

## Oaths and Truth

Matthew 5:33-37

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Some years ago the chaplain of the Kansas State senate prayed this prayer:

Omniscient Father: Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing and the other just the opposite. And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that too. And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I suppose its humorous, but things are much worse today. Today, we live in a culture of half-truths (if that), outright lies, perpetual distortions, skewed one-sided presentations. We are surrounded by rivers of reckless, undisciplined speech. And we generate our own streams of untruthful speech. Of lies, even if only little white lies, and impure speech, unfair speech, and careless, uncharitable speech daily.

Any sensitive soul recognizes how wild and undisciplined the tongue can be. How, in James' extraordinary words – it is set on fire by hell and sets the course of our very lives on fire. The power of life and death is in the tongue and we are often blithely unaware of that power, and thus unaware of what our unwholesome speech, our ungodly speech is doing to ourselves and to others.

The great Scottish author and minister, George MacDonald, said, perhaps surprisingly, but with brutal honesty: I always try – I *think* I do – to be truthful. All the same, I tell a great many petty lies. That's a sensitive soul. You know – I engage in just a little shading, a little embellishment, just slight misrepresentations of the other side. Just bending things a little bit.....nothing big. So, if you speak, this text speaks to you. We continue, of course, to look at our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew chapter 5. We will make two points. Swearing in vv. 33-36, and Simplicity in v. 37. Swearing and Simplicity.

### I. Swearing

First, then, swearing. Just prior to our text, Jesus addressed a permissiveness that had come to reign in contemporary teaching about marriage and divorce. And here he addresses a kind of permissiveness which was prevalent in the

realm of speech. Even as marriage is inviolable and sacred, so speech is to be utterly truthful, unmixed with falsehood or deceit. He begins: You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not break your oath (you shall not swear falsely) but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made."

First, notice that vows and oaths belong together. A vow, a public promise to perform something, also entails an oath. That is, it calls on God as judge to bless one's ones obedience and punish one's disobedience.

Now, the citation from Jesus – fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made-- does not come from any one Mosaic Law, but it's a good summary of many laws. For example: The third commandment says: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. This commandment is, first and foremost, about swearing an oath in a legal setting. It's about perjury.

Lev. 19:12 says: You shall not swear BY my name falsely, and so PROFANE the name of the Lord your God. Profanity is first and foremost PROFANING, treating as common, God's name by FALSE vows and oaths.

Dt. 32:21 says: When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack in paying it.

So what is in view here is the making of a vow, an oath-bound promise, to the Lord, and then breaking the vow. Thus, swearing falsely. You have heard it said you shall not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

Then, in v.34, Jesus, as the fulfiller of the true intent of the law, the end of the law, renders his judgment. BUT I SAY TO YOU: do not swear an oath at all. It appears that Jesus is making an absolute prohibition. No swearing of oaths. And some in the history of the church, and some today, read the text that way. This would entail no serving in the military, no life in politics, no holding any office which requires an oath.

For example, the Anabaptists (spiritual ancestors to groups like the Quakers and Mennonites), see a complete banning of oath-taking here. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, was sentenced to prison for refusing to take an oath. He famously told the judges: You have given me a book here to kiss and to swear on. And this book which ye have given me to kiss says, "Kiss the Son," and the Son says in this book, "Swear not at all." I say as the book says and yet you imprison me; why do you not imprison the book for saying so?

The logic is impeccable, and the conviction is admirable. And it seems like they have the plain, express meaning of the text on their side (lesson there). Yet, if that is what is being taught, Jesus' statement here would entail a radical break with the OT law.

So we must say a few words about the context (context is king). We could put it this way: In the third commandment, “you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain,” the rabbi’s focused on the “name of the Lord” part, more than the “in vain” part. That is, their concern was to guard the purity of a certain kind of swearing. That is, a swearing BY the name of the Lord. Put differently: they were more worried about profanity (profaning the Lord’s name), than they were about perjury (saying half-truth and falsehoods).

So what happened, and this is documented from Jewish sources, is that they developed an elaborate system of rules for vow-making. Vows made in the explicit name of the Lord were treated strictly. But there were other ways to swear, ways which did not expressly use the name of the Lord. And these vows were treated less strictly, even as non-binding.

What Jesus is doing here is rejecting this kind of tortured reasoning. For it led to the making of vows, and then treating the performance of them as optional. He deals with this also at length in Matthew 23. Which was part of our gospel lesson. Let me read that passage again.

Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.

So, notice the system they’ve constructed: you can swear by the temple, and that is nothing. But if you swear by the gold of the temple – that’s a binding oath. You can swear by the altar – and that is nothing. But if you swear by the gift on the altar, you are bound by that oath. You can swear by heaven – and you may think you’ve avoided swearing by God’s name, but, Jesus says, heaven is God’s throne, so to swear by heaven, is to swear by the one seated on the throne.

This background is crucial for what Jesus says beginning in v.34. 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.

So, you want to swear by heaven and avoid any reference to God, but you can’t because heaven is God’s throne. You want to swear by the earth to avoid using God’s name, but you can’t because the earth is his footstool. You want to swear by Jerusalem to avoid swearing by God, but Jerusalem is the city of the great King.

Jesus is saying: The world and everything in it is the Lord's, so enough of this evasive, non-binding swearing. God is the God of truth, so all speech, all oaths, should reflect his fidelity, and all speech is answerable to his sovereign authority. There is to be no refuge in swearing by something allegedly detached from God and his name. God cares about us profaning his name AND committing perjury.

In v.36 we get: and do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Again, the point is God knows the hairs of your head. Not one of them falls, or changes color, without his sovereign action. You are not sovereign over your head. God alone is Lord over your head, and his name cannot be avoided in our swearing of oaths.

Once we understand this context, we can confidently assert that Jesus is NOT absolutely forbidding all vows. He often does this. He uses hyperbolic speech, where he appears to pit one thing absolutely against another, but he does not intend the contrast to be absolute. But we can say more which bears on this topic.

First, God takes vows. Many of them throughout the Bible. Hebrews 6 expands on the oath he made to Abraham. He doesn't take vows for his own sake, for He CANNOT lie, but he takes them to assure us. God seals the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants with an oath. He guarantees the priesthood of Melchizedek with an oath.

Second, even though, in a perfect world, vows would not be necessary, even though truthful people don't need vows, yet an honest person is not forbidden from taking one if called upon by an authority. In a situation without the evasiveness in view here, a situation where truthfulness is not threatened, vows are fine. Jesus himself takes a vow in Matt. 26: The High Priest says: I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus says: Yes, it is as you say. Even the words yes and no, then, can be truthful replies to oaths imposed by authorities. That's just what Jesus does before the High Priest: he lets his yes be yes, AND he takes an oath. Thus, in serious situations, to assure the public, or to assure other parties, oaths are permissible.

Paul takes about 7 oaths in his letters. He says, for example, I speak the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit. Or, he says, I call God as my witness, that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Again: I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Again, you are our witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you. He takes a Nazarite vow in Acts 18. Paul does these things not because his word is untrustworthy, but because the gravity of the situation requires that he DOUBLY assure his hearers of what he is saying. Essentially the very same reason God takes oaths.

So, we can do the same things. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? I DO. That's letting your yes be yes. *And* making a vow. Do you take this woman as your lawful wedded wife? I do. Do you swear to protect, preserve and defend the Constitution of the United States? I do. But oaths and vows will not save us or our society unless we grasp the main point here.

## II. Simplicity

And that brings us to the question of simplicity. Jesus concludes in v.37 by saying: All you need to say is simply yes or no. Or as James puts it: Let your yes be yes, and let your no be no. Anything beyond this...is a real problem. No, that not what Jesus says. Anything beyond this is Satanic. It comes from the evil one – from the master of deceit, the father of lies.

So, perhaps to beat a dead horse—Jesus again appears to say – enough vowing, just say yes or no. Just speak the truth - that is enough. But given the context (earlier), the most one could say is:

If you are in a situation where all these silly, evasive formulas are being used, in that situation, don't play along – let your yes be yes and your no be no.

But, while oaths and vows are in view, the deeper issue is truthfulness in speech. Speaking with simplicity and purity and accuracy. Knowing that is that ALL our speech is before the face, under the name, of the Lord our God. The name the Rabbis were so perversely earnest to protect. Why do vows even arise in society? Well, they arise because men are deceitful and they lie. Their simple word cannot be trusted. So the Anabaptists are onto something.

I used to work with a guy who had a sort of verbal tick by which he would occasionally say to me: Now, to be frank. One day, I said him why don't we do this? I'll assume you're always being frank, and you tell me when you're lying (more helpful). I mean, what is implied when someone says to you: Can I be frank? Something about their ordinary speech is deficient.

So we conjure up silly oaths and verbal ticks that are meant to convince the other that we really are telling the truth this time. Like: I swear on my mother's grave, or I swear on a stack of Bibles. But it's all a rarely recognized confession about our own dishonesty. Oaths (while lawful) should not be necessary (very rare). The first c. Jewish historian, Josephus, says of the Essenes (a Jewish sect contemporary to with Jesus):

Whatsoever they say is firmer than an oath. But swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury, for they say that he who cannot be believed without swearing by God is already condemned.

So while we would disagree with them about swearing, the underlying point is taken. We agree with them on simplicity. Our word should be enough. Yes or No. Say what you mean and mean what you say. For this same Jesus says: everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. And the one who is blessed in the earth, is blessed by the God of truth. Amen.

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