

MATTHEW 5:33-37

TRANSPARENT TRUTHFULNESS

If you ever experienced life on a playground, or were able to play with your peers at a young age, then you are aware of the social conventions and mores, which are quickly established in such settings. For instance there were dares and then there were double dares. But trumping both of these was the double-dog dare. No self-respecting young man could back out of a dare like that without risking banishment from the playground or becoming a social pariah at such an early age. Looking back on such things, it is funny to me how binding such situations could be. The fact that these conventions are so well established, even among young children amazes me.

How many of you remember pinky swears or, “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye?” When you look at it on paper it really seems gruesome! Think about it, young children vowing to stick needles in their eyes and die! But once again, those were the conventions of that day and age. I don’t know if these are still in vogue, but I would be willing to bet, if I were a betting man, that something similar is still said in order to guarantee someone will do or not do a certain thing.

Now, we have to ask ourselves why we would go to certain lengths in order to guarantee something. We should have to ask ourselves why we would have to go to such lengths in order to be credible. This doesn’t just happen on the playground. It also goes on in boardrooms across the world. The difference being that rather than pinky swears, we involve lawyers and contracts with signatures and witnesses. Why do we have to go through all this?

The reason is simple. People are sinners and sinners lie. People lie. Therefore, we are forced to jump through hoops in order to hold people’s feet to the fire when it comes to making people hold up their end of a bargain. That is a shame but it is what it is.

Today we will see Jesus taking on this very issue. He will deal with oaths. Let’s see what He has to say, dig for the context and then see how it applies to us today.

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.’ 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.

Jesus opens with the fourth of six comparative statements. “You have heard it said... but I say...” But this time He doesn’t quote a particular verse. Rather **He summarizes the body of teaching on making oaths.**

The Biblical history of oaths

- The purposes of an oath or vow: to give a solemn promise to indicate you are telling the truth. Essentially, your word alone does not carry enough weight to guarantee you are truthful.
- **Oath: Gr. 3727; horkos – to fence or limit**
- **Ex. 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.**
- If you were going to bring the name of God into your oath, then you had better be speaking truth. You had better be honest and live up to your end of the bargain.
- The purpose was to seal an agreement. How can I take you at your word?
- Gen. 24:2- 4; **2 So Abraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had, “Please, put your hand under my thigh, 3 and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell; 4 but you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac.”**
- An oath was also used to settle a dispute.
- In Gen. 21 Abraham and Abimilech had a dispute over a well that Abraham had dug. They settled the dispute with a covenant/ oath.
- There are bad oaths, oaths that never should have been made in the Bible.
- Herod’s stepdaughter danced for him and he was so taken that he vowed to give her whatever she wanted. She asked for the Baptist’s head on a platter.
- Today we have lawyers and contracts based on mutual distrust of each other.
- So why does Jesus bring this to the forefront? Because we are sinners and sinners lie.
- We can see that God encouraged people to take oaths in the OT.
- **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.
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- These were made in order to bring the name of YHWH to the other nations and let them know that there is no other name or power greater than the God of Israel. So to take an oath in the name of YHWH was to invoke the highest possible power as a guarantor of the oath.
- The other side of the coin: unfulfilled oaths
- **Leviticus 19:12**
- **12 And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.**

- People love loopholes. This is one reason we like Walmart. They take anything back with virtually no questions asked.
- Getting into the gate as Six Flags with children.
- We love to skate through

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.

The problem of Jesus' day was that the rabbis had come up with wiggle room concerning what a binding oath was and what sort of oath could be broken. They loved loopholes!!

Mt. 23:16-22

16 "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.' 19 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. 21 He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

The Mishnah and other rabbinical writings had entire chapters regarding what sort of oaths were binding as opposed to those that weren't.

Going back to the Greek definition of oath: to fence or limit...

We try to compartmentalize our lives; our Christian lives. I once knew a bi-vocational pastor. He was a contractor during the week and preached on Sundays. He had become notorious for his shady business dealings during the week, but when it came to Sundays, he was so sweet that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He had "FENCED" Sunday off from the rest of his life/week.

We can't do that and be credible, transparent, truthful Christians!

By swearing on something that was thought to be of lesser importance than God, the people were fencing their credibility off from certain areas of their lives.

Do we do this? Do we fence off Sundays from the rest of the week? Do we attempt to fence God out of certain areas or days of our lives?

The fact is that God can't be fenced out of our lives.

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.

Jesus is demolishing this system that had become so commonplace. The idea was that by swearing an oath on something less holy than God or the Temple that the oath did not have to be honored. But Jesus shows that everything can be linked to God. Heaven is God's throne. The earth is his footstool. Jerusalem is the city of the Great King. Even our heads belong to God. WE cannot control the color of our hair! At least not at birth!

Rather, for a person of truth and credibility our simple yes or no should be enough.

- Daddy: at the end of the day, all you have is your name. And folks should be able to take that to the bank.
- The Essenes avoided taking oaths. They regarded taking oaths as worse than perjury, "for the say that one who is not believed without an appeal to God stands condemned already." That simply means if you had to appeal to God to prove your integrity, you were already deemed to be dishonest.

There are those that believe you should never take an oath. They refuse to be sworn in to testify or say the pledge of allegiance. That is taking things out of context. The point is that we should be credible enough that our word stands in its own as credible. But there are times that oaths and vows are warranted.

- Wedding vows.
- God swore oaths. **Hebrews 6:13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,**
- The Apostle Paul made oaths: **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,**
- Jesus was even held to an oath: **Mt. 26:62-64 And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" 63 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!"**
- **64 Jesus 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."**

- So there are times when an oath is warranted, but this should be exception and not the rule.
- Truth should always be on our lips. We should do what we say we will do, even when it pains us.
- **Psalms 119:29**
- **Remove from me the way of lying...**
- **Psalms 120:2**
- **Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips**
- **And from a deceitful tongue.**
- **Psalms 5:6**
- **You shall destroy those who speak falsehood;**
- **The Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.**
- Proverbs 6 states that there are six things the Lord hates! One of those is a lying tongue. (Jerry Clower and the Lion?)

Let your integrity be your only credibility.

Many young people today don't believe in absolute truth. Is this, at least in part, due to being raised in a home where they didn't see their parents as credible? Did they see hypocrisy?

- "Can we throw the ball like you said, Daddy?"
- "I'm going to count to three and if you don't stop by then..."
- "If I have to come over there..."

Is our word our bond? Are we credible? Can we be counted on to do what we say? Can we be counted on to say what we mean? Can we be counted on to live out what we say we believe?

- The "credibility gap" (coined during the LBJ administration)
- Let's bridge the credibility gap with our words, actions and our lives.