

“True to Our Word”

Matthew 5:33-37

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We've been looking at Jesus' six commands in the Kingdom Code, this part of the Sermon on the Mount. Six times he says "You have heard it said," or a phrase like it, and it means he's quoting the Old Testament. That's a bold claim, because he's saying, "I'm going to tell you what it really means." He can do that because he's the Word of God himself.

He's already talked about anger, lust, and divorce. It isn't just a question of keeping or breaking outward commands. The real issue is deeper, because we need a new heart.

Now, Jesus turns to the subject of swearing oaths. The Old Testament didn't just allow them, it actually commanded them. For example David wrote,

Sacrifice thank offerings to God,  
*fulfill your vows* to the Most High (Psalm 50:14)

Taking an oath was a way of testing a person to make sure they did indeed fulfill their vows, because if they didn't hold to the terms, a curse would apply to them. Samuel gives an example,

Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people *under an oath*, saying, "*Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!*" (1 Samuel 14:24).

To break an oath was to lie, considered a great sin and something that would cut you off from fellowship with God. Even in the New Testament, swearing an oath is assumed in several places as a way of insuring a person is telling the truth about a gravely important matter. The writer of Hebrews wrote,

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. (Hebrews 6:16)

The Apostle Paul himself came close to swearing a solemn oath when he wrote to the church in Corinth,

I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. (2 Corinthians 1:23)

So, when we add Jesus' teaching to the Old Testament practice of swearing oaths, what are we to make of it? And what does that tell us for following Jesus today?

First of all, it tells us that integrity matters to God.

Jesus' words about swearing tie back into the Old Testament, and I think particularly to the Ten Commandments. The third commandment tells us, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God" (Exodus 5:7), and the ninth commandment, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16).

Now the first four commandments had to do with our relationship with God: "No other gods," "No images," "No misusing the LORD's name," and "Remember the Sabbath."

The last six commands all have to do with our relationship with others: "Honor father and mother," "No murder," "No adultery," "No stealing," "No false witness," and "No coveting." And did you notice that there's a commandment in each group about speaking right—first, speaking right about God, and second, speaking right about others. Don't misuse God's name, and don't lie about others.

That tells us that our speech, what we say about God and others is critical to our spiritual life. It reveals the integrity, or lack of integrity, of our hearts. So it is that all over the New Testament, there's a concern that we be true to our word. As Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus,

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. (Ephesians 4:25)

That is, we're not just members of an organization called the church, we're members "of each other." It's a very strong way of saying God is concerned for the integrity of our community. When James, the head of the church in Jerusalem and Jesus' half-brother, remembered these words of Jesus, and reminded the church to live by them. He wrote,

Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned. (James 5:12)

Interesting, isn't it? For James, what it means to "come from the evil one" is "to be condemned."

Now, if Jesus has in mind the Ten Commandments, then he's telling us that making false oaths is connected to misusing the name of God. The point isn't simply that we shouldn't misuse God's name or abuse our integrity of speech with someone else. The Bible is teaching we should tell the truth and keep our promises without having to be forced. Jesus says, go beyond just the letter of the law, and understand its purpose.

#### How important is this command?

Let's face it, this command seems like the least important of the bunch, doesn't it? When you stack up not swearing an oath next to taking life or breaking marriage, swearing an oath doesn't seem so weighty in that context. But it shows pretty clearly how comprehensive our discipleship really is. The larger purpose is to protect speech.

Israel had a justice system where people could bring their grievances against fellow citizens or other legal matters before a local tribunal of elders that met at the village gate. People had recourse of appeal to a priest. In fact, a lot of psalms reflect the feelings of a person who has been wronged and is looking for justice.

The system depended completely on the testimony of witnesses to the matter under question; after all, there was no such thing as scientific evidence available. You can see why the integrity of the nation's life depended on the reliability of witnesses. Nobody could be convicted on the basis on just one witness.

But the Ninth Commandment intended to go further. Telling the truth in simple, everyday matters reflected on the fact that God had redeemed this people and lived in their midst. It was more than saying people shouldn't bear false witness. It had to do with basic truthfulness in living together: "You shall not lie to one another." (Leviticus 19:11)

That's why they made a system of verification. Money was weighed on scales; there were deeds of purchase. Witnesses were brought in to notarize a transaction. All of this was to verify, and hold people accountable to the truth.

We have standards of verification, too. People swear on Bibles, on God's name, on someone's grave. Or, in Johnny Hart's cartoon, BC, the cave man Peter makes great declarations from the column of truth. The punch line is often if he says something that isn't right, he gets zapped with lightening. But you can't compartmentalize where God is involved in some areas of life but not in others. Not just from the column of truth, not just when you swear. He is already in every area, and he hears every word we say.

#### Is swearing an oath ever okay?

Some Christian groups have taught you should take Jesus' words absolutely, and that oaths are never allowed.<sup>1</sup> Usually, in the mainstream Reformation tradition, we've said it's permissible:

“...when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote truth and trustworthiness for God's glory and our neighbor's good.” (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 101)

After all, Paul instructed the church,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1)

So, an oath in itself isn't bad, it's neutral. Sometimes we're required to give them. But the fact that we even need an oath shows we live in a world where our word isn't good enough, and where people expect to hear a lot of lies. Why do we call God as our witness when he sees everything we do, anyway? If we're filled with the Holy Spirit, we're above that. We should treat everything we say with the same reverence. That's simplicity of speech, and it's integrity.

We owe obedience to the civil authority. Because of that, our tradition has taught it is permissible to say a vow when we're required to. The bigger principle is to be persons

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Mennonite and Amish tradition forbids it: see *The Dordrecht Confession of Faith* (1632). Mennonite Historical Bulletin, MCUSA, <http://www.mcusa-archives.org/index.html>

who are true to our word. That leads me to ask, when does obeying God mean disobeying the government? Or are there times where it is permissible to lie?

Is it ever permissible to lie?

Let's say you were a Christian family living in Mainz, Germany, in 1939. Your father has a Jewish student working in his accounting office, and after praying you come to the conclusion you should be willing to hide him to save his life. One night, the Nazis knock on your front door and demand to know if you're hiding any Jews.

Now, you have a choice. Do you turn in the young man to what you know will mean a concentration camp, or is it permissible in that case to lie? Which decision will better honor God and preserve your integrity? Good, you know the right answer: it's to withhold the truth in order to save an innocent life. In that case the call to preserve life trumps the command not to lie, or not to swear an oath.

But that's not the case with most of our twisting the truth, is it? And oaths miss the point on that. When we stretch the truth to cover our tracks, or because we think people will think less of us, we're forgetting that God sees us, and one day he will show the secrets of every heart. So, when Paul says, "I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie," (Galatians 1:20) he knows we're accountable before God, and he leaves it at that. We don't take lightly the promises we make to God, because all relationships depend on integrity.

It's true in science. The basis of science is verification of test results. Who wants to rely on test results in medicine, for example, from a company that's been caught with falsifying data? Do you want to buy your prescription medicine from people like that?

It's true in journalism. A journalist was fired from the New York Times not too long ago because he had made up interviews. That's a cardinal sin in journalism. There's no room for fabricating facts in news coverage, because it undermines the whole idea of a free press.

It's true in sports. Athletes are barred from their sport if they use steroids, because if the game isn't honest, you don't have a game at all.

It's even truer in relationships. Truthfulness is the basis for all relationships. You can't have a marriage without it. You can't belong to a family or hold down a job without it, and you can't have a relationship with God without it. Jesus takes us to the heart of the third commandment and the ninth commandment, and says "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes,' or 'No, No'."

God wants us to have authentic relationships with himself, with others, and with ourselves. In order for that to happen, we have to be in touch with reality. There are two fundamental truths about us we need know:

First, we are sinners. Don't think too highly of yourself!

I was working in the office of my former church in Sacramento one day when a man in a blue blazer came in asking for the pastor. I thought he was looking for a meeting, and I

told him I was one of the pastors and asked if I could help. He waved a large plastic bag filled with wadded ten-dollar bills under my nose.

“I’ve been authorized to make you a wager,” he said. “The CIA has given me top secret information that the president is going to be thrown out of office with one month. If I’m wrong, I’ll come back in a month, and give this money to you. But if I’m right, I get to come back here and paint all the crosses in your church white!”

I know, it’s really random. I don’t know why that meant something to him, but I know I was glad to be able to say to him, “Well, in our system, that would really be the board of elders who would be able to authorize such a thing. But I don’t think that would go over real well with them.”

You see, this was a man out of touch with reality. He wasn’t doing himself or anyone else any favors by going around thinking he was privy to top-secret information when he was not. It was impossible to help this man on the level he needed help because he thought everything was great. God *wants* you to be in touch with reality, and he wants us to know that we’re sinners in need of his help. But that’s not the last word on us.

Second, we are beloved of God. Don’t think too little of yourself!

This is the second great reality about ourselves that God wants us to be in touch with. We don’t go along with the radical environmentalists that see humanity as a cancer on the face of the earth. There is no place for “worm theology” that says we are beyond hope. We are sinners, but we are beloved. We are broken vessels, says the Apostle Paul, but we are precious to God and are filled with a priceless treasure.

This means that we need honest relationships in the Body of Christ. We need friendships with our brothers and sisters in Christ where we can know and be known, where we don’t have to put on masks in order to be loved, where we don’t have to be super-Christians in order to be valued, where we can even confess our sins to one another.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” (John 14:6) He is the great truth God wants us to get in touch with. That’s why the Lord warns us against swearing to one another. We’re freed from having to play that game.

If you are tired of living the lie of self-referential living, and want to know the One who is the Truth, you can come to him now. If you’re tired of being a part of this culture of posturing and surface image, of trying to weasel out of commitments, you can be free. Christ died to set you free, the real you. He loves *you*, not some idealized version of who you feel you’re supposed to be.

Where does that leave us? I think Jesus wants us to try to take him at his word with each of the commands, and to keep from all oaths, all violence, all lust, all hatred, and as we do that, to discover the glorious freedom of the children of God.