

Yes Or No

Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 16

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Matthew 5:33-37

We have all committed the sin this passage addresses. You promised to do something, but you failed to do it. You promised to stop doing something, but you did it again. You have almost certainly invoked some kind of oath to excuse your broken promise or to get people to believe you. This passage is the fourth in a series of **antitheses** Jesus used to illustrate His theme in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:20: *For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

By emphasizing outward conformity to a list of do's and don'ts, the Pharisees produced terrible results:

- They didn't get to the real issues.
- They didn't understand the extent of sin.
- They could convince themselves (and others) they were truly righteous.
- They inoculated themselves against the message of Jesus.

I. **The Letter of the Law** (33)

Matthew 5:33: *Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.'*

Leviticus 19:12: *You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.*

Numbers 30:2: *If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

Deuteronomy 23:21: *When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you.*

The problem is with the way the teaching and practice of the Pharisees **circumvented the meaning** of those passages. They actually **reversed** the teaching of these passages. To the Pharisees, oaths which **implicated the name of God** were binding, but other oaths were not binding. For example, a man was not under obligation to fulfill his word when he made an oath by *heaven*, by the *earth*, by *Jerusalem*, or by his *head*, but only if he mentioned God did he actually have to live up to his word.

As with the other illustrations Jesus used, their practices failed to deal with the issue of the heart (in this case, **integrity**) while it allowed for a false sense of righteousness to prevail in the show you could put on for people to see.

II. The Application of the Law (34-36)

Matthew 5:34-36: *But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

Jesus was showing that what the Jewish leaders taught was **not just inadequate**, it was **totally wrong**. When the Lord said **make no oath at all**, He aimed at the Jewish custom which says that only statements sworn to need to be kept, and even among these there were only certain forms of swearing that were binding. Jesus says that **all** oaths are binding, but that **no such trivial oaths should be necessary**, since a simple **yes** or **no** is sufficient.

Jesus was strong in exposing their hypocrisy:

Matthew 23:16-22: *Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' "You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.' You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.*

Here's what the Pharisees were doing with God's word on this subject. Consider the three Scriptures involved in this illustration:

Leviticus 19:12 (God's intended emphasis) . . . **you shall not swear falsely by My name** . . .

Leviticus 19:12 (The Pharisees' emphasis) . . . **you shall not swear falsely by My name** . . .

Numbers 30:2 (God's intended emphasis) *If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, **he shall not violate his word**; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

Numbers 30:2 (The Pharisees' emphasis) *If a man makes a vow **to the Lord**, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

Deuteronomy 23:21 (God's intended emphasis) *When you make a vow to the Lord your God, **you shall not delay to pay it**, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you.*

Deuteronomy 23:21 (The Pharisees' emphasis) *When you make a vow **to the Lord your God**, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you.*

The Pharisees' meaning of oaths in general: **You shall not break your oath, if you swore it to the Lord.** God's meaning of oaths in general: **You shall not break your oaths, but you shall keep them before the Lord.** God sees every promise you make. God Himself sets the example. Our spiritual future is based on **God's own oaths to us:**

Psalm 132:11: **The Lord has sworn to David**, *A truth from which He will not turn back; "Of the fruit of your body I will set upon your throne.*

Hebrews 6:17–18: *In the same way **God**, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, **interposed with an oath**, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we may have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.*

Just as with the previous illustrations (anger, adultery, and divorce), Jesus teaches that God desires to work **in your heart**. It misses the point if you concentrate only on outward behavior. Let God deal with you on the inside, **then** you can see true, lasting change in your behavior. Notice the emphasis on **truthfulness from within:**

Psalm 15:1–2:

*O LORD, who may abide in Your tent?
Who may dwell on Your holy hill?
He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness,
And speaks truth in his heart.*

Psalm 51:6:

*Behold, **You desire truth in the innermost being**,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.*

Psalm 24:3–4:

*Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
And who may stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and **a pure heart**,
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood
And has not sworn deceitfully.*

Zechariah 8:16–17: *These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. Also **let none of you devise evil in your heart against another**, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,' declares the LORD.*

III. The General Principle (37)

Matthew 5:37: *But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.*

Let your **yes** really mean **yes**; let your **no** really mean **no**. **Beyond these is of evil.** Jesus is saying that in normal conversation, which is where the Pharisees' teaching on oaths was absurd, it is **evil** to spice up your speech by oaths. Say what you mean, and mean what you say. The point is the same as with the other illustrations. The real solution is **in the heart**. It's the work of **Christ in you**.

The ultimate issue is the **spiritual condition of your heart**. In the heart, truth must reign supreme. So Jesus says that in normal conversation, you should avoid oaths altogether. Be so truthful that **yes** means **yes** and **no** means **no**.

Integrity means *wholeness; soundness*. An integer is a *whole* number. A person with integrity is a person who acts with wholeness—not fractionalized. What any part of the person says, the whole person says.

Mark Twain:

"If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

Thomas Sowell:

"It's amazing how much panic one honest man can spread among a multitude of hypocrites."