

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

(Matthew 5:28)

The teaching is meant to remind people that we all are tempted to do wrong, however virtuous we think we are.

Nowadays we accept that it is normal for healthy males and females to think about sex and most Christians assume the teaching is against getting obsessed with lustful thoughts. The whole Sermon on the Mount is about the motives behind the actions that people do. Christians believe that sexual behaviour should be motivated by love not by lust.

Gouging out the right eye and cutting off the right hand (v. 29–30) are usually interpreted as metaphors to illustrate how seriously Christians should take the idea of trying to be pure in thought and action.

FOR DISCUSSION

Some Christians say that according to the Sermon on the Mount sinful thoughts are as bad as sinful actions. How far do you think that is what the Sermon teaches?

There is a saying, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' What do you think it means?

Matthew 5:31–32 Divorce

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 24:1 about divorce. Jewish law allowed men to write a certificate of divorce. Jesus makes marital unfaithfulness the only legitimate justification. Remarriage after divorce is also criticised.

There are different attitudes among Christians towards divorce:

- Some Christian traditions forbid divorce. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, teaches that marriage is a sacrament. This means that marriage is one of the ways in which God's grace is poured out on human beings. Obviously, for Christians who do not believe in divorce, remarriage is out

of the question unless the previous partner has died. Sometimes a marriage can be annulled, as if it had never taken place. This is very rare and applies to situations where, for example, the couple had not consummated the marriage by sexual intercourse.

- Some Christian traditions allow divorce. They quote Mark 10:2–12 where the Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. At that time, talking about divorce was a tricky situation. John the Baptist had been put in prison for condemning the marriage of Herod of Galilee to Herodias who had been divorced from Herod's brother. Jesus answered by referring the Pharisees back to the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 (see above). Jesus took the opportunity to explain that Moses allowed divorce because of human failure but it was meant to be the exception not the rule. It is in this passage in Mark that Jesus goes on to say that marriage was instituted by God and 'what God has joined together let man not separate.'

Matthew 5:33–37 Oaths

An oath is a sacred vow. It is a promise made in the name of God. To break such a promise means not only that you have told a lie but also you have taken God's name in vain.

Jesus says here that people should not swear by anything. Swearing to tell the truth implies that you are prepared sometimes to tell a lie.

Many Christians take literally the command not to swear an oath. For the majority this means that they are careful not to use bad language. For others it means also that they will not swear on a Bible in a court of law nor will they swear their acceptance of a creed. The Society of Friends, often called Quakers, is one Christian denomination known for living by this principle.

Truthfulness and honesty are important. The Ten Commandments tell people not to bear false witness; not to tell lies. Christians who apply the principles of the Sermon on the Mount say that you can tell a lie without saying anything. If you miss out some

important fact deliberately, in order to deceive somebody, then you have told a lie.

FOR DISCUSSION

Think of a situation to illustrate this idea.

Matthew 5:38–42 An Eye for an Eye

Jesus reminds his audience of the Jewish law of punishment which is found in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. The law of Moses recommended an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In other words it limited the revenge that could be taken. The punishment should fit the crime. Exact compensation was recommended rather than endless feuds. This law is not unique to Judaism. There are parallels in other ancient laws, e.g. in the code of Hammurabi. This was a very humane law, especially at the time it was written.



The stele of Hammurabi, dated about 1750 BC.

Jesus says that if someone hits you on the right cheek, instead of taking the revenge to which you are entitled, turn the other cheek, your left cheek, to the person who is hitting you. This principle applies to all situations. If someone claims your tunic, give your cloak as well. When the Roman soldier is entitled to ask you to carry his gear for one mile, take it two miles.

This is a challenging passage to anyone who reads it. Do not take revenge, do not retaliate, do not seek retribution. Some readers, not only Christians, take it so literally that they become pacifists. They will not

go to war and they will not use force in any situation. Other people see it as an ideal to aim towards.

Matthew 5:43–48 Love Your Enemies

It was logical to go on to talk about loving your neighbour after talking about revenge because the Jewish Law itself says in Leviticus 19: 18 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.'

Jesus talked about the importance of the command to love your neighbour in Mark 12:28–34 (see below). It is not one of the Ten Commandments but it summarises some of them.

When Jesus was asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' he told the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate that your neighbour means everybody including your enemies (Luke 9:25–37).

The same point is made in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus takes the command to love your neighbour and extends it to include not only neighbours but enemies as well.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

This unconditional love for every individual person is meant to reflect God's love and to be the distinctive mark of Christians. The Greek word for such love is 'agape'.

The final verse of this chapter says, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

- Either it means: By copying the behaviour laid down in the Sermon, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians can become more and more like Jesus, the example of perfect humanity.
- Or: The chapter is giving guidelines of an extreme ideal example for Christians to aim towards though it would be unrealistic to think they could ever totally achieve such a standard.

By using this command to be perfect, Jesus was echoing Leviticus 19:2 where the Hebrews are told to