



Mid-Week

**Bible Study and Prayer
Wednesdays 6:45pm – 8pm**



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A Promise is a Promise... or is it?¹

(Exposing Dishonesty in the Heart)

Matthew 5:33-37 (NKJV) *[with explanatory notes]*

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.' *[this is not a quotation from the Law of Moses]*

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 *[they would say this, meaning, "As far as I know, I will do it," or "I will do my best" or "If all goes well"]*, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

³⁷ But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' *[simply tell the truth]* For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

"So help me, God"; "I swear on my mother's grave!"; If I'm Lyin'... I'm Fryin'!!

Jesus is not only referring to the ninth Commandment "Do not lie" but also to the third commandment "do not take the name of the Lord in vain".

Why make a vow? Why swear an oath? The issue is one of credibility. How can you be sure one is telling the truth? How can I know I can trust you? Should I really believe you? Can I know for sure you will keep your word? Answer: If one swore an oath, you could be sure it was the truth. If one made a vow, you could count on its being fulfilled. In a word: In ancient times, you could be sure one was telling the truth if one swore an oath. It put "an end to all argument" (Hebrews 6:16). If you made a promise, one may or may not believe it. But if you swore an oath or made a vow, one always believed it. One did not violate the oath.

OLD TESTAMENT OATHS: The Old Testament not only did not prohibit the swearing of an oath; it commanded and encouraged it. Indeed, "Take your oaths in his name" (Deut. 6:13). There was a warning: Be sure you tell the truth. "Do not swear falsely, and so profane the name of your God" (Lev. 19:12). Not only that, "When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (Numbers 30:2). **It is therefore surprising that Jesus would say, "I tell you, Do not swear at all" (Matthew 5:34).**

JESUS AND OATHS: Jesus was more or less forced to take an oath before the high priest, who said to Him: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." In order to show respect for the Law and the high priest, Jesus replied, "Yes, it is as you say" (Matt 26:).

¹ Adapted from R.T. Kendall's chapter "Name Dropping", in *Sermon on the Mount*, 2011.

Paul seemed to use oaths several times in his letters:

- “God... is my witness” (Romans 1:9)
- “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth” (2 Cor. 1:23).
- “I assure you before God that what I am writing is no lie” (Gal. 1:20).
- He says “God is our witness” that he did not wear a mask to cover up greed, that “you are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you” (1 Thess. 2:5, 10)

God Himself swears oaths:

- “I swear by Myself, declares the Lord” (Gen. 22:16; Heb. 6:13-14).
- God promised David “on oath” that one of his descendants would sit on the throne (Acts 2:30).
- “I declared an oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest’” (Heb. 3:11)

There was a respect for the Law, and it was well known that one did not break an oath in ancient times. Once the name of the Lord (Yahweh) was mentioned, it meant you brought God in. The ancient Jew had deepest respect for that name. Once His name was invoked, it became a debt to be paid to none other than Yahweh Himself. If a person owed money and his creditors wanted assurance the debt would be paid, he said, “I swear to you by the name of the Lord.” The creditor felt good, knowing he would surely get his money. From that moment – for the debtor – it was like having to pay God Himself. In a word: ***Bringing in the oath was perfectly just – it was absolutely right to do – as long as one told the truth and kept his word.***

But people began to look for a loophole – something we have seen before, especially when it comes to legalistic matters. Was there a way of avoiding payment after all? Lawyers always look for a loophole – and the Pharisees did this. Here is how they did it: They used the rationale that “circumstances alter cases.” There was an increasing feeling that perhaps you should not bring in the name of the Lord. So they began to swear by “heaven” instead, or by “earth” or by “Jerusalem.” That was the loophole. This way, it was slightly less serious if you did not keep your word. So, by examining how closely the oath was tied to the name of the Lord determined whether or not it was absolutely binding after all. **Read Matthew 23:16-22 for an example of this.**

Matthew 23:16-22 (NKJV)

- 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 Law encouraged and required oaths. Jesus says, “Don’t swear at all.” Here is a question we must cope with: Do we follow Jesus by the letter or by the spirit? When do we apply this literally? James said, “Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else” (James 5:12). **There are those who go by the letter, such as the Quakers. They take the words “do not swear” literally and will not take the oath in a court of law. They say it is a matter of conscience for them.**

THIS DOES NOT REFER TO TAKING AN OATH IN A COURT: There are several reasons Jesus' words (and James') cannot possibly apply in a court of law.

- 1) Jesus is talking about everyday conversation, not when you are commanded by the state to testify. Your reason for taking the oath in a court is to respect the law. **It is not using an oath to vindicate yourself or make yourself look good, which is what Jesus is against.** In a court of law, you have involuntarily been put into a situation you must respect.
- 2) If we are never to take an oath at all, God Himself would not have required this in ancient times. God laid down legislation when oaths should be taken. This, moreover, was an Old Testament practice – e.g., when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. **Abraham said, “Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites” (Genesis 24:2-3).** Jacob asked Joseph to swear to him that he (Jacob) would be buried in Canaan (Genesis 47:29).
- 3) When Jesus was required to swear whether He was the Christ, Son of the living God, He respectfully replied to the solemn charge of the high priest. Jesus had refused to vindicate Himself until the high priest said, “Are you not going to answer?” and commanded Jesus to say whether He was the Christ (Matthew 26:62-64).
- 4) It was a custom practiced by the apostle Paul, as we saw above, who wrote by divine inspiration.
- 5) The marriage vows are under oath and are honoring to God, who wants total fidelity in marriage. The vows “for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” are part of the Christian ceremony. We take them to ensure that we will be faithful.

JESUS IS REFERRING TO EVERYDAY CONVERSATION. We are not to bring in God's name to make ourselves look more credible. We are to keep our word without having to swear oaths or make vows. Jesus says, “Do not swear at all” – **keep God's name out of it!**

Positively speaking, Jesus is saying, “Let your word be your bond.” Let every word you say be simple, straightforward and honest. Don't speak evasively but plainly, leaving people in no doubt what you really mean. Speak without being complicated.

HOW WE MISUSE GOD'S NAME:

- 1) It means don't vindicate yourself by appealing to – or “using” – God's name. Ex. “I'm sure I'm right – and God knows I'm right!”
- 2) Saying “The Lord told me...” – Namedropping so that they will take your word seriously. Some have told others about dreams they have had, stating “God gave me a dream about you” simply so they will listen. If you have something to share with someone, and you truly believe it is from the Lord, you still don't have to attach God's name to this. If it is really from God, the person you are talking to will see this without your namedropping. This way, you are protecting God's name. Also, you won't have egg on your face if that word turns out to be not so accurate!
- 3) Don't casually talk about God to impress another with your piety. “The Lord told me this,” and “the Lord told me that”. This is not making God look good, it is attempting to make yourself look good. “God has been speaking wonderful things to me” or “His presence is so real to me” - **this sort of pious talk almost always comes from people who are trying to impress.** They have something to prove: that they are close to God. If you really have been close to the Lord – and His presence is real – let God cause others to see it.

IN A WORD – DON'T "NAME-DROP" GOD! When we misuse God's name, the devil gets in. **Proverbs 10:19 (NKJV) - In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise. Ecclesiastes 5:2 (NKJV) - ² 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.**

Dr. Helmut Thielicke puts it like this: Whenever I utter the formula "I swear by God," I am really saying, "Now I'm going to mark off an area of absolute truth and put walls around it to cut it off from the muddy floods of untruthfulness and irresponsibility that ordinarily overruns my speech." In fact, I am saying even more than this. I am saying that people are expecting me to lie from the start. And just because they are counting on my lying I have to bring up these big guns of oaths and words of honor.²

Personal Story: As a teenager who had also given his life to Christ, I did not want to tell lies. Before I became a Christian, I was excellent at telling lies, but after giving my life to Christ, I simply wanted to always tell the truth. However, I also did not always want to do what people wanted me to do. There were times I did not want to go to school, but I also wasn't sick. If I told people I just didn't want to go to school, I would get an unexcused absence, and got into big trouble. If I wrote a note from my parents that said I was sick, I would be lying, and they would have never signed it. So, I came up with a clever phrase: "Josh Franklin was physically unable to go to school yesterday. Please excuse his absence." I thought I was so clever, and I never had "UN-excused absences", but as I grew up, the Lord convicted my heart that I was still telling a lie. I thought I was clever, but God could see through this. POINT: I think God is telling us, "I see through your cleverness. You still need to be honest."

Some years ago UPI reported this prayer by the Chaplain of the Kansas Senate³:

Omniscient Father:

Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing, and the other just the opposite.

And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that, too.

And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Vows were assumed, even encouraged. But once made, they were not to be broken under any circumstances. The Bible taught that they were very serious business. The problem was that in Jesus' time the traditional, Biblical teaching had come under massive abuse. Somewhere along the line some rabbis (but not all rabbis) began to teach that an oath was not binding if it did not include God's name or imply it. Therefore, if you swore by your own or someone else's life or the life of the king (as Abner did in 1 Samuel 17:55) or by some object, but did not mention or allude to the name of God, you were not bound. The Mishna devotes one whole section called Shebuoth ("Oaths") to an elaborate discussion of when oaths are binding and when they are not. The swearing of oaths had degenerated into a system of rules as to when you could lie and when you could not. The results were incredible. There was an ongoing epidemic of frivolous swearing, and oaths were continually mingled with everyday speech: "By your life," "by my beard," "may I never see the comfort of Israel if..." There was an inevitable trivialization of everyday language and integrity. It became common practice to convince another that you were telling the truth (while lying) by bringing some person or eminent object into reference. The deception was very subtle.... All of this produced in its adherents

² As quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word – The Sermon on the Mount* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 127.

³ *Ibid*, 123.

a profound spiritual schizophrenia: "I'm not telling the truth, but I'm really not lying." Their use of oaths was like children saying, "I have my fingers crossed, so I don't have to tell the truth."⁴

How does this translate into life? What deductions can we draw concerning our speech? Simply this: Oath-taking is permitted, but it is not encouraged. In civil life oath-taking, as in the courtroom, is permitted, and when one does so, he does not sin against Christ's teaching. Also, on rare occasions it may be necessary, as it was for Paul. However, oaths are not to be a normal part of our everyday conversation. In normal relations oaths should never fall from our lips. Kingdom men and women do not need such devices. Their commitment to truthfulness should be evident to all.⁵

A minister told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17." The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark 17. Every hand went up. The minister smiled and said, "Mark has only sixteen chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying."

A recent commercial for auto insurance asks the question if Honest Abraham Lincoln ("Honest Abe") was really that honest. It shows his wife coming into the room and asking if the dress was making her look fat. There's a long pause, with Honest Abe holding up his hand signaling maybe slightly...

According to polls reported by *USA Today*, Americans lie—and are lied to—much more than we realize. Citing statistics from the book *The Day America Told The Truth*, the newspaper reported that:

- 91% of Americans lie routinely.
- 86% lie regularly to parents
- 75% lie to friends
- 73% lie to siblings
- 69% lie to spouses

Humor: Flat-out Lying - On a beautiful fall day, four friends decided to go for a drive instead of showing up to class on time. When they did arrive, the girls explained to the teacher they had had a flat tire. The teacher accepted the excuse, much to the girls' relief. "Since you missed this morning's quiz, you must take it now," she said. "Please sit in the four corner seats in this room without talking." When they were seated, the teacher said, "On your paper write the answer to one question: 'Which tire was flat?'"

GREAT STORY - I heard about a teen-age boy who was supposed to be home at midnight and came in at two a.m. in the morning, but everyone was asleep. He crept up the stairs and as he did so he hit a stair that squeaked and his dad woke up. "Is that you Bobby?" Yes "What time is it?" Before he could say a word the coo-coo clock struck twice. He said it was the most ingenious moment of my life when I stood there a coo-cooed ten more times.

APPLICATION – Do your children know that you tell the truth? Do you teach your children to pick up the phone for you and say, "Mama's not here" when you are? **If we teach them to lie for us, we should never punish them when they lie to us.** [Adrian Rogers, 158]

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.