



World Christian Fellowship

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Credibility Matthew 5:33-37

Matthew 5:33-37, *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.*

Talk is cheap, and we need to make sure that our words correspond with our actions, and that our actions correspond with our words. There are few things more important to your reputation than simply speaking the truth about what you have done and doing what you say you will do.

How can we credibility in a world of deception?

The first sin that happened on the earth was a lie.

Satan deceived Adam and Eve, which plunged the world into sin and destruction. From that point, lying became common.

Paul described the effects of sin on humanity.

Romans 3:13, *“Their throats are open graves, they deceive with their tongues.”*

Sin has affected everybody’s integrity.

Children struggle with lying, adults struggle with it, and the aged struggle with it also.

Dishonesty is an epidemic from pre-school through graduate school.

From the home to the workplace. It is often hard to trust people in our society.

Why do people practice lying?

- People lie to make themselves look better (a little exaggeration makes a story more exciting).
- People lie to protect themselves from consequences (often to cover up a failure committed).
- People lie to gain something they want (like a good grade, a promotion, or tax benefits).

Psalms 15:1-4, *Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? ²He who walks uprightly, And*

*works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart;
³He who does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his
neighbour, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;
⁴In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honours those
who fear the Lord; He who swears to his own hurt and does not
change;*

Jesus is particularly talking about taking oaths in this passage. His words would also apply to the promises and vows that we make.

These are all similar, but an oath specifically means bringing God into the equation.

When you take an oath, you are calling on God as your witness that you are telling the truth, and you are calling on God as your judge should you be lying or if you should break your word.

The most common way people take oaths today is when we say things like “I swear to God ...” in order to bolster our words.

The Quakers refused to follow our legal system’s requirement that witnesses in court must place their hand upon a bible and “swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

They were criticized, and ridiculed and in some cases, incarcerated for their refusal to take an oath. But because they have gained the reputation of being honest people, they are, in some courts, no longer required to swear on the bible. They are known as truth-tellers.

It is a joke with a truth:

Conversation between a husband and wife.

Wife: why don't you tell me you love me anymore?"

Husband: "I told you fifty years ago that I loved you, and if that ever changes, I will let you know."

For truth-telling has reached an all-time low.

Politicians have turned "spinning the truth" into an art form.

Corporate executives have fleeced stockholders with their fuzzy accounting systems.

Government and educational institutions have affirmed the adage that there are three kinds of lies in this world: Lies, Damed Lies and Statistics.

A national men's organization arose in the 1990's and had the audacity to call themselves "Promise Keepers." But compared to our population at large, that's exactly what they were.

V 33, *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’*

1. What did the OT teach about taking oaths?

Jesus presents a summary of several Old Testament commands related to the taking of oaths.

Leviticus 19:12, *And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.*

Exodus 20:7, *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*

The Old Testament did not forbid taking oaths; in fact, it encouraged taking them.

Deuteronomy 10:20, *You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.*

Even the Gentiles were encouraged to make oaths in God’s name.

Jeremiah 12:16, *And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the Lord lives,' as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they shall be established in the midst of My people.*

God permitted oaths to restrain humanity's natural tendency to lie. By invoking God's name, it brought a greater accountability between people.

Essentially by invoking God's name, one asked for God's judgment in the case of lying.

Deuteronomy 23:21, *"When you make a vow to the Lord your God you must not delay in fulfilling it, for otherwise he will surely hold you accountable as a sinner."*

Numbers 30:2, *If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

What was forbidden in the OT was breaking one's vows and also flippantly making them. Oaths were reserved for the most solemn occasions and were to be kept.

Ecclesiastes 5:2-6, *Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.*

³For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words. ⁴When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— ⁵Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. ⁶Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?

However, this was exactly what the Jews were doing. They were flippantly taking oaths, breaking them, and deceiving others by their use.

Rabbis taught that as long as people didn't use God's name in an oath, they were free to break it.

They would swear upon one's mother, father, Jerusalem, or something else that appeared sacred. It was like a child making a statement with his fingers crossed.

Legal loopholes and manipulation of oaths by religious leaders.

Jesus said I have come to fulfil the law and Prophets.

The problem was that, just as with murder and adultery, the Pharisees were reinterpreting the law to find a way out. The problem wasn't with the Old Testament commands but with

the Pharisees' legal loopholes and the manipulation of oaths to get away with deception.

The Pharisees taught the people, "Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord," they focused on the phrase "to the Lord." In other words, they found a loophole.

Sure, you had to keep the oaths you made to the Lord, but you didn't have to keep the oaths you made to each other.

2. Was Christ forbidding to take oath?

V 34-36, But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

However, Christ was not forbidding all oath taking. Again, the OT encouraged taking oaths.

God swore that he would fulfil His call on Abraham's life and offspring.

Genesis 22:16-18, and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son— ¹⁷blessing I will bless you,

and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

In fact, when Jesus was on trial and put to an oath by the high priest to say if he was the Son of God, Jesus affirmed.

Matthew 26:63-64, *But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” ⁶⁴Jesus said to him, “It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*

Paul took oaths before God several times in his epistles.

2 Corinthians 1:23, *Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.*

Galatians 1:20, *(Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)*

Christ is not giving an absolute prohibition of oaths. He is condemning frivolous oaths and evasive oaths, which only increased dishonesty instead of decreasing it.

a) Oaths weaken the truth

Oaths weaken the truth. There is an irony here. Oaths are meant to strengthen the truth, but they actually end up weakening it instead.

An oath is always a revelation of a possibility of deceit. Think about it.

The only reason oaths exist is because lies exist. If everyone everywhere always told the truth, there would be no need for oaths.

The Old Testament condemned the lie by the use of the oath. But Jesus destroys the lie by forbidding oaths.

The oath must go since it is a protection for the lie.

Matthew 23:16-22, *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’¹⁷ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?¹⁸ And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it,*

he is obliged to perform it.’¹⁹Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?²⁰Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it.²¹He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.²²And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

Jesus exposes some of the real-life ways that the Pharisees tried to manipulate their oaths.

Instead of swearing by God’s name, they would say something like:

“I swear to heaven that I am telling you the truth!” Or

“I swear by heaven and earth” Or

“I swear by Jerusalem, you can count on me!” Or,

“I swear by my own head I will be there!”

These all sounded fancy and even religious, but you will notice none of the oaths mentioned God directly. That was the point.

The Pharisees taught you only had to keep the oaths you made “to the Lord.” So, by swearing by things that were related to God without actually mentioning God, you could make the other person think you were serious and still get away with breaking your word.

Jesus will have none of these games when it comes to the truth. He says, *“You think you can swear by heaven and get away with it? It won’t work because heaven is God’s throne. Or you think you can swear by the earth? That won’t work either because the earth is God’s footstool. You think you can swear by Jerusalem and get away with it? Sorry, Jerusalem is God’s city.”*

What about people who swore by their head?

To swear by your head meant to swear by your life.

We have a similar saying people use today: “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

But Jesus said, *“You can’t swear by your head, because you have no control over your head. You cannot even make one hair white or black.”*

Jesus was talking about the process of aging, and sure you can dye your hair, but it doesn’t change the fact that you are growing older. You can’t swear by your life, because you do not have control over your life, whether or when you will live or die. That’s God’s territory.

Jesus is saying you cannot escape God in your words. You cannot remove God from the equation. The Pharisees were trying to game the system by making it seem like they were making an oath in God’s name when they were not.

But Jesus says God is always witness to what you say whether you call on him as witness or not.

Therefore, Jesus says don't swear at all.

Why?

Because oaths actually weaken the truth.

God is always witness to what you say anyways.

We must therefore recognize God as sovereign over all if we are going to practice radical righteousness.

God is everywhere and hears everything, and we will be judged not only for breaking our oaths, but also for every word.

Matthew 12:36-37, *But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. ³⁷For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*

Revelation 22:15, *But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.*

We must recognize God as sovereign.

God is everywhere,

God hears all, and
God will judge all.

Therefore, truth is important in every situation, not just some situations.

Hebrews 4:13, *And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*

3. Keep it simple.

V 37, *But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.*

Your “yes” or “no” should be sufficient.

If you need to add something to your words to make them more credible, it throws doubt on all your other words.

There can be no double standards when it comes to the truth. No oaths are necessary when you always tell the truth.

Think about it.

If the other person has to ask you, “Do you promise?” that shows that maybe you haven’t been faithful to your word in the past.

So let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no,' 'no.' If you say you are going to something, do it.

If you say you are not going to do something, don't do it.

Be a person of your word, but don't swear an oath about it.

If you are a person of integrity, then your "yes" or "no" should be sufficient.

Satan is the father of lies.

V 37, *But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

John 8:44, *You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.*

Satan is the father of lies.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

When we speak the truth, we follow Jesus.

But when we lie or deceive, we follow Satan.

Satan spoke through Peter in order to try to convince Jesus to not go to the cross.

Matthew 16:23, *But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."*

We are no less vulnerable to the enemy's tactics. When we accept lies and then begin to speak to them, we allow Satan to use our voice box to deceive, discourage, and destroy. We must be aware of this reality.

Ephesians 6:14, *Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness,*

Paul said that we protect ourselves from Satan's attacks by putting on the belt of truth. We must know God's Word if we are going to stand against the evil one and his deceptions. We must not only know it, but we must constantly speak it.

Jesus says the best way to avoid all this is to stop swearing altogether. Keep it simple. Just say yes or no, and then stick with it. Be a person of such integrity that no one will ever doubt your simple word.

4. Public oaths are not forbidden by Scripture!

Is it ever wrong to take an oath?

There are certain oaths or vows that we make today.

Let me give you some examples:

- marriage vows,
- ordination vows,
- church membership covenants,
- signing contracts, and
- sworn testimony in court.

Is Jesus forbidding these things as well?

Some people believe so, and so they refuse to take an oath even in court.

Scripture makes a distinction between public and private speech.

When we compare Scripture to Scripture, it becomes clear that public oaths are not forbidden by God.

a) God permits and takes oaths.

God permits and takes oaths Himself.

Deuteronomy 10:20, *You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.*

Hebrews 6:16-18, *For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all*

dispute. ¹⁷Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, ¹⁸that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

b) Jesus took an oath in court.

Matthew 26:63-64, *But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" ⁶⁴Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

c) Paul calls God as his witness.

Romans 1:9, *For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,*

2 Corinthians 1:23, *Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.*

It's unfortunate, but in a world of lies, public oaths are sometimes required to better ensure that the truth is being told.

It's similar to carrying keys. In a world without theft, there would be no need for keys. In the same way, in a world without lies, there would be no need for oaths.

In summary Jesus prohibited the use of misleading oaths, but he did not intend to prohibit all use of oaths. Oaths in court, marital vows, oaths of office, and the use of other oaths on solemn occasions to emphasize one's truthfulness comport both with biblical teaching and Christian practice.

So it is not wrong to take a public oath in a situation that requires it, but for the reasons already stated, we should eliminate oaths from our personal, everyday speech.

Conclusion:

Three applications:

1. Be truthful in your speech.

Proverbs 12:22, *Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, But those who deal truthfully are His delight.*

No lying, no exaggerating, no distorting or shading the truth. Speaking the truth is absolutely necessary for trust.

Speaking the truth brings great freedom to your life.

“If I speak what is false, I must answer for it; if truth, it will answer for me.”

Commit yourself to always speaking the truth, and it will revolutionize your life.

2. Be careful what you promise.

Ecclesiastes 5:2, & 5, *Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.*

⁵Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

God is always witness to what you say, so you need to be careful about what you promise. Make sure you anticipate all potential obstacles before giving your word.

Always leave room for God’s will. “If the Lord wills” is a good phrase to attach to all your plans and promises.

3. Be faithful in following through.

Psalm 15:1-5, *Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? ²He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart; ³He who does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbour, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;*

4In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honours those who fear the Lord; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

5He who does not put out his money at usury, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

Speak the truth from your heart, and once you have given your word, be faithful in following through, even when it hurts.

Did you say 'yes'?

Then make sure you follow through with 'yes.'

Did you say 'no'?

Then make sure you follow through with 'no.'

That's what it means to let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no,' 'no.' Be people of truth, be people of honour, be people of integrity.

Of course, we all fall short in this area of truth-telling, promises and commitments, and this is where we once again turn to the cross of Christ.

"The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power that can make us truthful." **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

Only God's grace can forgive you of your sins.

Only God's truth can set you free.

So let us live honestly in light of the cross, and let us keep our eyes on Jesus, who died for you so that you can live for Him.