

Week 9 – To Be Perfectly Honest... – Matthew 5:33-37

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 6:13-18

Introduction

“Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye”

Did you ever invoke that oath when you were younger and wanted to make certain you were believed?

How about, “I swear on a stack of Bibles this high” – complete with the indication of just how high a stack you were swearing on

When my girls were growing up it became popular among their crowd to make what they called a “pinky promise” or a “pinky swear” when they would hook their pinky fingers together as they vowed one thing or another or solemnly swore that a thing was true

As kids we invoked such statements to emphasize just how honest and sincere we were being in a particular instance

While we may chuckle when we hear kids say those things we also must recognize that even kids know they don’t always tell the truth and that there is a sliding scale regarding honesty

And because we know that we often speak in such a way that we aren’t exactly lying but also not being completely truthful, we feel the need to take an oath to highlight those times when what we say is 100 percent true

Or at least we want to convince people that what we are saying is true regardless of whether it actually is and the more we want to be believed the more extravagant the oath

It’s not at all unusual for people to tell the most egregious untruths while swearing on their mother’s grave or their children’s eyes or for the words, “I swear to God...” accompany a bald-faced lie

We also have formal oaths and affirmations that are legally required such as when signing important papers or giving testimony in a court of law

In Wisconsin courts, witnesses are required to declare they will testify truthfully either by swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth “so help you God” or by solemnly swearing their testimony is true “under the pains and penalties of perjury” if they have an issue with taking the first oath

And yet, no one really believes that everything that is said from a witness stand is the truth or even sincerely and innocently believed to be the truth by the witness as they say it – because we all know people regularly lie under oath

But that should not be the case for those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven

And in **Matthew 5:33-37** Jesus turns his attention to the matter of oaths and truthfulness

As we examine his teaching we are going to see that, once again, we haven’t progressed really at all since Jesus’ day making this a timely message for us

If you are taking notes, we will begin by looking at the whole notion of oaths as we find them in Scripture

Then we will take a look at the issues that existed in Jesus’ day that prompted him to give his hearers this teaching

And then we will look at what Jesus says about oaths and truthfulness or Jesus’ teaching

Please take your Bibles and join me in Matthew 5 (page 810) and follow along as I read verses 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 to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

This passage is apparently about oaths so let’s take some time to look at other places oaths are mentioned in the Bible and see if our understanding of the passage before us is affected

I. Oaths in Scripture

To take an oath as we see it in our passage means, in one sense, to affirm truth by calling upon God to take punitive action if what they are saying isn't actually true – to declare “May God strike me dead” or “If I'm lyin' I'm dyin'” would be examples of this kind of oath

But oaths were also used in the sense that the nature of the thing sworn upon was meant to validate the statement made – for example swearing on a stack of Bibles

And oaths are found throughout Scripture – in fact, proper oaths are actually commanded in the Old Testament

Look with me at **Deuteronomy 10:20** where we read where Moses told the people of Israel:

*You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and **by his name you shall swear.***

Jeremiah also showed how God would bless the Gentile nations if they would learn to obey God and to swear by his name in **Jeremiah 12:16-17**

And God himself is recorded as swearing oaths

Luke 1:73 speaks of the oath God swore to Abraham to send a Redeemer and in **Hebrews 6:13** we read concerning that oath that *when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself*

And the word “swear” found in Hebrews 6:13 is the exact same Greek word found in our passage so it logically means precisely the same thing

We also see God swear an oath to Noah in Genesis 9 to never send another global flood and there are many other examples of God vowing a multitude of things

Unlike with us though, the Hebrews passage shows that God doesn't appeal to a higher authority, because there is no higher authority than God, but only that he takes pains to assure men of the truth of his statements

Then in **Matthew 26:63** we see the high priest demand that Jesus testify under oath (that's what “adjure” means) as to whether he is the Christ, the Son of God and Jesus did so in verse 64 [**Matthew 26:64**]

And the apostle Paul regularly swore to the truth of statements he made usually by invoking God as his witness such as he does in **Romans 1:9**; **2Corinthians 1:23**; and **1Thessalonians 2:5** and other passages

Oaths, vows, swearing to something – whatever name you put to it, are designed to encourage truthfulness and to make people more serious about what they claim to be true

I bring all of this up to show that Jesus' meaning in our passage from Matthew 5 was not primarily about whether it was proper to take an oath – in light of all the passages we just looked at it couldn't be

Vows were assumed to be a part of life and were even encouraged

But once a vow was made, it was meant to be kept and not broken under any circumstance

So, what Jesus was talking against was not the taking of oaths themselves but what the taking of oaths had turned into

And for that we need to look at the issues at hand when Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount

II. The Issues at Hand

This is the fourth contrast that Jesus brought up in his sermon and having looked at the previous three we shouldn't be surprised to find that the religious leaders of his day had perverted a command of God

It wasn't as if God had been unclear about his view of the seriousness and solemnity surrounding oath-taking

In **Leviticus 19:12** God says: *You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord*

In **Numbers 30:2** Moses writes: *If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

And in **Deuteronomy 23:21-23** we read that it isn't even wise to delay fulfilling an oath: *If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.*

Still, by Jesus' day the religious leaders of the Jews had built up a whole system of rules around the Old Testament teaching regarding oaths and when you had to honor them and when you could ignore them

They relied heavily on the idea of whether a vow was made to God and as time went on, it had become common practice to teach that a vow wasn't binding unless it included God's name or implied it too directly

In fact, there was a whole section of the Jewish oral teachings that was dedicated to the question of oaths and the detailed rules as to when oaths are binding and when they are not – it's quite lengthy and full of tortured reasoning

In other words, the religious leaders spent a lot of effort codifying when a person could safely get away with lying and being deceitful and when they could not

So, of course the first issue that came about was that of **false swearing** where people would deliberately swear to things they didn't intend to honor in a way they believed excused them from honoring their vow

But there was also an epidemic of **casual or frivolous swearing** where oath-taking became so much a part of normal speech that oaths became meaningless

Integrity was therefore trivialized and people would invoke all manner of oaths to try to convince another that they were telling the truth while lying

For example, one rabbi said that if you were to swear *by* Jerusalem you were not bound by your vow; but if you were to swear *toward* Jerusalem then you were bound by your vow

Or, if you were to swear by your own life or the life of someone else or some object but didn't mention or allude to the name of God, you were not bound by your oath

If someone were to swear on a stack of Bibles back then, I imagine they would have determined how high a stack was binding and decided that if you swore on one Bible less you would be free of your vow

We still see the predominant reasoning that was employed back then all around us today when people know they aren't telling the truth but rationalize that they aren't exactly lying either

It's kind of like believing that telling an untruth while having your fingers crossed negates the lie simply because that's the rule and it's your problem if you didn't ask me to have both hands out in the open

A really great example of the mindset that Jesus is talking about is seen in the movie Fried Green Tomatoes where there is a courtroom scene

And in this scene the Reverend Herbert Scroggins is called to the stand to testify and as he approaches the witness stand he is asked by the bailiff to swear on the Bible provided

Whereupon the reverend states that he has brought his own Bible and he goes ahead and swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God

And when he gets up on the stand he proceeds to lie terribly resulting in the acquittal of the star of the movie

Later when it is remarked how unbelievable it is that he lied after swearing on the Bible it is revealed that what he carried with him wasn't the Bible but a copy of Moby Dick

The reverend convinced himself that he was justified in lying even though he had sworn not to because he hadn't actually sworn on the Bible

Obviously, this was an intentional deception against the court and all who witnessed it but it was also the same sort of self-deception that the people of Jesus' day were under that caused them to feel justified in their mendacity

I think maybe Reverend Scroggins would have fit right in with the Pharisees

But God isn't fooled by such faulty reasoning and the splitting of philosophical hairs as we will see next as we consider what Jesus teaches in this passage

III. Jesus' Teaching

In this case, unlike the first two cases, Jesus doesn't quote directly from the Law and what he reminds his hearers they have heard taught is kind of a paraphrase of **Leviticus 19:12** which says:

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

But, as we have seen, in Jesus' day, playing fast and loose with one's vows had become common practice and only vows and oaths the only vows whose fulfillment were considered necessary were those too directly involved God

And oaths, which God had encouraged as a means of fostering seriousness, sincerity, and truthfulness, were instead being used to weaken the truth and to promote deceit as swearing evasively was seen as a rationalization against lying

And that was in spite of the clear teaching of the Old Testament passages such as **Zechariah 8:16-17** which says:

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.

Notice that God's name isn't mentioned in connection with oaths in that passage and what God thinks of any deceptive oath is clear and Jesus was having nothing to do with the elaborate and contorted logic that was widely being practiced

Let's review what he taught on the mountainside that day as found in verses 34-37 [**Matthew 5:34-37**]

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

Basically, what Jesus is saying is that his followers are to be characterized by such honesty and integrity that an oath of any sort is completely unnecessary because what they say doesn't need have its credibility enhanced

But it's only when we read Jesus' argument with an awareness of the common belief and practice that the logic of his teaching becomes clear

Jesus uses four examples of things people were prone to swear by because they sounded lofty but were, in fact, considered to be lesser things that allowed those who swore by them to weasel out of their oath

First, he says not to swear an oath by **heaven** as if it counts less, since God is there on his throne

Then he says don't swear an oath by the **earth** thinking it doesn't count because the earth is where God rests his feet

Don't swear by **Jerusalem** either since it is the city of the great King, God himself

And don't even say, may I be put to death – that's the likely meaning of swearing by **your own head** – since God is in complete control over whether you live or die

In fact, as Jesus points out, you can't even control the natural color of a single strand of your hair

In other words, Jesus says that every oath is sworn to God because God is behind everything so to swear by anything at all is to swear by God

Jesus elaborates on this point in another passage from Matthew 23 where he finds himself once again in a confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees – keep a finger in our passage and look with me at **Matthew 23:16-22** where Jesus says:

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Therefore, according even to the faulty reckoning of the religious leaders, there are no trivial oaths because all oaths are solemn pledges that are made before God and to swear on anything is to swear on God's name

God knows, sees, and hears everything you think, do, and say and he takes the words that come out of your mouth with the utmost seriousness

So the real issue addressed in Jesus' teaching isn't the matter of oaths but of truthfulness itself

And Jesus says it's better for his followers to simply say "yes" when they mean yes and "no" when they mean no and stop with the oaths altogether because anything else comes from evil – that is to say from the tendency to shade the truth and to hide your true intentions

There should be no sliding scale of honesty for a citizen of the kingdom of heaven that requires one to make sure his veracity in a particular situation should be believed more than another

And Jesus is saying that oaths are not to be a part of our normal, everyday conversation not that we cannot take an oath in certain circumstances when they are necessary such as when testifying in a court case

Simply put, kingdom men and women shouldn't need such devices because our commitment to truthfulness should be evident to all

But when an oath is warranted or required we are free to make them because they aren't universally forbidden by God and actually have their place but when we do swear an oath we must be sure to live up to it completely and quickly

Conclusion

Without a doubt, Jesus is calling his followers to maintain a very difficult standard of truthfulness and, if we're honest, it's a standard that we have to admit we struggle to live up to

We might well wonder why that should be since we claim to know the truth and we follow him who is the Truth as Jesus reveals himself to be in **John 14:6**

The eminent preacher, George **MacDonald**, wrote the following to his son in December, 1878 –

"I always try – I *think* I do – to be truthful. All the same I tell a great many petty lies, e.g. things that mean one thing to myself though another to other people. But I do not think lightly of it. Where I am more often wrong is in tacitly pretending to hear things which I do not, especially jokes and good stories, the *point* of which I always miss; but seeing everyone laugh, I laugh too, for the sake of not *looking* a fool. My respect for the world's opinion is my greatest stumblingblock I fear."

Do you relate to that? I do

I have to admit that there are times when I'm telling someone something and all of a sudden I realize that what I am saying isn't exactly true – anyone else ever have that happen?

How many times do we tell a story with a certain slant that makes us look better or makes someone else look worse than the hard facts would actually show if they were made known?

How many times do we promise to do something while really meaning that we might do the thing if it doesn't prove to be too inconvenient when the time comes?

How often do we use calculated language and vague statements – never actually straying from the facts – all while knowing that we are leaving someone with a false understanding?

How often do we pretend to know more than we do or speak with more authority and assurance than is warranted just to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others?

How many times do we recite as "facts" that which we know are nothing more than wishful thinking or products of our own imagination thinking no one will ever know the difference?

Of course, we're all guilty of making mistakes or of saying things that we honestly don't know are false and that isn't what Jesus is teaching against here – it's the deliberate deceit disguised as truth that we are all guilty of

Perhaps the most humbling thing that we discover from Jesus' teaching on truthfulness is how our words describe the true condition of our hearts

Turn with me to Matthew 12 follow along as I read verses 33-37 [**Matthew 12:33-37**]

"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

There are two things we want to be sure to catch from those verses

First, our words reveal our hearts and second, we will each give an account before God for every word we speak – not just the oaths we take

Truthful speech comes from a truthful heart just as deceitful speech comes from a heart of deceit

And, once again as he has done repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals that he is more concerned with our hearts – with what's inside us – than he is with our actions and our rote adherence to an external standard

We can do a great deal to correct our lies by dealing with them swiftly and harshly when we recognize them but God has called us to a life of internal truth of the heart and only God can work that change in us

So, as we close, let's ask God to tune our hearts to the truth and to make us truthful as befits a true citizen of his kingdom

Let's pray