like this outfit?” may hide the real question: “Do you still love me?” How can you, in both questions and answers, grow in your ability to let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no? What fears make it hardest for you to speak plainly, avoiding evasive or slippery words?

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▲ Jesus taught about solemn pledges after talking about divorce. (Other texts about divorce—Matthew 19:3–9, Mark 10:2–12, Luke 16:18, and 1 Corinthians 7:10–16—show a fuller, more nuanced picture.) N. T. Wright called us back to Jesus’ main theme: “Jesus certainly didn’t want his hearers, or the later church, to get embroiled in endless debates about just what was allowed ... Jesus is not just giving moral commands. He is unveiling a whole new way of being human.” How would inner honesty lead you toward that whole new way of being human?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, sadly we’ve sometimes used your words to condemn others, not to challenge ourselves. Keep me focused on learning how to always let my yes mean yes and my no mean no. Amen.*

**Friday, April 25** – Read Matthew 5:38-42. When Jesus lived there, Palestine was an occupied land. It seethed with hatred of Roman occupiers (and even of Hebrews with different views or status). Roman soldiers could legally slap you, take your shirt or force you to carry a load. They were the “enemy.” Jesus called his followers to act graciously toward even those enemies. “No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.” (Matthew 5:42, *The Message*)

▲ Jesus challenged his followers to live in bigger ways than they had dreamed of, to love their enemies and pray for those who harassed them. (He did that for Roman soldiers executing him in Luke 23:33-34.) What ways of reacting to others might our culture teach us until we realize that Jesus’ teaching calls us beyond those patterns? When you feel like “getting even,” how can you become more like Jesus instead?

▲ On Monday we read that Jesus said, “I haven’t come to do away with [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). Yet here he set aside the law of proportional revenge found in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. But he did that to fulfill a greater law: “You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). He called that one of the greatest laws in Matthew 22:37-39 because he knew hatred or revenge just beget more of the same. How easy or hard do you find it to adopt Jesus’ priorities when someone has hurt you?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, teach me how to seek forgiveness from others, how to offer it even to enemies—and how to do both in healthy ways that heal, rather than suppressing, my pain and hurt. Amen.*

**Saturday, April 26** – Read Matthew 5:43-48. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached his last Christmas Eve sermon on December 24, 1967. It included these words: “Agape is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return... This is what Jesus meant when he said, ‘Love your enemies.’ And I’m happy that he didn’t say, ‘Like your enemies,’ because there are some people that I find it pretty difficult to like... I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself... every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear.” Jesus made a similar point with an “obvious” statement that isn’t obvious at all when we reflect on his point: “[God] makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.”

▲ Jesus (and Dr. King) knew that one common way we deal with fear is to turn it into hate toward those we fear. Following Jesus’ teaching, Dr. King said there’s a better option. He told those he called, “our most bitter opponents... We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you... be assured that ... we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory... the truth crushed to earth will rise again.” John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, said in Matthew 5:48 Jesus called us to be “perfect in love,” always growing toward loving with God’s all-inclusive love. He rejected the idea that “perfect” meant never sinning or missing the mark. Does it challenge you more, or less, to see “perfect” as about the state of your heart rather than just your outward actions? How might you live with God’s generosity toward the “unrighteous” people you know?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, make me an instrument of your peace. Keep teaching me to trust in the long-term power of love, the world-changing power that makes me a follower of Jesus. Amen.*

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