

**Matthew 5:33-37, 23:16-22**  
**Living Righteously Through our Speech**

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## **Review Sermon on the Mount**

This morning we come to Jesus' fourth antithesis in the Sermon on the Mount; his fourth statement that begins: "You have heard that it was said of old; but I say to you." In the first section of Jesus' sermon on the mount; we heard Jesus' teaching on anger and murder. In the second and third statements that begin "you have heard that it was said but I tell you", we heard Jesus' teaching on adultery and divorce. And now we come to the fourth antithesis; the fourth statement of Jesus that begins "you have heard that it was said but I tell you". And we listen to Jesus teaching about oaths.

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount by teaching us how to protect life by practicing the virtue of humility. Then he teaches us how to protect love from being selfish or abused by practicing the virtue of chastity. And now he is teaching us how to protect language by practicing the virtues of integrity and truthfulness.

The first section of the Sermon on the Mount is very important; it literally is a matter of life and death. The second section is equally important for it deals with matters of the heart; with how we see or regard others and how we treat them in the intimacy of friendship or relationship. But then Jesus begins to teach us about oaths and our speech. Why does Jesus consider our language to be such high importance in his sermon on the mount; immediately following teaching on anger, murder, adultery, and divorce? How does oath making compare with the enormous implications of murder, adultery or divorce? Why is honouring our word of such significance to our King and our Saviour as that of honouring life and love?

## **Righteousness as goal**

Well it's important that we remind ourselves what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount. He preaches and teaches what his Kingdom is all about so that we can be formed as his people. Jesus invites us to go deeper into his gospel message; deeper into what His Kingdom looks like. Through his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows us the way of righteousness – of being in right relationship with God, others, all creation, and ourselves. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is for our character formation; so that we will be people who are righteous; people defined by Kingdom of God qualities. So how do we understand the connection of righteousness and oath making? Rather, how do we understand the connection between righteousness and speech?

## **Jesus as God's Word**

Jesus seeks to protect language; to protect speech; to protect words. Words matter in God's Kingdom. After all, Jesus is the Word. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* Words matter for Jesus because words and deeds always go together. In the beginning there was nothing; there was chaos. Creation comes from God speaking; creation comes from the Word. We see the calming of the storm coming from God's Word. We see the healing of people coming from God's Word. Words matter because word and deed are inseparable. I'm sure each of you can remember a time when someone's words didn't match their actions; when there was a disconnect between word and deed.

Words matter because words have power. They have power to bring together or to separate; to reveal or hide; to heal or hurt; to comfort or aggravate. In the same way that anger, murder,

adultery or divorce disrupts unity; so too do lies and untruthful speech. So let's look a little closer at Jesus' teaching on integrity and truthfulness.

## **Old Testament Commandments**

Most of you will immediately recognize that in verse 33 Jesus deals with two of the ten commandments. Now, the ten commandments are divided into two: commandments 1 through 4 deal with our relationship with God. And commandments 5 through 10 address our relationship with others. In Jesus' teaching on oaths, he combines the third commandment which says that we shall not take the Lord's name in vain and the ninth commandment which says we shall not bear false witness. In Jesus' antithesis about oaths; Jesus integrates a commandment about our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Jesus addresses both oaths or vows of promise between people and oaths made before God. In doing so, Jesus will show us how the Ten Commandments were originally about righteousness.

## **Definitions**

Now the Old Testament commandment that speaks about not taking the Lord's name in vain is often translated in our Bibles as not swearing. This is not the same as what we understand to be cussing or using inappropriate language. In ancient times, an oath was understood as someone calling God as witness to their statements. An oath brought God into the picture and was used to strengthen the validity of a statement. It was supposed that a declaration carried more weight and was more legitimate if a person made an oath by bringing God into the picture as a witness to the statement. There is the perception that oaths artificially increase the gravity and seriousness of

my word; which is to suggest that ordinarily my word, my speech, my language isn't true or serious. So when I say "I swear to God" what I'm really saying is "What I am about to say is absolute truth. I'll box it off from my regular speech which isn't always truthful". This carries with it the implication that people expect me to lie from the start. Because they expect me to lie, or at least to carry some untruthfulness; I need to make an oath and word of honour. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it sounds like "I swear to God that I ...".

In the ancient times, Jewish rabbis believed that lying was one of the four greatest sins that separated a person from God's presence. Perjury – which is the act of making a vow and breaking it – was regarded as a very serious offence. In fact, the Jewish sect, the Essenes, regarded swearing worse than perjury so swearing at all costs was avoided. The Essenes believed that someone who cannot be believed without swearing is already condemned. Speaking truthfully was highly valued and regarded in ancient Jewish custom. Israel was the only nation that believed in Yahweh God and the practice both of making and taking oaths was something that occurred daily.

### **Examples of oaths in Bible**

Oaths were a regular practice in ancient Israel and in the first century when Jesus lived. In fact, many of you will notice that the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, are full of God and God's people making oaths. From Abraham instructing his servant to make an oath concerning Isaac's wife to Joseph making Israel swear about what will happen to his bones after he died to

King Zedekiah swearing an oath to Jeremiah. God Himself seems to make an oath in Genesis and Jesus takes an oath on trial. In the New Testament, it appears that Paul also makes an oath.

It is important for us to understand the purpose of oaths in the Bible. Remember that an oath was used to signal that a statement was legitimate and valid. An oath effectively indicated that the statement was most certainly true. Now God obviously does not need to increase his credibility and add more weight to his own statements; distinguishing them as valid and legitimate. God uses and makes an oath in the Bible to elicit and confirm our own faith in him. God uses oaths not because he cannot be trusted but to help our unbelief.

### **History of oaths**

So if God used oaths and many of Israel's leaders used oaths, what does Jesus mean when he says make no oath at all? To understand that, we need to understand the type of speech that was happening during the first century.

Over time, as Israel's history unfolded, her faith in Yahweh God turned into verbal piety and legalism. This was reflected in the language as well. The use of oaths had seeped into daily speech. There was still this hesitation to use God's name when making an oath or swearing. So instead of using God's name when making an oath people began to swear or make an oath by using some other object or place – like heaven or earth or Jerusalem or one's head. This satisfied the perception that God's name was not being misused or abused. In fact, there was an entire

book in the Mishnah that detailed extensively what was appropriate to swear by and what was not ok to swear by. For example, if you swear toward Jerusalem then you are bound by your word. But swearing by heaven or earth or by Jerusalem was not binding. Oaths had become an occasion to construct clever lies and casual deceit.

What the Pharisees did was to shift the attention away from the vow or oath itself – away from commitment, integrity, and truthfulness – to a formula. The Pharisees established a clear formula that was either acceptable or not acceptable in making a formula. It was argued that it isn't wrong to take something other than the Lord's name in vain but it's wrong to take the name of the Lord in vain. So the elaborate rules to make a vow listed the formulae which was permissible. Speech had turned into a set of rules.

### **Heaven, earth, Jerusalem, head: vv 24-26**

Jesus is addressing this legalism; is addressing the formulae that the Pharisees had established; is addressing the everyday regular speech that has become meaningless through the use of oaths and the determination of what is binding and what is not binding. Jesus is trying to deal with two problems: first, the issue of constant swearing: taking an oath when an oath isn't necessary. It was common in Jesus' time to regularly say "by thy life" or "by thy head" in everyday speech. Speech became meaningless. Secondly, Jesus was addressing evasive swearing. Oaths were divided into two: absolutely binding oaths and those that were not absolutely binding. For example, if someone swore by heaven then it was not binding, you didn't have to follow through

with your promise. But if you swear by the name of God then it is binding, you must obey your word.

So now we come to verses 34-36 with a bit more clarity. As I mentioned earlier, the rabbis declared what was permissible to swear by and what broke the Lord's commandment. Among those permissible – among those that weren't using the Lord's name in vain – included swearing by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, and by one's own head. In a similar way, we see this in Matthew 23 where the Pharisees declared it was ok to swear by the temple, but not the gold; to swear by the altar, but not the gift on the altar. When someone swore by the temple it meant someone couldn't hold them to it. But when someone swore by the gold then their word must stand.

What Jesus does here is address the formula that was created to make vows. Jesus says the formula, the rulebook, legalities are irrelevant because we cannot avoid reference to God. So if the precise wording of the formula is irrelevant, then it means that the law is not about the formula. The law is about keeping our vows and our promises; it is about being people of integrity and truthfulness who keep our word and our promise and our commitment. It is about righteousness.

Jesus' counter argument is that whatever someone swears by is related to God somehow; for the whole world is God's. Behind every oath implicitly is God's name. Jesus says that no one can keep God out of a transaction; out of our speech. God is everywhere. There is nothing in this

world that doesn't already belong to him. So our life, and our speech, cannot be divided into compartments where God is present in some and absent in others. Our speech is not one thing in church and a different manner in the marketplace or sports field or arts venue. Because God is everywhere present it means that all promises are made in the presence of God.

### **Oath making vs oath taking**

So Jesus says to not make oaths at all? Could he really mean that we should never make an oath? What about those occasions when we are asked to take an oath? Just over a year ago, I attended a Canadian citizenship ceremony here because I knew a few people who were becoming Canadian citizens. At that ceremony, each person was asked to take an oath of citizenship; the final legal part of the citizenship process. The oath says this: *“I swear (or affirm) That I will be faithful And bear true allegiance To Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second Queen of Canada Her Heirs and Successors And that I will faithfully observe The laws of Canada And fulfil my duties As a Canadian citizen.”* As someone born in Canada, it is something that I have never actually needed to state. When a person occupies an office of government, whether federal, provincial/territorial, there is an oath of office or allegiance that is declared. So what are we, as Christ followers to do?

Our Christian friends in the Quaker and Mennonite traditions refuse to take any oath in a business transaction or court. It's important to make the distinction between making an oath and taking an oath. To make an oath is to initiate the vow, the promise, the oath. To take an oath is to respond to what someone is asking us to do. Someone has already created and initiated the oath

and is now asking us to take the oath. When there is a legitimate authority asking us to take an oath, I believe that we can.

### **Yes yes, no no**

Jesus tells us that our character, our integrity ought to be enough that we don't need to make an oath; we don't need to swear that what we are saying is true.

Now, we can get into sticky situations. Over the centuries and generations it is often debated if, in a situation of life and death; where telling the truth would lead to someone's death or serious injury, what do we do? Rare are these situations in our part of the world. But this is where, again, we must practice all the principles that Jesus teaches, not legalism. And mercy and love sometimes trump truthfulness.

### **Yes yes; no no: v 37**

What does Jesus mean in verse 37 when he says "*Let your word be yes yes or no no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*" He is reminding us that we ought to be people of integrity and truthfulness. There is a temptation, which is particularly true for certain cultures, to tell people what they want to hear. This expectation has good intention for it seeks to keep harmony between people by pleasing them.

When I lived in Uganda for a year, you can imagine the culture shock I experienced at many different levels. One thing I never quite mastered in Uganda was their way of communicating. I was raised in a home with a lawyer as a father who taught us the importance of integrity and truthfulness. My family does not beat around the bush and to this day, if I need to hear something bluntly, particularly when I am in the wrong, I call someone from my family because I know they will tell me something at face value. I was also raised in a German home where arriving somewhere on time meant being there 15 minutes before the agreed upon time. So in Uganda when dealing with matters of time, I was completely confused. Scheduled events and meetings to begin at 10am didn't start until 2pm. When friends and colleagues would arrange to visit their response was almost always "I'm coming". Now to my German mind, this means that I have left my home and I am walking to you right now and will be there in a matter of minutes. But to my Ugandan friends and colleagues it meant I am coming to see you sometime. I don't know when but it is my desire to come to you so I'm coming. Over the 12 months I lived and worked in Uganda, I picked up language cues and even began to play that game. Jesus' teaching on integrity and truthfulness of speech is still relevant for us today because it shows us a different way of living and being.

## **Evil One**

So why are oaths evil, as Jesus says? As Bonhoeffer writes "*the very existence of oaths is a proof that there are such things as lies. If lying were unknown, the world would have no need for oaths... But it goes further than that: for there, where alone the oath claims final truth, is space in life given to the lie, and it is granted a certain right to life.*" Bonhoeffer reminds us that the very fact that we have to say 'I swear' or 'take my word' is evidence that sometimes we

shouldn't take their word. I was recently talking with a friend and, when asked a personal question that I thought was quite important I said "to be honest, ..." It is not uncommon to hear people say this but, if we pause and think about it, it's not necessary unless at other points of our speech we are dishonest. The necessity of using oaths is evidence of the brokenness and fallenness of our world. If integrity and truthfulness is what God's Kingdom is all about; what righteousness is about; then the need for oaths remind us that our world is still fallen. We, as followers of Christ, must seek to make this world one where falsehood and infidelity will be gone so that oaths are not needed. Jesus has overcome the whole world and should not our speech believe this and testify to this?

### **Concluding comments**

Just as Jesus' command concerning murder seeks to protect life and Jesus' teaching on adultery and divorce seeks to protect love; so too does Jesus' instruction about oaths seek to protect language. According to Jesus, the trustworthiness of our speech is as important as the trustworthiness of temperament and the trustworthiness of relationships. How we speak in private and in public reflects righteousness. Righteousness in God's Kingdom includes integrity and truth. So may we be people whose speech reflects God's Kingdom.