

CHASING PERFECTION

A Prep Guide for Session Three of a Scholarly Stroll

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“Perfect Peasants?!” (Nosy Nahum, Page Six Column, *The Sepphoris Sun*)

More heads are turning toward our Galilee, dear reader, and they aren't all happy heads. Jesus, the upstart ambler from over the western hill, has once again raised a ruckus – this time by proclaiming to the unwashed masses that they ought to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Scholars are fuming; aristocrats are snorting; rabbis are raging; but the *hoi polloi* are flocking. While opponents mutter the ancient adage, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?!”, outcasts stream down the hillside with renewed hope for a future. There is surely more to come from this baffling, bearded bumpkin, and, as ever, I will keep you on the inside.

When Things Break

Contrary to sensationalist rumors, Jesus never married; but he did honor marriage. Jesus taught that God designed marriage as a lifetime gig. But the U.S. divorce rate hovers around 50%, and Christian numbers are no lower – even among those keen on the “defense of marriage” act. [And a growing percentage of westerners are choosing not to marry at all.](#) In 1950, nearly 80% of U.S. households featured married couples. In the 2020's, our married-household rate has dipped below half. The change even has [Cosmopolitan magazine](#) asking “How We Fell Out of Love with Marriage”.

In Matthew 5.31-32 Jesus enters the conversation.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

How do Jesus's demanding words from Matthew 5 land among us? Are they embarrassingly passé – the perfectionist product of a time when marriages were arranged and women were considered chattel? Or are they a pertinent word to our culture now? If we fail at marriage, does Jesus shake a finger at us or weep with us – or both? This is not an easy topic or passage — partly because it is quite personal for many of us.

However difficult this topic, though, we're walking through the Sermon on the Mount and this is our next paragraph, so let's talk! In the Judaism of Jesus' day, men could divorce women, but not the other way around. They debated the question of what constituted adequate cause for a man to divorce his wife. Some of the rabbis insisted

that almost any cause was sufficient. “She burnt the toast!” for example. [Blu Greenberg summarizes in an article for MyJewishLearning:](#)

“Shammai, the strict constructionist of biblical law, maintained that the scriptural words *ervat davar* [meaning ‘some fault or indecency’, which was the standard biblical grounds for divorce] meant, literally and exclusively, “adultery.” Thus, a woman’s infidelity was the only legitimate grounds for divorce. Hillel, known as a liberal because he generally interpreted Scripture more broadly, interpreted *ervat davar* as anything that was offensive to the husband.”

As Shammai and Hillel dug in around a table full of books, to interpret scripture as best they could, their opinions carried weight and impact. In the ancient context, the “liberal” position of Hillel, which gave men a blank check for divorce, put women in considerable economic peril. They had lost their “value” by being deflowered, and yet, like a widow, they had no obvious means of providing for themselves. There was also no mandated alimony or childcare, and women didn’t have access to employment. Shammai’s position was female friendly .

In the first -century context of Palestinian Judaism, Jesus’s Shammai -like teaching on marriage and divorce, if obeyed, would have reduced the number of reasons for which men could divorce their wives — and fewer women would have been left with no way forward.

So why did Jesus say what he said about divorce? Was it because “God hates divorce?” (Malachi 2.16) Or because God loves the women of the first (and every century) and doesn’t want them tossed to the curb? Or both? And if it was at least to help women, what should this mean for how we ought to array the lives of men and women in our century? And doesn’t Jesus know and care about the pain involved in a damaging or abusive marriage – for men and women?

I’ll leave all these questions to your faithful pondering as we head toward our Monday evening conversation.

Jesus and Abe Lincoln

“To be honest...” is a stock American idiom that is, as the Cambridge online dictionary has it, “used for admitting that something is true.” But you and I live and breathe a decade after the Oxford English Dictionary people named “post -truth” their annual “Word of the Year”. So, if we hear someone start a sentence with, “To be honest...” we might rightly ask “What were you being before?”

Truth takes an especial tumble in an election year. “Fake news” began (in the media’s usage) as a way to describe fabricated facts, but it has come to identify a heavily biased, oppositional way of reporting news. Across our campaigns, Politifact’s Truth -o-Meters continue to hit all -time lows. It’s not just George Santos, with his false self. Truth has been replaced by what’s most expedient or advantageous in the moment.

But what's the harm, really? Why worry about a little truth -stretching by politicians? It's not like that hasn't happened in politics before.

Jesus cared about such things. In Matthew 5.33 -37, he preached on honesty as an element of integrity.

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

Twelve centuries after Jesus, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri grappled with the harm of untruth in his *Divine Comedy*. In his “Inferno”, liars languish in Circle Eight of nine, the last lair before Lucifer's ice-cold haunts. (Yep, this Italian poet imagined the pit of hell as freezing cold.) This condemnation may seem excessive. White lies can ease social awkwardness, after all ([See Geico's Honest Abe ad.](#)); and a classic Ethics 101 question – “If you live in WW2 Germany, you’ve got a Jewish family sheltering in your attic, and a Nazi soldier knocks to ask, do you tell him the truth?” – implies that some causes may ultimately call for "a noble lie."

But perhaps we ought to take a second look at Dante’s claim. The poet worries about keeping trust with one another, and Americans are experiencing a desperate shortage in that area. In fact, in a 2020 article for the Atlantic, David Brooks identified the decline of our levels of trust for one another and our institutions as a primary mover in the disintegration of our neighborhoods and communities — and even our wider culture.

So, let's look at Jesus's and the brilliant poet's case for truth as a means to trust. Observe the company that liars keep in Dante's hell. Along with those who tell lies, circle eight also hosts counterfeiters, who circulate bad money as if it were good, and frauds, who exploit innocents by their false promises. In a 21st -Century Inferno sequel, Bernie Madoff, whose scheme bilked thousands out of their life savings' by trading on their dreams, would suffer next to the people who mint phony bills one step ahead of the Treasury department's safeguards -- and right there with them would be the purveyors of actual fake news.

For both Jesus and Dante, any assault on truth harms everyone, because it undermines basic human trust. Like counterfeiting, it debases the coinage of the realm: our word. Dante's hell tells us what we already know: a culture of lies leaves us perpetually unstable.

Jesus's words call us to swim against the current cultural stream, and that means not only speaking truth ourselves, but also listening for truth — instead of hearing what we want to hear. As consumers of fake news, our question is naturally, "Where can we find truth?!" In this context, three practices can help us begin to restore truth and trust:

1. Read the raw materials behind the story to fact-check headlines and opinion. This is admittedly difficult. It's much easier to click a headline and believe it. So, this is the informational equivalent of Jesus' call to "go the second mile." The Washington Post headline inclines you to condemn the same thing that the FOX News headline moves you to praise. Don't let news organizations (or candidates, for that matter) do your interpretive work. Listen to the speech, read the executive order or the piece of legislation. Draw your own conclusion from the facts you find.
2. Vary your sources. We live in an age of automated online curators, who usher us further and further into one slant on the truth. "If you liked this article," they say, "you're sure to like that one." This algorithm is useful to us at Target or Walmart or Amazon, to funnel us toward consumer items we prefer. If you bought diapers or men's pants or a mystery novel last time, you'll likely seek that sort of thing again this time. But applying the sameness algorithm to our taste in news hurts us. In the past, I've charged you to "read the other side" in order to understand your neighbor. That's still a good idea. Now, though, I'm giving that variety a purpose that may be more important: helping you to discern truth.
3. Put truth first. Followers of Jesus who live this election season of 2026 will do well to attend especially to facts and truth all the way through. When fact-checkers help us a bit, we may be tempted to gloat about our candidate's lower number of lies. But comparative advantage isn't truth, and a candidate's fit with our own opinion should not outrank truth-telling. Our job as people who love truth is to seek it where it may be found. It's the hard work of disciples, and it's the hard work of citizens -- especially in an election year.

All of this brings us back to Jesus's pithy saying about oaths. As followers of Jesus, "to be honest..." should be what we expect of ourselves. In a society that is trending toward self-serving fibs and lies, we need people who simply make a habit of telling the plain, simple truth. As an older translation renders Jesus's case for truthfulness, "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no..."

Jesus at the Convention

We're heading into a political year and what many see as a crucial mid-term election. But let's hearken backwards or forwards a couple years and imagine Jesus speaking at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. How would his teaching on love for enemies fare in the war we blithely call partisan politics?

Election seasons feature a whole lot of "We" versus "They", "Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth" attitudes (Leviticus 24.19-21; Deuteronomy 19.16-21), and our mortal DNA

has us cheering it on. In every year, we naturally like it when bad guys get their due; but in recent U.S. election years, enemy -hatred is thickly supplied among us. “Those ignorant conservatives” or “those woke progressives” are so disgusting, they don’t deserve our empathy or our prayers. Our love?! Are you kidding me? Have you heard what those MAGA idiots/Socialist Reprobates believe?!

As our righteous dander rises, if we’ll take a breath and listen, Jesus will stop us up short with the outlandish, otherworldly expectation in Matthew 5.38 -47. He doesn’t just tell us to love and forgive our friends. He demands love for our enemies too. He wants us to be kind to those who hate us. In fact, if someone hits us from the right, we turn to offer the left. If someone demands a coat, we’re supposed to say, “No problem! Take my shirt, too.”

Here’s the passage:

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

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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.”

This stark word is very inconvenient for us because, as aforementioned, we have this urge for revenge in us, and we like our stuff. To help us see the forest in which the tall trees cluster, Jesus groups these strange acts under the concept of AGAPE love that preachers talk so much about — the kind “they’ll know we are Christians” by. We don’t often hear Jesus’s stark challenge directly, though, because many of our polarized preachers charge our congregations to love in vague enough terms to shield us from the direct demand and leave worship or Bible study banking on our general benevolence to be enough. On the Left, preachers tell us to love the marginal and the afflicted, but not those so -and-sos who vote down programs for that group. On the Right, teachers hold forth on behalf of the unborn, but not so much the people who don’t share our values. Since so many of us have conveniently chosen the church that suits our politics, everyone leaves feeling righteous.

Jesus does not let us off so easily. First, he gets us to admit that it’s easy to love people who love us and lend to those who will pay us back. (This apparently amounts to C minus level work in his grade book.) Then he reminds us that a God -like love goes much farther than the norm. God, it turns out, is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked — as Matthew’s Jesus says, “makes his sun shine on the evil and the good” — and he insists that the apple of God’s kids should not fall far from the divine tree. If

God loves everyone, regardless, then God's children ought to love everyone the same way. In Jesus's plan, this sort of love turns heads and lights up the world.

"Impractical!" we insist. "Impossible!" we protest. But, of course it's not. The Son himself has shown us what this divine family resemblance looks like. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, knowing all too well that Judas will betray him, Peter will deny him three times, and all of his disciples will forsake him and flee, Jesus feeds them all in the Passover that has become the Lord's Supper to us, When enemies beat him and flog him and put him up on a cross, and even when they ratchet their spite up one excruciating notch higher by ridiculing him as he hangs there, Jesus looks their hatred in the eye and says, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23.34).

Jesus will likely not show up at the political rabid conventions in 2028 and he won't be on a ballot anywhere in 2026, but he wants to show up in his followers. In fact, our polarized setting of mutual hatred across lines of difference is where real disciples stop making excuses and start following. The deeds match the words with this Christ. His is admittedly a daunting standard, but God empowers those he calls, and God calls us. In fact, our Lord's example shines with such integrity and courage, he's so inspiring, that some part of us might even begin to hope that he'll form in us his very problematic, impractical, amazing love.

Perfect?!

"Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect" is a popular sports psychology book that nails a common neurosis. My son Isaac grew up playing golf extremely well for his age, medaling in state -level tournaments, and winning the occasional member -guest outings in elementary and middle school; he then made the varsity team as a freshman in high school. But, because Isaac is a perfectionist, competitive golf almost drove him out of his mind. He didn't even play for a few years. Now he has rejoined the game "just for fun".

Is Christianity "a game of perfect?" Given Jesus's last words of Matthew 5, it's not a bad thing for us to ask. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," says he. Is that bar so high that it makes us want to leave the game altogether?

I know people (and at times am one) who have the same problem with their Christian faith that Isaac and others have with golf — who can shout in frustration Paul's famous self -searching confession, "The good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish!" (Romans 7.15)

On the other hand, I also know people (and I sometimes am one) who are so confident in God's grace or so tired of striving that they have grown lax about Christian morality. They/We have caved in so often to temptations like the anger and lust and lying and vengefulness and hatred that Jesus has addressed one by one in Matthew 5, that they/we have accepted a lesser life as the norm.

So what does Jesus mean — not merely with this last line, but with the aspirational call to shed anger and lust and retaliation and enemy -making?

It will help us to add some context to this daunting one -line word.. To wrap up the section we've frequented, Jesus challenges his charges to redefine their moral comparatives — the community that sets their standards. Jesus channels a middle schooler's parents who say, "The fact that your friends do it doesn't make it right! If they jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?"

Here's how Jesus puts it:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even Gentiles do that? (Matthew 5.46 -47)

Instead of settling for this garden variety pagan morality, Jesus calls them up into God's moral neighborhood.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. (Matthew 5.43 -45)

All of this should suggest to us that Jesus is not demanding flawless perfection. The Greek word that is often translated "perfect" is TELEIOS. It's related to the word TELOS which denotes an end, an aim, or a completion. The word picture Jesus paints is of reaching the point toward which one's life is directed. This is different than acing an exam or having no blemishes. It aligns more with our reading of the Sermon in this course as an outline of proper human thriving in connection with the Creator. In other words, "We were made for this!"

Discipleship is not a game of perfect, friends. In fact, perfectionism has been a hypocrisy -breeding excursion for Puritans and Dana Carvey's Saturday Night Live Church Ladies across the centuries. It almost always leads to arrogance and judgment. Disciple ship is a game of growth, though. Jesus calls us to aim higher, and the family resemblance to God will grow for followers of Jesus increasingly as we fall in line behind his Son.

Preparatory Reading for 19JAN26

As you know, I strongly recommend reading the Bible text thoroughly and repeatedly as your first entry into our conversation. After you have read closely and well the second half of Jesus's "Antitheses" (Matthew 5.31 -45), some of you will wish to pursue extrabiblical resources (commentaries, etc.) that open the Gospel's content more fully. Here are several writings to assist you in this quest.

Francois P. Viljoen, “Jesus’ halakhic argumentation on the true intention of the law in Matthew 5:21–48” (Click [HERE](#))

Dr. Viljoen is a professor of New Testament studies on the Faculty of Theology at North-West University in South Africa. His article compares Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon to rabbinic structures of argument that were contemporary to him.

Blu Greenberg, “Rabbinic and Post -Rabbinic Divorce” (Click [HERE](#))

Blu Greenberg is the founding president of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. Her article chronicles how rabbis have interpreted the divorce laws of the Hebrew Scripture – a conversation that Jesus entered in Matthew 5.31 -32.)

John Meier, *Did the Historical Jesus Prohibit All Oaths? Part 2.* (For Purchase [HERE](#))

Dr. Meier was a prominent figure in the second wave of the Search for the Historical Jesus in New Testament scholarship. I have not read this essay (it, like far too much good New Testament scholarship, is behind a pay wall); but the abstract makes me want to look into it. Dr. Meier explores the uniqueness of Jesus’s prohibition of oaths in its ancient context.

“The total prohibition of oaths (Matt 5:34 -37) come from the historical Jesus. The criterion of discontinuity argues that there is no parallel to Jesus' total prohibition of oaths in the Jewish Scriptures, the intertestamental literature prior to 70 C.E., or the NT. The Jewish Scriptures take oaths for granted and imposes them in a few cases. Apart from Jas 5:12, the NT knows of no prohibition; Paul uses oaths with abandon. The criterion of multiple attestation argues that Jas 5:12 represents an independent tradition of the prohibition; Jas 5:12 is parallel to Matt 5:34 -37 in both content and structure; James has other examples of Jesus' sayings woven into his epistle without attribution; and Jas 5:12 is at odds with James' treatment of the Law in the rest of his epistle. Hence Jas 5:12 qualifies as an independent witness to an isolated stream of oral tradition preserving Jesus' prohibition.” This is Part 2 of a two -part essay.

Scott Burson, “Expanding the Tribe: What Does It Mean to Love Your Enemy?” (Click [HERE](#))

Dr. Burson is a professor of philosophical theology at Indiana Wesleyan University. In this very personal article/blog post, he contemplates a contemporary application of Jesus’s command to love enemies. He continues on this trajectory in his book, *All about the Bass: Searching for Treble in the Midst of a Pounding Culture War* .

Our Class Reading Schedule

05JAN26	Blessed	Matthew 5.1 -16
12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17 -30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31 -48

26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1 - 18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19 - 34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1 - 11
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.12 - 23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24 - 29