

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Spiritual Credibility Gap

Scripture: Matthew 5:33-37

Code: 2222

This morning, we have an unusual and wonderful change in our schedule here at Grace Church. For many, many months, on Sunday nights, we have been studying the gospel of Matthew. We who have been a part of the Sunday night fellowship for those months have had a tremendous time. I would mark the study of Matthew, so far, as a real milestone in my own life.

While I was away, a reporter or someone doing an interview asked me the question, "Can you pick out the milestones in your life?" One of the milestones in my life, among others, has been this study of Matthew. Since my first year in seminary, I have had a hunger to understand the book of Matthew, and never, until now, have I really been able to tackle it. God has blessed me in so many ways in this study.

I've already preached 42 sermons on Matthew, and this morning, you're going to hear number 43. So if you've been coming on Sunday mornings and haven't been able to be with us on Sunday nights, you'll have to buy 42 tapes to find out where we are, but I want you to know that God will richly bless you, even if you missed the first 42. This is such a great, great book.

I do feel like, for the sake of many of you, I need to just give a little bit of background and get a running start. Our text this morning is Matthew 5:33-37. Let's read the text for the study today, and then I'll give you some setting for the text, and we'll go right in to it.

Our Lord says, "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.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

Before we look at the passage specifically, let me give you some background as a setting of context for your understanding of what our Lord is saying. Matthew is the gospel of the King. In it, Matthew focuses on presenting Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Anointed, the monarch of God. Matthew writes to rehearse the story of salvation from the viewpoint of the kingliness of Jesus Christ. All the way through, as you study the book of Matthew (and this is not imposed on the book, it is implicit there), you see this constant focus on the kingliness of Jesus Christ.

Matthew was originally writing to a primarily Jewish audience to let them know that they had, in fact and in deed, executed their own Messiah, the King. There are three, great, sweeping themes concerning the King in Matthew. The first one is that the King is revealed. For example, His ancestry is traced from a royal line. His birth is dreaded by a rival king. Wise men offer Him kingly honor and royal gifts. A royal herald proclaims His coming. Even His temptation reaches its climax as He is offered the kingdoms of the world, so that Satan even recognizes His kingliness.

He then proclaims the manifesto of His Kingdom, setting forth for His subjects the righteous standards. His miracles are His royal credentials, His parables are called the mysteries of His Kingdom. He is hailed as the son of David. He claims freedom as a child of a king. He makes a royal entry into Jerusalem, and claims sovereignty. He tells, concerning Himself, the story of a king's son. While facing death on the cross, He predicts His future reign. He claims the power to command the legions of angels. His last words are a kingly claim, "All authority is given unto me," and a royal command, "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples." So, from beginning to end in Matthew's gospel, we see the King revealed.

Secondly, we see the King rejected. Interwoven with the first theme is the second, and from the very beginning to the very end, they run concurrently. For example, even before Jesus was born, His mother was in danger of being rejected by her own husband. At His birth, all Jerusalem was troubled and Herod sought to kill Him. Soon after His birth, the angel choir was silent, and all that could be heard in the hills of Bethlehem was the weeping and wailing of mothers who were sobbing over the deaths of their children who had been slaughtered. He was hurried away for His life to live for 30 years in the obscurity of a nondescript, off the road village called Nazareth, a place where He Himself knew no honor. His forerunner was imprisoned and beheaded, and He Himself had nowhere to lay His head. His parables indicated that His Kingdom would not be accepted in His own time, and even on the cross, He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"

There is no penitent thief praying in Matthew, there is no word of human sympathy spoken, and those who pass by His cross in Matthew's gospel mock and revile and jeer. Even the soldiers are paid to lie about His resurrection. In no other gospel is the attack so constant and bitter. Matthew reveals the King and then shows the rejection.

The great glory of the gospel of Matthew is the third theme, and that is the King returning. All through Matthew, there is a focus on a day coming when majesty will belong to whom it belongs, and the King will reign. No other gospel lays so much emphasis on the Second Coming, so it ends as a gospel of great and glorious triumph. As we go through the study of Matthew in the years to come (it will be a while), keep these themes in mind.

As I've said, we've already passed through 42 messages. This morning, we come to the 43rd. What have we already learned? Can I give you a fast checklist? We have studied the ancestry of the King,

His genealogy. We have studied the arrival of the King, His virgin birth. We have studied the adoration of the King, the worship of the magi. We have studied the anticipations of the King, the fulfilled prophecies predicting His coming. We have studied the announcer of the King, John the Baptist. We have looked at the affirmation of the King, His baptism in which the Father affirms His Messiahship. We have studied the advantage of the King as He defeats Satan in the temptation. We have studied the activity of the King, something of His ministry and miracles. We have now begun to study the address of the King, His Sermon on the Mount beginning in Matthew 5, and extending through the end of chapter 7.

This morning, we are in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the manifesto of the King. Here, the King is saying, "These are the conditions for belonging to My Kingdom. These are the qualities of life that My Kingdom demands. This is the nature of My reign and rule in the world." What is so marvelous about it is that it is the very antithesis of everything that Judaism was in the time in which Jesus gave it. He literally crashes head-on into the Jewish system.

It is not an easy-going talk; it is not socialistic, pious platitudes. It is a confrontive, bold, stark definition of the inadequacies of human religion. It is a blast at all that Judaism was. It is a stripping bare of the phoniness of the Pharisees and the hypocrisies of those who followed their lies. It is the unmasking of the religion of human achievement and the establishment, in its place, of the religion of divine accomplishment. In my judgment, it is far and away the greatest sermon in the Bible. Incidentally, it is the first one recorded by our Lord in the New Testament.

Having said that, let me digress to describe to you something of the religion of Judaism at the time, so that we can close the history and the language gaps to be able to understand a little more of what Jesus is saying.

The Jews gathered on the hillside in Galilee where Jesus was preaching were basically led by the Pharisees and the scribes. The Pharisees were a legalistic, ritualistic sect of Jews; the scribes were those who wrote down and copied the law. Together, they formed a kind of coterie of legalists, and between the two of them, based on years of rabbinical teaching and tradition, they had invented a sub-biblical, quasi-divine system of religion that had sub-standard ethics. In keeping their sub-standard, self-defined religion, they convinced themselves they had therefore attained to self-righteousness and spiritual perfection. So they went around and gave everyone airs of great pride over their attainment.

The fact is this: in the Old Testament, God had set a high standard; He had set down His divine law. But in the moral disintegration and digression of Israel's history, they had descended far away from God's law. They did not desire to go to God to receive grace for salvation; they wanted to attain it themselves, in their own pride, but they could not attain to the law of God as God defined it. So they invented a sub-standard ethic, a man-made system of their own designing. Then, they said, "If you

keep that, you're alright." So in keeping that, they established their own self-righteousness, but it was not God's law.

That is why, beginning in Matthew 5:21, six times Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said by them of old, but I say unto you." In other words, "Your system has told you this, but I'm telling you this." In each of the six illustrations, Jesus lifts the standard back to where it belonged. Some people assume that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is adding to the Old Testament; He's not. Other people assume He's taking away from the Old Testament; He's not. What He is simply doing is reestablishing the biblical standard over against their sub-standard system.

"You have heard that it was said by them of old," is in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43. He is contrasting their system with God's truth, and in each case, He reveals them as sinners. They had thought that because they didn't kill, they were alright. He says, "But you hate, and that's murder in your heart." They had thought that because they didn't commit adultery, they were alright. He says, "You commit it in your heart, and it's just the same." They had thought that because they did the paperwork in their divorces, they were alright. He says, "When you divorce for other than fornication, you make everyone an adulterer."

In other words, He stripped them of the cloak of their self-righteousness based on their sub-standard ethic and put it back where it belonged. He said, "God is concerned with your hearts, not your external system. You are sinners; your hearts are angry and hateful. Your hearts are lustful, and your adulteries are multitudinous through your illegitimate, unbiblical divorces.

Now He comes to a fourth illustration of their sinfulness in verse 33. Here He says, "You think you're telling the truth, but I'm telling you you're nothing but a group of liars." That's the thrust of it. You see, the key to what He says in the Sermon on the Mount is in verse 20; that sums up the whole of chapter 5. He says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no case enter the kingdom of heaven. The standard of the scribes and Pharisees is too low."

The scribes and Pharisees were so pious, they were looking for a vacancy in the Trinity. In their own minds, they had elevated themselves to that level. But He says, "No, you don't belong in My Kingdom." I know they thought that when the Messiah came, He'd just kind of grab them all in a big group and scoop them into the Kingdom and appoint them all to places of leadership, but He says, "You don't even belong there. My standard is far beyond yours. How high is My standard?" Look at Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect. To be in My Kingdom, you have to be perfect."

You say, "Who qualifies?" The answer is, "Nobody. Nobody on his own terms, by the effort of human achievement, on a system of self-righteousness, can get into My Kingdom. You can't attain that perfection." Whence does that perfection come? It is imputed to you by faith in Jesus Christ. The

perfection that you have to have to be in His Kingdom and can't attain is a gift of His grace. What Jesus was trying to do in the sermon was to get them to realize that they hadn't made it, and to look to a Redeemer. Then, as He offered Himself, He would be the solution to the very problem He Himself had induced in their own minds.

The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to convince people of their sinfulness and to show them the utter hopelessness of a religion of human achievement to attain an absolute standard of righteousness.

Perhaps the best summation ever given by our Lord of the whole Jewish system is in Matthew 15:9, "You have substituted the commandments of men for the doctrines of God." That defines what they had done, and so He comes to destroy their smug, secure, self-righteous confidence, strip them bare, leave them empty, so that they wind up in a Beatitude mentality: beggars crying for mercy, mourning over their sin, meek before a holy God, hungering and thirsting for a righteousness they must have but can't attain. Then they're ready to receive the gift of forgiving grace and the righteousness imputed to them. That's His purpose in this marvelous and masterful sermon.

Let's look specifically at verses 33-37 to see how Jesus confronts them about the lying hearts that they are masking with their supposed self-righteousness. By the way, this passage may at first seem somewhat obscure, and we say, "I read that once, a long time ago, and it seemed strange - oaths, swearing, all of this - we don't do a lot of that nowadays. It didn't seem to apply to me, and I didn't really understand it," so we kind of just passed it over.

Let me give you a little hint. Whenever the Bible talks about the tongue, or about what you say, you ought to stop and study it, and you ought to master it. Because James says, "If any man can control his tongue, the same is a perfect man." That's the heart of the matter, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks," says Matthew 12:34. Matthew 15:18 says, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and they defile the man." In other words, you need to learn that what you say is a vital thing because it is nothing but the thermometer of the heart. Whenever the Bible talks about speech or the tongue, you ought to listen.

I think back to Ephesians, we were going through the first chapters, and Paul was rising to the heights of glory. He was drawing us all into the counsel halls of Heaven, and we were looking over God's shoulder as He was penning His divine, eternal purpose for the world. We were seeing all of the majesty of the purpose of the believer, and all of the fulfillment of the reality of his position in Christ, and we were lifted up to be rich beyond imagination, and then we came crashing into chapter 4 and heard him say, "Lie not one to another."

It reminds us of the words of Wordsworth, who said of the skylark, "True to kindred points of Heaven and home is that bird." So it is, that when we speak of the tongue and of truth, we are touching the

earth and Heaven at the same time. It is very practical. I trust that God will speak to our hearts as we see what He is saying.

It is needful in this day. Wouldn't it be nice, in our world, to know the truth about just anything? Wouldn't it be refreshing? People talk about 'the credibility gap,' the gap between what people say and what is really true. Watergate, in our society, was not an incident, Watergate is the definition of a system. The entire system of the world in which we live is built on lying. After all, it's all spawned from Satan, of whom said Jesus in John 8:44, "He is the father of lies," and all men are born liars. Did you know that? They are born liars.

Just look at your little kids; the first thing they want to do when confronted with something they've done is to lie about it. So we have to teach them to tell the truth. It reminds me of the television program, *To Tell the Truth*, do you remember that program? On it, three people sat there, and two were liars and one told the truth. Everyone was supposed to guess who was telling the truth. That is nothing but a microcosm of life.

There is such a credibility gap in our world, and we add to it by the fantasy of television and music and movies, which induce us into a fantasy mentality where our basic, unreal approach to everything adds to our overall skepticism. The truth is scarce, and everyone is suspect: business people, salesmen, clerks, lawyers, doctors, advertisers, teachers, reporters, writers, politicians, and even preachers, with a few exceptions. In fact, the whole of our society is a network of fabrication. We shade the truth, we cheat, we exaggerate, we tax-dodge, we fail to keep our promises, we flatter for gain, we betray confidence, we make excuses, we tell half-truths, white lies, etcetera.

As I said when we were studying Ephesians, do you want to know what would be interesting to me? It would be one day where everyone told the truth. You know what would happen? Our entire system would collapse because it is all built on a framework of lies, because it is all spawned by the father of lies. Yet ambivalently and paradoxically, our world realizes that if you don't tell the truth at some points, it's going to be very costly. So when you get to a courtroom, they make you swear to tell the truth and make a crime out of not telling the truth - perjury. It is pretty tough for people because they've lived in a system that lies about everything else.

The great Roman orator, Cicero, said, "Nothing is sweeter than the light of truth." Chaucer said, "Truth is the highest thing a man may experience." Daniel Webster said, "There is nothing as powerful as truth, and often nothing as strange." Even the Jewish rabbis, in spite of their system, were ambivalent enough to say there are four things that shut a person out from the presence of God. One is scoffing, two is hypocrisy, three is slander, and four is lying. Yet, by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Jews were so good at lying that their system was unbelievable. Jesus cuts through the facade of that system.

There are three things to see in the text; let's look at them. Number one, the principles of Mosaic law. Number two, the perversion of Jewish tradition. Number three, the perspective of divine teaching. We're going to see what the Old Testament taught about oaths, what the Jewish system had developed, and what Jesus affirms.

Number one, the principles of Mosaic law. You'll notice that it says in verse 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.'" That statement is not included in the Old Testament. It was kind of a composite statement of their Jewish tradition. But it is based upon Old Testament reality, for oaths are a part of the Old Testament.

Notice the word 'oath' and notice the word 'perjure.' Both come from the same root, the word 'swear' in verse 34 is a synonym. Swearing, oaths, and perjury basically all come from the same thing. An oath is simply this: it is making a statement and calling God to witness to the truth of that statement, and invoking a curse from God if, in fact, you're not telling the truth.

We do it; we say, "I swear to God that's the truth." You go into court, and you put your hand on a Bible, and say, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." When you get married, you say, "Before God and these witnesses, I take you," and you are invoking God as a witness to the voracity of a lifelong vow that you are making.

This had been a part of Jewish society from the earliest part of the Old Testament. The Greek word for 'oath,' horkos, has the idea of binding something, or strengthening it, so that your word is then strengthened in the affirmation of invoking God to attest to the validity of your word.

Look for a moment at Hebrews 6:16, and I'll show you perhaps the best biblical definition of an oath. He's talking here about the second great covenant, the new covenant, the great covenant Jeremiah said would come when God would plant His law in the inward parts, the hearts of His people. God was giving this tremendous promise of a new covenant, and in verse 16, God wanted to verify the validity of His word. Of course, God never tells a lie, but God accommodated Himself to the human mode, the human way, as He does in so many ways at so many other times.

It says, "For men indeed swear by the greater." In other words, when a man wants to swear, or make an oath, or confirm his word, He will call God, who is the greater, to attest to the truthfulness of it. So men will swear by a greater. "And they make an oath for confirmation for them, as an end of all dispute." In other words, two people have a conflict, and one promises to fulfill something that will resolve the conflict, and in order to end the conflict and secure the confidence of the other person, he affirms the truth by calling God to witness.

Verse 17 shows, interestingly, that even God did this. "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath." In other words, God wanted to accommodate men and show them the immutability, or the unchanging character, of His own promise, and also made an oath. When God makes an oath, He doesn't make an oath by anyone greater than Himself, but what you find throughout the Old Testament is this statement, "'As I live,' says the Lord, 'I will,'" and then comes the statement. In other words, God makes an oath on Himself.

The point is this: God does acquiesce to the oath system. God realizes men are sinners, and He realizes that they need an affirmation of their truthfulness. They need something fearful to bind them to speak the truth in serious settings. Did you know there are times when God says, "Verily I say to you," and there are times when the Lord said, "Verily, verily I say to you," and someone said to me one time, "When God says, 'Verily, verily,' are those the times He really means it?" When God says, "Verily, verily," He really means it. When He says, "Verily," He means it, and when He doesn't say, "Verily," at all, He means it. Those are merely for emphasis.

That is the reason God makes an oath; not because you have to have an oath from Him to trust Him, but simply to emphatically state the urgency and the singular significance of that which He has said, setting it apart from other things. So we see, then, that an oath is simply calling God to testify to the truth of something.

By the way, in the theocracy of Israel, where God ruled and the people feared God, this was a good way to bind men's word. We live in a society today where people don't keep their word. I read an article not long ago that asked the question, "Do you know how many peace treaties in the history of the world have been broken?" I thought for a minute, and I didn't know. The answer was all of them. Men break their promises, and they need something fearful to hold them to it, so God allowed them to draw His name into it. We still do that today, in certain, very serious settings.

In Genesis 24:2-3, Abraham made an oath. In Genesis 26:28-29, Isaac made an oath. In Genesis 31:44, Jacob made an oath. Jonathan makes an oath to David in I Samuel 20:16; David makes an oath in II Samuel 19:23 and following. The greatest men of God, there they are: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jonathan, David, and those are only samples. They covenanted with someone to the truthfulness of their statement by calling God to witness it, and saying, in effect, "God, if I'm telling a lie, You bring Your vengeance on me." When you said, "Before God and these witnesses," at your marriage, that's what you meant - "Lord, I'll stay with this person until I die, or else, You deal with me." That's the way they did it then.

Did you know there were times in the Old Testament when God asked for an oath to be taken? I don't have time to show you all of them, though I wish I did, but I'll give you a sample. In Numbers

30:2, it says, "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." And then He goes on to talk about when and the conditions that these oaths are to be made, they are to be fulfilled. In other words, God says, "Do this, and when you do it, mean it and keep it."

God knows men are sinners. God knows that the basic lying nature of men causes them to distrust each other, and in serious situations, there will be necessary oaths taken. He allows for that, He Himself doing it by example. Let me show you an example of someone who did it and didn't keep it, someone who lied with an oath. You'll remember the story; this is Peter. This gives us an idea of how oaths were taken. This case unfortunately happens to be a negative one, but it will make its point anyway.

In Matthew 26:69, Peter sat outside the court while Jesus was being tried on the inside, having been taken in the Garden as a prisoner and preparing to be crucified. "And a servant girl came to him, saying, 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee.' But he denied it before them all, saying, 'I do not know what you are saying.'" So first, he just says, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Then, "when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, 'This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth.' But again he denied with an oath, 'I do not know the Man!'" So this time, he uses an oath. Now he literally says, "God is my witness that I don't know Christ." Oh, Peter, it's bad to lie. It's double-bad to call God to witness to your lie. Triple-bad is coming up.

"And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, 'Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you.'" They're saying, "You have a Galilean accent; we can pick you out." So, "He began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the Man!'" This isn't profanity, dirty talk, filthy, obscene language. He is saying, "God is my witness! May God curse me, I swear to God I don't know!" That's what he's doing.

Now you know why, when the cock crowed, he wept bitterly. It was bad enough to lie, but worse to confirm your lie by invoking God as a witness to its truthfulness, and then to swear to God and call down a curse from Heaven if you're lying. Oh, Peter. Peter, you coward. I'd imagine that all the tears he shed never washed his soul of the memory of those lies.

So oaths were not uncommon. The supreme oath in the Old Testament was, "As the Lord lives," to confirm words. "As I live," says the Lord in Genesis 22:16, "I swear by My own name." Always two things in the Old Testament: swearing only in God's name, and only for very special occasions. Get those two; that's what the Old Testament taught. We find in the Old Testament many occasions where people took rash oaths. They had no business taking them, they took them at the wrong time for stupid things, and then they were bound by them.

You'll remember, for example, Joshua in Joshua 9, Jephthah in Judges 11, Saul in I Samuel 14, Herod in Matthew 14, taking rash and ridiculous and stupid oaths, and having to bear the consequences. On the other hand, you'll find oaths of loveliness given by Ruth, Samuel, David, and others at the right time for the right reasons, and God honored them. Listen, the Old Testament taught two things: all oaths were to be in God's name and only at special times, for very serious occasions.

Deuteronomy 6:13 says, "You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name." Isaiah 65:16 says, "He that swears shall swear by the God of truth." Deuteronomy 10:20 says, "You shall fear the LORD your God, Him shall you serve, and to Him shall you cleave, and swear by His name." The only object ever to be sworn by was God. In Jeremiah 12:16, Jeremiah reaches to the Gentiles and says, even to the Gentiles, "You are to swear by God's name only." In Joshua 9:20, it says, "This we will do, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath which we swore." They had a fear of God and when they called God to witness something, it bound their hearts. Leviticus 5 says that if you have broken an oath to God, you must go and offer a trespass offering, a sacrifice. This was serious business. Only in God's name, and only on very special occasions.

By the way, in the psalms, David talks about who has a right to ascend into the holy hill, who has a right to worship God, who has a right to enter His presence. David says, "He that swears to his own hurt and changes not." Who is a righteous man? He is saying it's one who keeps his vows to God. The Bible says, "He will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

That is the principle of the Mosaic law. Secondly, the perversion of rabbinic tradition. That's what Moses taught; what did these Jews teach in Jesus' day? Verse 33 sounds good, "You shall not perjure yourself, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord." That sounds great, but like everything else they did, it is an illusion. There are two things that I want to call to your attention here. One is a missing ingredient, and the other is a misplaced emphasis.

The missing ingredient is this. It says, "You shall not perjure yourself, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord." The missing ingredient in their system was that it never told them when oaths were proper, so you might say that the missing ingredient lead to frivolous swearing. They were swearing oaths for every little thing throughout every day. They were swearing by this, and swearing by that, and swearing to this, and swearing to that, all the time swearing oaths indiscriminately, add-libbed, glibly, taking them as a common matter of conversation. We have information, as we look back into some of the ancient writings, of all of the complexity, the elaborate network of swearing, and oaths, and curses that they had developed. They used them constantly for everything.

You can see that in the statement in verse 33, there is no qualification. It just says, "Be sure when you perform an oath to the Lord that you keep it." It doesn't say anything about when you should do

that, so they were just swearing by everything. Of course, that drew people in. If a guy came up to you and said, "I want you to know, my friend, that I will keep my word to you. I swear by Heaven and Earth, and I swear by my head, and I swear by Jerusalem, and I swear by the altar, and I swear by the temple that I'll do it," you'd probably say, "Alright." And he'd go right out and not do it.

They'd swear by everything. The second thing is not only a missing ingredient, but a misplaced emphasis. Notice the phrase, "Unto the Lord." That was their little catch. As long as you swore unto the Lord, you had to do it. But if you swore to anything else, you didn't have to. It was King's X.

Remember when you were a little kid? "I know I told you that, but I had my fingers crossed!" That's exactly what they were doing. That's what they were playing. "If you don't swear to the Lord, you don't have to keep it." So they would swear by Heaven, Earth, Jerusalem, their head, the temple, and just go out and do the very opposite. They didn't have any impunity at all, no sense of guilt, because they didn't swear by the name of the Lord, and all it did was make a network of lies going everywhere.

For example, Leviticus 19:12 says, "You shall not swear by My name falsely." The emphasis is that you shouldn't swear falsely. But their emphasis is, "You shouldn't swear by His *name* falsely." See the difference? In Numbers 30:2, "When a man makes a vow to Jehovah, or swears an oath, he **shall not** break his word." They read it this way, "When a man makes a vow **to Jehovah**, he shall not break his word." Otherwise, you could break it.

You see, if you're going to be righteous on your own, and make yourself righteous, you have to invent a system you can keep. So they wanted to lie because they were liars, and sinners can't help lying, so they just fit their lies into a nice, comfortable category. If you didn't say 'in the Lord's name,' you could lie and it was OK. That's how they twisted the Scriptures.

You might call that evasive swearing. It was frivolous because they did it all the time, and evasive because they circumvented the truth. Watch how Jesus deals with this; I love this. Verse 34. "But I say to you, do not swear at all," which really means, "Stop swearing like that!" You can't swear by Heaven and avoid God; that's God's throne. Or by earth, you can't avoid Him there either - that's His footstool. Or by Jerusalem, you can't avoid Him there, that's the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black."

Now that was before Clairol, we'll have to agree to that. But what He is saying is this: God is in control of your head. Whenever you touch Heaven, you touch God. Whenever you touch earth, you touch God. Touch Jerusalem, touch your head, and you touch God; He is all and in all. You can't avoid God; there aren't any little compartments where you can lie over here and speak the truth over here. There is no sacred and secular; there is no way to evade it. You can't tell the truth in church and lie in your business; you can't separate those categories. God is all and in all, and whenever you vow a vow and swear to tell the truth, you invoke God.

This thing had become so complex that Jesus had to deal with it later, and He gave them another good shot in Matthew 23:16. Look at it. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing.'" If you swear by the temple, it's Kings X - it's nothing. "But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 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.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it." Whew! That's straight stuff.

Isn't it amazing what a system they had invented? They were playing footsie with all these objects, and they wanted to con someone by saying, "I swear by the altar in the holy temple." The guy would say, "That's straight up for me, you're a Jewish leader." But that was King's X, it didn't count. Here they were, trying to purport to everyone in the world that they were righteous. Jesus says, "You're liars to the core, and your system only betrays the reality of your rotten hearts."

William Barclay says so well, "Here is a great eternal truth: light cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved, and in others of which He is not involved. There cannot be one kind of language in the church and another kind of language in the home. There cannot be one kind of standard of conduct in the church and another standard of conduct in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life and kept out of others; He is everywhere, all through life, and every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in His name, He hears all words, and there cannot be any such thing as a form of words which evades bringing God into any transaction. We will regard all promises as sacred if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God."

The truth knows no degrees, no grades, only black and white. Half-truths are whole lies. The Bible says that you are not to lie. There are six things the Lord hates, even seven. The first is a proud look and the second is a lying tongue. Proverbs 12:22 says, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord." You see, only the wicked engage in lying, and Psalm 58:3 says, "The wicked go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies." In Psalm 64:2, he says, "The wicked delight in lies." Jeremiah 9 says the world lies; in Jeremiah 23, it says that false prophets lie. In Isaiah 57, hypocrites lie. In I Timothy 4, apostates lie. What is the end of all liars? All liars shall find their part in the lake of fire, which burns forever (Revelation 21-22).

Jesus is saying, "You can't be in My Kingdom if you're indicted on all these counts of lying." They were liars; they couldn't have been in their Kingdom on their own, they would have to have those lies washed in the blood of Christ to get into His Kingdom. The sons of the Kingdom hate lies; Psalm

119:29 says, "Remove me from the way of lying." Psalm 119:163 says, "I hate and abhor lying;" Psalm 120:2 says, "Deliver my soul, O Lord, from a lying tongue and deceiving lips." So our Lord destroys their system, tears their elaborate cloak of cover, and reveals the truth.

That leads us to the third point. From the principles of Mosaic law, and the perversion of Jewish tradition, we come to the perspective of divine teaching. What is Jesus teaching here? Beloved, I believe He is simply reasserting the Old Testament standard. What was it? Two things govern oaths: don't use them frivolously, but only for special occasions; and only swear by the name of God. He deals with the second one first, in verse 34.

"Swear not at all by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or by your head." In other words, He is not forbidding swearing totally, like the Quakers have taught; I don't believe that's what He's saying. Why? Because if God took an oath, and if God reiterated that oath in Hebrews 6 in the new covenant, and if Jesus, in His trial, was confronted, and they said to Him, "I adjure you by the living God," and at that point, His silence was broken and He answered. Why? Because He had been called into oath; Jesus responded to an oath.

If the Apostle Paul, in Romans 9:1, says, "I speak the truth in Christ; I lie not. The Holy Spirit bears me witness," if Paul takes oaths in the epistles (and that's only one of many), if Jesus takes an oath at His trial, if God takes an oath in Hebrews 6, and if Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "I came not to destroy the law," and in verse 19, "No one is to break the least of these commandments," then believe me, there is still a place for those kind of oaths.

So He is not removing it all, He is saying, "Swear not at all in the manner to which you have become accustomed, evasively trying to cover your lies, because it is God who touches every place in His universe." Secondly, He says, "You'd better keep it for solemn occasions. You'd better not do it as a way of life; that just shows you come from the evil one." Verse 37, "But let your communication," and He uses the simplest Greek word for conversation that there is, logos. Let your routine conversation, your daily communication, be just, "Yes, yes," and, "No, no." If it's any more than that, you simply show the evil source of your heart.

What He's saying is, "Keep it for those times when it is needful, when invoking God's name is a right thing because of the seriousness of the matter. But on other occasions, in your normal logos," and by the way, that word is translated in the New Testament probably 50 times as 'common speech,' just the word 'speech.' "Let your normal speech be that 'yes' means 'yes,' and 'no' means 'no.' That way, you don't have to swear by anything, because your word is your bond." So Jesus is merely reiterating what I said at the beginning, the two Old Testament standards.

That's what God wants. There are times in our lives when we can take a vow. I remember in my own heart, after the accident that almost took my life, when I committed my life to the Lord for ministry. I

said, "Lord, I promise You my life, to preach Your Word until I die. I covenant with You." I take that as a very solemn oath, and I feel, were I to step out from under that oath, God would have the right to chasten me, to avenge me, because I made Him a promise. That is a promise I'll never break. When I married my wife, I made a promise before God, and called Him to witness that promise that I would spend my life with my wife. I'll keep that promise; she knows that I'll keep that promise. That makes marriage a lot easier, when you both know you'll keep that promise until you die.

Those are some solemn occasions in my life when I made those promises. That's not for everyday conversation. If my conversation is so suspect every day that I have to make vows to God that I'm telling the truth, then there is something wrong in my life, right? You should be able to trust what I say. What is this message saying to you this morning?

If you're a non-Christian, what it's saying to you is that you may think you're OK, but you're not. God is a holy God; to be in His Kingdom, He demands righteousness. You can't be righteous. You may think you tell the truth, but you shade it; you cheat, you dodge here and there, you tell half-truths, you make excuses, you betray a confidence. We all have that lying in us from our sin nature, and Jesus is saying to them and to you today, "If you see it there and know it hasn't been dealt with, you need to come to Jesus Christ, who alone can give you the righteousness you must have but can't gain on your own." if you come and put your faith in Jesus Christ, then Christ will give you His righteousness and you'll be as perfect as God is perfect, as His righteousness is imputed to you. By simply receiving Christ, His righteousness becomes yours.

What does it say to Christians? If you're a Christian and a child of the King, you should live like one. He is the Father of truth, so when we open our mouths, the truth ought to come out. On those solemn occasions when we vow a vow to God, we ought to keep that vow. On those other occasions, in the daily matters of life, our 'yes' should be 'yes,' and our 'no' should be 'no.' Anything more than that reveals an evil, untrustworthy heart.

Beloved, let's start a new movement in the world, a truth movement. Wouldn't it be great? Let's keep the vows we've made that demanded an oath before God; let's keep them for our lifetimes. In our daily conversation, let's speak the truth, the real truth, and live it. Let's be an oasis in the midst of the evil of this world of lying. Let's pray.

Oh God of all truth, teach us to be children of truth, speaking the truth in love. Guard our tongues that we may rightly represent the God of Truth, because we speak the truth. How, if we lie, we belie our sonship. Father, I pray for those here this morning who don't know Jesus Christ, that perhaps the conviction of sin has entered their hearts and they know the righteousness that You demand for Your Kingdom they haven't met. Oh God, may they reach out in simple faith to take the gift of grace that gives them that righteousness freely. Father, meet our needs this morning, every need. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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