



KEEPING YOUR WORD

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:33-37

13th Message

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Soren Kierkegaard tells a tale about a make-believe country where only ducks live. One Sunday morning, all the ducks came into church, waddled down the aisle and into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" The ducks yelled, "Amen!" And they waddled home.

That humorous little story is a reminder of the purpose of studying the Bible. It is not to make us smart. Learning is not the goal, nor is gathering information. The goal of Bible study is transformation. The truth is given to make us more like Christ: to make us more loving. Sometimes non-Christians have a better grasp of this than Christians. They don't point out our wrong theology (they don't understand much of anything about theology), but it is disappointing to them when Christians lie, don't pay their bills, cheat on their taxes, fail to keep their word, freeload shamelessly, and desert their mates. Non-Christians know, sometimes better than Christians, that we bear the image of Christ, so we ought to act as Christ acted.

We return to our study in the Sermon on the Mount, the best explanation and the clearest illustration of what true Christianity is all about. In this discourse, Jesus explained the true meaning and intent of the Old Testament law, which the Pharisees had distorted. The verses we will look at this morning speak to the issue of honesty in our speech.

In this context, I am reminded of a story I heard recently. Four high school students were late to school one day. They entered at the end of first period, and solemnly told the teacher they were late because the car had a flat tire. The sympathetic teacher smiled and told them it was too bad that they were late, because they had missed a test earlier that morning. She said she was willing to let them make it up on one condition. She gave each one of them a pencil and paper, sent them to the four corners of the room, and asked them to answer one question: Which tire was flat?

Just as the rabbis tended to be permissive in their attitude toward divorce, they were permissive also in their teaching about oaths. This is another example of their devious treatment of Old Testament Scripture: they wanted to make it easier to obey. As we have done in earlier studies, we will look first at the Mosaic law; next, at how the Pharisees had distorted it; and finally, at the

true implication of the law on which Jesus insisted.

We find his words in Matthew 5:33:

"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' (Matt 5:33, NASB)

Although this is not an accurate quotation of any one law of Moses, it is a summary of several Old Testament precepts which require people who make vows to keep them. And the vows in question are, strictly speaking, oaths in which the speaker calls upon God to witness his vow and to punish him if he breaks it.

Moses frequently emphasized the evil of false swearing and the duty of keeping oaths. Here are a few examples:

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exod 20:7, the third commandment).

"You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God" (Lev 19:12).

"When a man vows a vow to the Lord,...he shall not break his word" (Num 30: 2).

"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack to pay it" (Deut 23 :21).

The intent behind these commandments is quite clear: They prohibit false swearing or perjury, that is, making a vow and then breaking it.

But the Pharisees got to work on these awkward prohibitions and tried to restrict them. They shifted attention away from the vow itself and the need to keep it, to the formula used in making it. They argued that what the law prohibited was not taking the name of the Lord *in vain*, but taking *the name of the Lord* in vain. False swearing, they concluded, meant profanity, not perjury. So they developed elaborate rules for the taking of vows. They listed which formulas were permissible, and they added that only those formulas which included the divine name made the vow binding. One need not be so particular, they maintained, about keeping vows in which the divine name had not been used.

Jesus expressed his contempt for this kind of deceptive reasoning later in his ministry, as we see in Matthew 23:16-22:

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his 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 if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Matt 23:16-22, NIV)

Jesus' teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount is similar.

The second part of his antithesis, in which he set his teaching over against that of the rabbis, reads as follows. Verse 34:

"But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil. (Matt 5:34-37, NASB)

Jesus begins by arguing that the question of the formula used in making vows is totally irrelevant, and in particular that the Pharisees' distinction between formulas which mention God and those which do not is entirely artificial. However hard you try, Jesus said, you cannot avoid some reference to God, for the whole world is God's and you cannot eliminate him from any of it. If you vow by "heaven," it is God's throne; if by "earth," it is his footstool; if by "Jerusalem," it is his city. If you swear by your head, it is yours in the sense that it is nobody else's, and yet it is God's creation and under his control. You cannot even change the natural color of a single hair which is black when you are young and white in old age.

So if the precise wording of a vow-formula is irrelevant, then a preoccupation with formulas is not the point of the law at all. Since anybody who makes a vow must keep it, strictly speaking, all formulas are superfluous. For the formula does not add to the seriousness of the vow. A vow is binding irrespective of its accompanying formula.

That being so, the real implication of the law is that we must keep our promises and be people of our word; then vows become unnecessary. *"Make no oath at all but rather let your statement be, 'Yes, or 'No.'"* As the apostle James would put it later: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." And, Jesus adds, *"anything beyond these is of evil."* It is either from the evil of our hearts and its fundamental deceit, or from the evil one, whom Jesus described as "a liar and the father of lies."

Christians should say what they mean and mean what they say. It is an issue of integrity, which can be defined as doing what you said you would do.

- You promised that you would be faithful to your mate.
- You declared your expenses amounted to a certain figure.
- You promised your son you would play ball with him.
- You assured your roommate you would carry out your end of the load.
- You signed a contract that committed you to certain things.
- You told your neighbor you would bring back the tool you borrowed.
- You swore to tell the truth when you took the stand.
- You told someone you would pay back the money you borrowed.
- You said that you would pray, or return a phone call, or pay your bill, or show up at 6:30.

If divorce is due to human hardheartedness, swearing is due to human untruthfulness.

We might ask at this point, If swearing is forbidden, why did God himself use oaths in Scripture? Remember, he said to Abraham: "By myself I have sworn . . . I will indeed bless you . . ." The answer is that the purpose of divine oaths was not to increase God's credibility, but to elicit and confirm our faith. The fault which made God condescend to this human level is not due to any untrustworthiness on his part, but to our unbelief.

Jesus is emphasizing that honest men do not need to resort to oaths. It is not that we should refuse to take an oath if it is required of us; it is that that external authority is not needed. Oath-taking is a pathetic confession of man's dishonesty. That is why we resort to oaths.

Secondly, if swearing is forbidden, should Christians, in order to be consistent in their obedience, decline to swear an affidavit for any purpose and to give evidence on oath in a court of law? The Anabaptists took this line in the sixteenth century; and most Quakers still do today. While admiring their desire not to compromise, one can still perhaps question whether their interpretation is not excessively literalistic. What Jesus emphasized in his teaching was that honest men do not need to resort to oaths; it was not that they should refuse to take an oath if required to do so by some external authority.

Swearing (i.e. oath-taking) is really a pathetic confession of our own dishonesty. Why do we find it necessary to introduce our promises by some exaggerated formula like, "I swear by the Holy Bible"? It is because we know that our simple, unadorned word is not likely to be trusted. So we try to induce people to believe us by adding a solemn oath. As A. M. Hunter put it, "Oaths arise because men are so often liars." The same is true of all forms of exaggeration, hyperbole and the

use of superlatives. We are not content to say we had an enjoyable time; we have to describe it as “fantastic,” “fabulous,” “unbelievable” or some other linguistic invention. But the more we resort to such expressions the more we devalue human language and human promises.

The issue here is truthfulness. You might want to underline the words in verse 37: “*Let your statement be, ‘Yes,’ or ‘No.’*” In the Old Testament, oaths and vows were meant to be kept. These verses are not a prohibition against oaths. God took an oath; and men of God did. But Jesus is saying, “Among my people, oaths are not necessary.” Your word is true—because Christians have the truth. Christians are related to “the Truth.” They are to speak the truth, in love.

How much we need people with integrity, the kind of people who, when they say, Yes, that’s it, you can take it to the bank; and when they say, No, they are not stuttering.

As we prepare our hearts for taking communion this morning, let us take a few moments and gaze upon the beauty of our Lord. Certainly, no more truthful man ever lived. He was one who called himself “the truth.” John said he was “full of grace and truth.” Everything he did was truthful, and yet he was unfailingly gracious. There is a kind of truth that isn’t gracious at all. It may be the opposite of falsehood, but it is also far from goodness and beauty. It was truth linked with grace that made Jesus the man he was.

I think of that last night before he was crucified, when he and the disciples celebrated that final Passover together, and he instituted the Lord’s Supper. There was an argument over who was the greatest. Who could have blamed Jesus if he had blasted them? But he didn’t. Instead, he girded himself with a towel and washed their feet. He who was the greatest of all became the servant of all. What truth and beauty!

And then there was the leper whom Jesus encountered when he was teaching in one of the little villages of Galilee. Luke says the man was “full of leprosy”—a medical expression for an advanced case of the disease. He was all lesions, running sores and grotesque stumps, discolored and disfigured, shocking in his ugliness, a gross caricature of what a man was intended to be. Jesus, moved with compassion, reached out and hugged him. He didn’t have to touch him. He could have cured him with a word from afar. Yet there was every need in the world to hug this ugly, awful man, because no one else had done so. What truth and beauty!

There was that day when Jesus was teaching in the temple and he was interrupted by shouts and sounds of scuffling. A group of clergymen barged in and uncer-

moniously dumped a rumpled and disheveled woman at his feet. They tried to trick Jesus into breaking the law of Moses. They cried, “Moses commanded that we should stone such a woman. What do you say?” Controlling his anger at their hypocrisy, Jesus uttered the words that have been heard down through the centuries, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” As they all slowly departed, he looked into that woman’s eyes and said to her, “I don’t condemn you. Go and sin no more.” What truth and beauty!

I think of all the dirty little street urchins of that day who used to tag along behind Jesus and climb into his lap. His disciples wanted to shoo them away, but Jesus gathered them into his arms and blessed them. What truth and beauty!

There was a beauty in Jesus’ truthfulness. It was more than being decent and ethical and right, he *did* things beautifully. It was not just what he said, but how he carried out his own words.

The rules and regulations of the Pharisees could do nothing to change their hearts. So don’t leave here today vowing to be more honest, to handle your money better or spend more time with your children. Most of the time that’s the reaction of the flesh—vowing to be more religious. It won’t last, of course.

What we need to do more of is following the Lord Jesus. Let him put his finger on the things that need to be changed in your life. When he begins to change us, then we are changed indeed. Oh, there will be failures along the way, but that will not take away from the reality that you have been changed utterly. No longer are you what you once were. There will be a different quality about your life that bespeaks God’s goodness and his power to change us. Then when we fail, we can admit to it, because there will be no need for a facade of righteousness. Because we have Christ, we have the real thing.

This is what we celebrate when we come to this table: the life of One who kept his word. He died for *all* sin: the obvious sins of murder and adultery, as well as the secret sins of selfishness and pride. He *himself* bore our sins in his body on the cross. That was sin’s final cure. Some people look at the cross and say that man was so bad and God was so mad that someone had to pay. But it was not anger that moved our Lord to be crucified; it was love. The crucifixion is the point of the story: God loves us so much that he *himself* took on our guilt; he internalized all our sin and healed it. That is why, when it was over, he could say, “It is finished!” There is nothing left for us to do but enter into forgiving acceptance.

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