

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON
Christ's Keys for Successful Living
Matthew 5:33-48
Dr. George O. Wood

This is our fourth time looking at the Sermon on the Mount as we explore together Christ's Keys to Successful Living. As we've been going along I've tried to note the major sections to this sermon that Jesus gives. The first 16 verses relate to qualities of life that he wants developed within us – the beatitudes and influences that we will have for him. Salt and light. Then beginning in verse 17 through the end of chapter 5:48 Jesus gives 6 specific illustrations describing behavior changes he wants to make in us. You look at each of these illustrations beginning in verse 21 you find that it starts off with Jesus saying, *"You have heard that it has been said."* Then he goes on specifically to describe from the Old Testament law what was said. When he's through with that he then gives another phrase which he repeats throughout each of the illustrations. *"but I say unto you..."* or *"but I tell you..."* *"You've heard that it was said but I tell you."*

The first and the second illustration verses 21-30 tell us that murder and adultery are more than acts. They are attitudes. So Jesus tells us to consistently come to grips with our feeling of anger and lust and to be cleansed from their destroying influences in our life.

The third illustration which the Lord gives in this chapter about behavior change relates to divorce and remarriage. Our Lord here affirms the marriage bond and tells us we may not divorce or remarry unless there is infidelity.

The fourth illustration of the behavior change which the Lord seeks has to do with keeping our word. *"You have heard it said by those of long ago do not break your oath but keep the oath which you make to the Lord. I tell you do not swear at all."* If you were living in that time you had to be very careful about talking to a Pharisee because you could never be sure when he was making a commitment whether he would keep it or not. He played word games with commitments. Some oaths which he took to substantiate his word allowed him in his callous thinking in his logical processes to escape from his commitments. Jesus in Matthew 23 in verses 16-22 some illustrations of how the Pharisees would say one thing and you had to be very careful of the terminology they were using to know whether or not they would keep their word.

The Lord here is responding to that kind of speech. He's telling us not to play word games with truth, not to speak out of both sides of our mouth, not to make promises that we cannot keep. The Lord does not approve that kind of behavior. He says Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Say what you mean and mean what you say. If you say it, do it. If you say you're going to be at a certain engagement, take on a certain responsibility, make a commitment then do it or don't say it. If you say it and can't keep it talk to the person to whom you made the commitment and seek to be released from it. But do not treat your word cavalierly. As though it doesn't mean anything.

Some people falsely interpret Jesus' words on oath taking to include his prohibiting using an oath in court. Some would say when the Lord says do not swear at all that means that when you're called before a witness stand and they tell you to raise your right hand and say "I swear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God." That that is what Jesus is prohibiting here.

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

However that would be to bring into this particular passage of teaching a doctrine which it is not meant to support. We do have examples in the New Testament of persons approved by God who did take an oath in a court session or in a moment when they are calling God as a witness or a party to the truth. For example in Matthew 26:63 the high priest Caiaphas puts Jesus under oath. In the language of his day he says to him, "I adjure you by God." That was the way of being placed under an oath in those days. Jesus does say, I won't answer under an oath. Rather, Jesus responds to what the high priest asks and answers under oath.

Paul in writing to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 1:23 says I call God for a record on my soul. In Galatians 1:20 he says, "*Now the things I write to you behold before God I lie not.*" He calls God as a record, as a party, to his actions.

So the Lord is not forbidding an oath in a kind of situation where we are called upon to tell or affirm the truth or give a deposition or take an oath of office. What he is saying to us is that our words should be good enough that it never needs an oath to back it up. We ought never to even have to call as a witness because our word when we say Yes ought to always mean yes and when it's no it ought to mean No.

We go from this to the major thrust of my message this morning, verses 38-48. The fifth and sixth illustrations of behavioral change that Jesus gives in chapter 5. These illustrations relate to how we respond to our enemies. The person who strikes us, sues us, forces their will on us, imposes on us. Jesus here is telling us what actions we are to pursue and what actions we are to avoid. I suppose in looking at this scripture we can treat enemies in one of two ways. We can refer to enemies as the guys out there. The outsider. Like the person who blares his horn at you on the freeway. I might momentarily flare up but they have no power to hurt me. They're not my enemy. They're not a person who's deeply involved in my life.

I would rather take the word "enemy" to refer to the people closest to us, who really have the power to hurt us. An in law. A close friend.

Joyce Landorff has just published a book The Irregular People. She talks about persons we are forced to maintain close ties with because of circumstances or because they're in our family. And they are irregular. As I look at her definitions of irregular people and look at what Jesus is saying as our enemy I would equate the two. Irregular people equals enemy. Irregular people are people who rub us wrong and who cause us grief in our relationships. She defines an irregular person as having three characteristics. I'll add a fourth.

1. An irregular person is someone who is emotionally blind. They have 20-20 vision in regard to their own needs. They know what you need to give them. They have perfect vision. But they don't see your needs. It's like they're totally blind to you. They live with you but do not see the real you. They have perfect vision however in regard to your imperfections. They are blind to your achievements. That irregular person may be a parent who never sees a fault in your brother or your sister. When you were kids you did the same thing, they get away with it and you wouldn't. They were blind to the defect of your brother or sister but saw everything going on in you. Now you've had kids and even your kids don't measure up.

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

That irregular person may be a spouse who can make out a long list of your shortcomings. Somehow never see your achievements. In turn they're totally oblivious to their own failures and don't seem to have the faintest idea of any deficiencies in their life and they're totally shocked when you suggest that something may be lacking on their part. It's really rough when two irregular people marry each other! The irregular person may be an in law and is still uncomfortable when you call them Mom or Dad. You're still the one who stole their child. The irregular person may be a child who loves you when they want something from you. The rest of the time they are totally blind to your constant labor of love toward them.

2. They are emotionally deaf. We can be in the process of spilling our guts, a moment when we want to really say what's going on inside of us and maybe sharing some deep need and they're response indicates that they're not listening to us at all. They'll come up with something off the wall. Like "What's for dinner?" and you're sharing some deep hurt in your life. We try to talk to them about what's really going on in our life, where we hurt, what they can do to help, but either they don't listen or they have an immediate answer. A judgmental or a defensive response. Talking to them is talking to talking to a brick wall or talking to a robot – you say certain things and you're always going to get a programmed response. A lecture, a defense, the tirade. You learn after a while to be very careful in selecting what you're going to talk to that person about. You can't talk to them about everything. The more irregular they are and the more little you can talk to them. You get very surface level conversations. You don't explore anything at all that is threatening or internal. They simply won't handle that. You wish deeply you could communicate with that person, open up the inner core in your life and really share with them but there's defense there and they're deaf.

3. Damaged vocal cords. You will not hear these kind of phrases coming from the irregular person: I am sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me. I apologize. The irregular person simply doesn't have any idea they've done anything wrong. You must always be the person to make peace. You must always be the person to apologize. You must always take the lead in restoring the relationship. They're always the ones against whom the offense has been done. The irregular person doesn't see themselves as a person who could ever be in the wrong. Or maybe if they made a mistake it was a small mistake certainly not on the level of the mistake that you made. Someone else is always at fault. Someone else is always to blame and someone else always must apologize. Know anybody like that? Recognize yourself? The irregular person doesn't recognize himself.

Words of endearment and encouragement rarely come from the person with damaged vocal cords. Words like: I love you. You're special. You mean everything to me. You're beautiful. The phrases just seem to be absent from their vocabulary.

I've noticed one additional characteristic in the irregular person. I call it tied hands. Their hands do not hold you, embrace you, pat you, stroke you, touch you. It's as though they were a living mummy. Somehow in life maybe through parents or whatever somebody wrapped some bands around their hands and that's the way they go through life. Never reaching out to touch, to hug, to embrace.

There are I wouldn't be surprised adults in this room who have one of two parents who have never in their life put their arms around you. Persons who are unable to touch. And generally

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

when a person is unable to touch they're also blind and deaf and have damaged vocal cords. They seem to all go together.

Do you recognize these characteristics in anyone? Are there irregular people in your life?

What should we do about irregular people? And if we're an irregular person what should we do?

Jesus gives us in Matthew 5:38-48, a strategy for dealing with the difficult or the irregular person. Four things he says basically.

The first thing he says is between the lines. He doesn't say it explicitly but it's implicitly there.

Jesus does not hold out any hope that the difficult person will change. That's a rather bold and striking statement but I think it's foundational. I realize the gospel teaches us faith, to believe that people can change and will change. I believe our words can help people discover a new identity. But in spite of that there are still people who do not change no matter how hard you try. We keep hoping they will change. Periodically we may do something nice for them, hoping they will change. What we're really doing is subtly manipulating them saying, I hope at last I've found some key to your heart! But they do not change. Time after time their lifestyle goes right on. They are legalistic people. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. You do something for them, you give them a Christmas gift of a certain value they get you a Christmas gift back of a certain value. They are abusive. They strike you on the cheek – maybe not physically but verbally abusive rather than encouraging. They are unreasonable and unthinking. Give them your outer clock, they want your inner clock as well. Whatever you do for them is never enough. They want more, more. Why? Because I deserve more, more. Give me more! Unreasonable. And the Lord says they are demanding. Give me. Loan me.

Jesus is telling us to develop a plan of action, which does not depend upon their changing. He never says to us, When you've gone the second mile... when you've turned the other cheek... when you've given or loaned your life or your money... then that's going to be the key to turning this person around. When you've gone that second mile, at the end of it, they're going to say, "Aren't you a wonderful person? I'm so glad you've taught me through your own life what it is to go the second mile. I've learned from you and I'm going to change." Jesus never says our action ought to be predicated on the basis of they're going to change. That person who has that old crusty frog nature may never be kissed into being prince charming. When we are done with all of our loving and our caring they may still be emotionally blind, emotionally deaf, have damaged vocal cords and tied hands. You're going to have to decide what kind of a person you are going to be to them on the assumption they will never change. They may not have the capacity to change or more likely just choose or have chosen not to change.

Irregular people are like dried concrete. They are set in their ways. I'm not saying give up on the irregular person or quit having faith for them. But I am saying plan your response to them on the assumption that they are not going to change. No matter what you do, they're not going to move off their spot. The good which you show becomes an honest good rather than a manipulative good. You're no longer doing things in order to get them to change. You're doing things because you're doing it because it's right. It really helps when we do not become manipulating.

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

Once you've freed yourself from relying on their response then it allows you to be somewhat cushioned from the emotional ups and downs as you hopefully wait for them to change. You realize and accept that they may never change. Therefore my response to them is not going to depend on how they relate back to me. You know they have problems seeing hearing and speaking and touching. Rather than directing your energies toward getting them to change God's telling you redirect your energy and get yourself to change in your response to them. You're the person who can change first.

It's a great freeing moment when we can say This person is maybe never going to change and yet I determine to accept them and choose to love them anyway.

The second thing the Lord is saying here is deal with the difficult person by avoiding retaliation. If they're throwing cactuses at you, don't throw them back. The Old Testament allowed retaliation – an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, etc. Actually the Old Testament law on retaliation was the beginnings of mercy. It limited vengeance. If you put out my eye, I didn't have the right to knock your head off. It was a good law. Law of retaliation – limited vengeance.

But Jesus takes it in another dimension. We need to clear up a misconception in Matthew 5:38-42 before I say what Jesus is really saying. Some people misunderstand the Lord's teaching here and think him to be impractical and unrealistic pacifist. For example when he says, Do not resist one who is evil or Do not resist an evil person. Is he saying that we should disband police forces in order to let anyone hit anyone they want? When he says if someone takes you to court to get your outer cloak, give them your inner cloak as well is the saying the field is open. If anyone want to do something to someone they never have to face the prospect of a damage suit in court. Go ahead and do all the damage you want.

When he says, give to him who asks, is he saying when a mad man comes, or when your three-year-old asks you for a butcher knife, you hand them what they want. There is such a thing as being stupid in regard to what the Lord is saying. Some people look at this are stupid. They want to make it fit all situations. Jesus is not introducing a new legal code, he's not introducing a new economic code, he's talking about personal relationships. He is saying to us, How do you respond to the difficult person in your life? When you're insulted by them, what do you do? When they hit you on the cheek, or are inconsiderate or unrealistic or burdensome in their demands, how do you respond. He's saying avoid personal vindictiveness. Avoid retaliatory spirit. Avoid get even actions. Hard words. He's encouraging us to go overboard in our actions away from retaliation. So he says Turn the other cheek, throw in the cloak, go the second mile.

I submit that only the free person can do this. If you tried to do this because somebody's laying a guilt trip on you, and it's not a free choice of yours to do it, but you're doing it because you "should" or if you think this involves you becoming a doormat then that other person is going to walk over your life for a while and you're going to reach a point in your existence where you're tired of being a doormat and all of a sudden all that nice, cool, collected nature is going to explode in one big eruption when all the anger comes out.

The Lord is not talking about that kind of passivity. He's saying to us, make a free and conscious choice to return good for evil. Don't simply be a doormat and take it. Rather than taking it, *transform* it and turn the negative energy, the negative anger into a positive expression

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

of good. When we begin to do that interesting enough we find our self esteem begins to be picked up because the other person is really knocking our self esteem by their negative reaction to us. As we find that we can do the good and will do the good we begin to be more comfortable even with ourselves and with what the Lord is telling us to do. Avoid retaliatory action toward that irregular person is what the Lord is saying.

Third, Jesus tells us to love that difficult irregular person. How do we love? It's intriguing to compare Matthew 5 where Jesus says in verse 44 "*Love your enemies and pray.*" If you look at a parallel passage, same teaching, Luke 6:27, you find two other terms between loving and praying. I believe these two other terms in Luke 6:27 define for us how we love the irregular person. "Do good to," and "bless".

Jesus thereby defines love not as an emotion but as an action. He does not say feel good toward your irregular person. He says Do good. Too often we let our feelings lead us and the Lord is teaching continually saying "Get you're actions out in front and let your emotions follow your actions. Do good."

Then he says bless them. The word means literally speak well of them. That irregular person in our life, we know so many nasty and true things that could be said to them and about them. The Lord is saying Speak well of them.

In this manner I can resist becoming their mirror. If they're emotionally blind and deaf why should I be a mirror to them and be emotionally blind and deaf myself. Why should I have damaged vocal cords? Why should I have tied hands? The Lord is saying that we can step into this kind of heavenly love. The Father lets his sun shine upon the good farmer's fields and the bad farmer's fields. He lets his rain fall on the good farmer's fields and the bad farmer's fields. They're both good. The farmer needs both sun and rain. The Lord is saying that the father sends his rain and his sun on the good and the bad. Contrary to what some people are thinking that God only favors the good. And never shows mercy on the bad. That's not true. He lets his love fall indiscriminately because he's doing good toward us even when we're not in relationship to him. The Lord says to us step into the maturity of God's relationships.

A fourth thing that the Lord tells us to do is to pray for the difficult person. Notice that's not first but last. I don't know if we should note anything special from that. But I said in the first point we need to realize that they probably will never change. I think that needs to come first. We do what we do not because it's one more effort to get them to change. We've accepted where they are. Then when we've done these things – avoided a retaliatory spirit, and loved them, we can come to the fourth level, which is the level of prayer. When we stop praying for that irregular person we really do get defeated in our life. They never have hope for change.

But even though we've accepted the fact that they may never change and we've planned our action accordingly there is still a corner in our hearts where we in prayer we yet say All things are possible. God, you can even change this person.

That difficult person in our life is not free in this age and they are a believer in the Lord we believe that they will be freed in the age to come. The Lord in coming announced his mission as to give the blind sight, the deaf hearing, the mute speech, and to untie those that are bound. We

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT PERSON

Christ's Keys for Successful Living – Matthew 5:33-48

pray for that irregular person in our lives that God's kingdom might come in them and His will might be done in their lives.

The Lord here is simply calling for us to deal with the difficult person as he has dealt with us. That's why Jesus concludes chapter 5 with this phrase, Be you therefore perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. The English word perfect kind of gives the impression of stainless steel, rigidity, flawless. But the actual idea of perfect here means maturity, completeness, someone who is fully realizing the purpose for which they were made. The Lord is saying here, be mature, grow up. Be mature as your father is mature. I believe that as we take these steps the Lord calls us to take in regard to the irregular person we'll see God do a fresh new work in our life and a lot of the frustration we've experiences will bring new meaning to our actions.

Our heavenly Father we come to you today and we recognize that in this message you have been speaking to our hearts. Probably most of us here can identify an irregular person in our life. A difficult person whom life would be a whole lot more enjoyable if they were different. You're teaching us today to focus on that one and rather than letting that person stand in our way of maturity and wholeness to allow that person to be an agent for good change in our own lives. Let the influence of that person not damage what you seek to do in us. Give us the power to accept that individual, to not return their meanness or coldness in the style in which they've given it. To be a person who loves and does good and blesses and prays. Create in us, O God, a new heart toward the difficult person in our life. Perhaps Lord there are in this room persons who themselves have been difficult people. We've all had moments when in family situations and with close people to us, we have been blind to their needs, deaf to their voice, silent when we should have spoken words of encouragement and endearment. Our hands have been tied when they should have been loving. Forgive us, Lord, the irregularity in our own lives and may we open up to see the people you've put in our lives with new eyes, hear hem with new ears, speak them with a new voice, love them with arms which hold them. Do this Lord, we pray in your name. Amen.