

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN, MEAN WHAT YOU SAY MATTHEW 5:33-37

When I was a teenager our family spent a week with another family sharing a cabin at a mountain lake in California. At the far end of the lake there was a cliff called Butterfly Rock that jetted out from the shore and rose about forty feet above the water. It was there that we spent our afternoons climbing the cliff and plunging into the lake.

Of course, the more we did it the more courageous we got, and the more daring our manner of jumps and dives. We invented all kinds of ways to increase the thrill. Swan dives, 360's, spread eagles—you name it, we did it. Except for flips. As tough as we thought we were, none of us had the guts to do a flip. Until, that is, I challenged our friend with words that most boys cannot resist. I double dared him.

His response, quite naturally, was, "What will you give me?"

I thought for a moment, then replied, "I'll give you twenty doll hairs." My twin brother raised the ante, "I'll give you twenty doll hairs, too."

"Promise?"

"Sure."

"Cross your hearts?"

"Yep."

"Let me see your hands. No fingers crossed?"

"Nope."

"Twenty bucks, right?"

"I said twenty doll hairs."

He then walked to the ledge, and proceeded to do the ugliest 40 foot flip I have ever seen. He looked like a sack of potatoes that had been flung over the edge, and it must have hurt when he hit the water because he landed on his side. But that didn't seem to bother him, because he popped up from the water with an enormous grin on his face.

Of course, he had one thing on his mind. And so we immediately went back to the cabin, whereupon my brother and I found an old doll, and proceeded to pluck forty hairs from its head.

"Here's your forty doll hairs." And we laughed and laughed. Needless to say, he didn't, and for the next twenty minutes he took at least \$40 out of our hides.

Most of us learn about trickery at an early age. We learn that people don't always say what they mean, or mean what they say. We ourselves learn how to do that as well. It's a game that kids play. But as we get older it can become more than a game. It becomes a way to manipulate, get the upper hand, and get things for ourselves at the expense of others.

We call it by several names, some of which almost sound like virtues. *Sly, crafty, shrewd, cunning, clever*. Or we have other ways to describe it. A loophole, a smokescreen, fine print. The real name for it, however, is deceit, and deceitfulness is no joke, according to Scripture.

The Bible says that deceit is one of the major ingredients of sin. It was the method Satan used when he tempted Eve in the Garden, and it's the primary method he's used ever since. We also know from Scripture that deceit is a component of our fallen nature. In Jeremiah God says, "*The heart is deceitful above all else and desperately wicked*" (Jer. 17:9). We have a natural propensity to believe and propagate lies.

However, as followers of Jesus who have been born of God we are no longer controlled by our sinful nature. We are no longer children of the father of lies (Satan). We

are the children of the Father of Truth. We are no longer citizens of the kingdom of darkness, where lies are the mode of operation; we are citizens of the kingdom of light, where truth reigns supreme.

That is not to say that we are no longer *tempted* to lie. But part of what it means to be a kingdom person is that we are progressively becoming people who are true, through and through.

Jesus talks about this several times in the Sermon on the Mount as He describes the character and values of kingdom people. You may recall in our study of this sermon that one of the characteristics of kingdom people is *purity*. We discovered that to be pure in heart means to be without guile, without deceit, without hypocrisy. It means to be authentic, congruent, true—through and through. It means to be a person of integrity.

In the passage we are going to look at today Jesus talks specifically about truthfulness in our speech. He says in **verses 33-37**. *³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

This passage comes in the context of Jesus informing His audience that He had come to fulfill the Old Testament, and one of the ways He was going to do that was by clarifying and amplifying the intent of God’s laws. In Matthew 5 He does this for six OT laws. We have studied three of them so far—laws about murder, adultery and divorce. In this passage Jesus is talking about swearing and oath taking, something that is addressed in several passages in the Law of Moses (i.e. Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2). Please note that swearing, here, is not the same as cursing or cussing. Swearing is affirming the truth about a matter by calling on God as a witness to judge if it is untrue. Swearing wasn’t commanded in the Old Testament, but it was permitted to substantiate an important affirmation or promise and ensure that a person remained faithful to a commitment.

There was nothing wrong with that. Sometimes God Himself guaranteed the fulfillment of His promises by swearing by Himself (Gen. 9:9-17). And although God did not require people to make oaths, He approved of them if they were properly given.

However, over time this matter of swearing or oath-taking devolved into something that God never intended it to be. Jewish rabbis developed a highly structured hierarchy of oaths that allowed for varying degrees of truth. The result was that lying through word manipulation became an elaborate game, and by the first century, this game was played so often and by so many people that lying was the norm and not the exception.

And the implications were enormous. People had a hard time trusting each other and taking each other’s words at face value. In business transactions they learned to become skeptical, suspicious, and guarded, always having to wonder if the other guy was trying to rip them off.

We lived in a similar culture in Africa, and that was perhaps the most stressful part about living there. You could never be sure someone was telling you the truth; you always wondered if you were being taken advantage of. And so you always had to do the math on your bill at the restaurant, always had to watch the meter at the gas station, always had to make sure they hadn’t hiked the price of their goods when they saw our white faces coming into their shops.

In Jesus' day the suspicion that one was being lied to was so bad that the religious leaders proposed a solution they thought would restore a measure of trust. But instead of insisting that people simply tell the truth, they developed an elaborate system of swearing.

Here's how it worked: Let's say someone wanted to sell a car. He said, "This car is in great shape. The engine has been overhauled, the brakes have been replaced, and it was owned by a Mennonite farmer who kept it in his garage except to drive it to church on Sunday."

Well, you could be pretty sure that yes, the engine had been overhauled and the brakes replaced—but it was probably 150,000 miles ago. And yes, it was owned at one time by a Mennonite farmer who kept it in his garage, but it had since been owned by a New York taxi company.

However, if the car salesman said all of the above about the car and attached an oath, then you could be *more* certain that it was true. Not *completely* certain, but *more* certain. In fact, the certainty of a statement or claim was determined by what *kind* of oath a person attached to it—and there were lots of different kinds of oaths. Indeed, if you wanted to get the truth out of somebody, you practically had to be an oath expert.

Let me explain: There is an Old Testament command that says, "*You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God: I am Yahweh*" (Lev. 19:12). To swear by God's name was a very serious matter, because not only did it invoke Him to be a witness of the transaction or agreement, it invited Him to judge the person who violated His word. The Jews took this seriously, and made sure they were absolutely truthful when swearing by God's name.

However, instead of understanding the principle and intent of that command—namely, that God wants us to be truthful—they looked for ways that would not obligate them to tell the truth *all the time*, and still feel they were within the bounds of the Law. In other words, they conveniently interpreted the OT command to mean that swearing falsely by God's name was *not* allowed, but swearing falsely by some other name was allowed. And so if you were clever enough you could lie with an oath and get away with it.

As ridiculous as this seems, permission to do this is actually stated in the *Mishna*, a Jewish commentary on the Law of Moses that most Jews esteemed almost as much as Scripture itself. The *Mishna* says that if you swear by the temple, then you had to keep your promise. But if you swear by the gold in the temple, you're off the hook. If you swear by the altar in the temple, then you had to keep your word, but if you swear by the gift on the altar—it's okay to renege. They even got down to prepositions. One rabbi writes in the *Mishna* saying, "If you swear 'by' Jerusalem the oath is not binding, but if you swear 'toward' Jerusalem, it is."

In other words, swearing became a silly game, every bit as absurd as when a child crosses his fingers and tells a lie and says, "I had my fingers crossed, so it's okay." Only it was all the more evil because it was shrouded with pious language.

When Jesus addressed this subject of oaths in verses 33-37 He was mocking their silly games. But it was no laughing matter. He condemns them—for a couple of reasons.

First, it was a misinterpretation of the Law. Look at **verse 33**. ³³ "*Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'*" This command is found in Numbers 30:2. In that passage God permitted oaths, not to make the statement more binding, but to make it more emphatic and solemn.

Wedding vows are a good example of this. The purpose of wedding vows is not to keep the couple from lying to one another, but to demonstrate the importance and the solemnity of what they are promising.

God has permitted oaths to solemnize our promises, not to distinguish truth from lies. He has always expected His people to tell the truth...at all times, not just when they are using an oath.

But because swearing and oath-taking had become a way for people to manipulate the truth and had turned the Jewish community into a society of liars, Jesus says in **verse 34a**. ³⁴ *“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all...”* In other words, don't participate in that game devised by the rabbis and endorsed by the Mishna. Don't compartmentalize your statements and distinguish between true ones and not-quite-true ones.

Lying, in any form and to any degree, is a serious matter. In Isaiah 59 when God is describing the horrible sins that have separated His people from Himself and compelled Him to hide His face from them and ignore their prayers, He says, *“Your lips have spoken lies—your heart conceives them, your lips utter them. Truth has stumbled in the streets. Honesty is not allowed to enter. Truth is nowhere to be found”* (vv.3, 13-15). In Proverbs 6 when Solomon is describing the six things the Lord hates, yeah seven which are an abomination to Him, the second is *“a lying tongue,”* and the sixth is *“a false witness who breathes out lies”* (Prov. 6:16-19). In 1 Timothy when Paul is listing several manifestations of depravity, He talks about adulterers, perverts, slave traders, and liars and perjurers all in the same sentence (1:9-10). And God said in Revelation 21 that the destination of *all* liars is the lake of fire (21:8).

Remember, God is a God of truth. There isn't even a hint of falsehood in Him. Lying is incompatible with God's nature, which is the nature He imparted to us when we put our faith in Jesus and were born again. If that is true, and it is, it means that lying ought to be just as loathsome to us as it is to God. Lying in any form, whether it is intentional deception or inadvertent embellishment, ought to bother us. It ought to make us cringe. It ought to activate our consciences.

I will never forget when Josh McDowell visited Salem several years ago and told of a survey he gave to 300 Christian high school students at one of the nation's leading evangelical churches. The question was simple. “If you could lie to keep from getting in trouble, would you?”

297 said yes. Only three said no.

That response is incompatible with the nature of a Christ follower. Truth is not only precious to God, it is part of who He is. And because God has imparted His nature to us truth is part of who we are as well. We ought to tell the truth all the time because we are true people—it's in our nature to tell the truth.

And because we are true the truth ought to emanate from us naturally and spontaneously, rather than us trying to prove that we are truthful. And so, says Jesus, we shouldn't swear at all. **Verses 34-35**, ³⁴ *“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.”*

The Jews in Jesus day said that if a person swore by heaven or the earth or Jerusalem, it was not as serious or as binding as swearing by God's name. In making this distinction they were trying to distinguish between what is sacred and what is not sacred, or at least what is not as sacred. Jesus says, that's really bad theology. God is everywhere, and that

makes everywhere and everything sacred. He is in heaven, sitting on a throne, which makes heaven sacred. He is on earth, because He uses the earth as His footstool, so that makes earth sacred. And He is in Jerusalem because it is *His* city, and that makes Jerusalem sacred. Since God is everywhere all things and all places are sacred. And because God is present in *all* places He hears *all* our words, so we ought to be absolutely truthful *all* the time.

But there is something else. Not only is it presumptuous to swear by a place because you don't think God is there, it is also presumptuous to swear by yourself. **Verse 36,** *³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

Yesterday I caught Mindy staring at my head. I said, "What's wrong?"

She said, "Wow, your hair is completely gray!"

That statement didn't bother me in the least. I looked in the mirror and said, "Hmnn, you're right." But that was different than my reaction to her statement the day before when she said, "Wow, you've put on a few pounds!"

The reason it was different is because I can't help it if my hair turns gray. I have no control over that. But I *can* control my calorie intake.

It was common for Jews in the first century to prove the veracity of a statement by saying, "If this is not true may every hair on my head turn white."

Jesus said, "Stop that nonsense! You cannot make even one of them turn white. So quit devising ways to try to prove that what you are saying is true. By trying to prove that you are telling the truth you are actually undermining your own credibility."

So instead, **verse 37.** *³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."*

You don't have to punctuate your statements with an exclamation mark. You don't have to say, "I promise" or "I swear." You simply let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' 'no'. In other words, say what you mean and mean what you say.

I hope you understand what Jesus is saying here, and how it applies to you. By the way, if you come away from this text thinking that Jesus is anti-oaths, then you've missed the point. Jesus allowed Himself to be put under an oath by the high priest (Matt. 26:63-64). Paul put himself under oath on two separate occasions to emphasize the importance of what he was saying (Gal. 1:20; 2 Cor. 1:23).

The real issue is not oaths; it's truthfulness. We all know that contracts and formal agreements and pledges don't guarantee truth. People will lie in spite of these things. Jesus is not trying to give us a new rule here. So don't get hung up as to whether this means you should or shouldn't take an oath in a court of law, or make a vow at your wedding. You could very easily get caught up in the same old hairsplitting legalism that afflicted the people in Jesus' day (Robinson).

The issue is not oaths; it's truthfulness. We ought to be so committed to telling the truth that we don't need oaths to guarantee it. A simple 'yes' or 'no' is all that is needed. Anything beyond that comes from the evil one, who is the author of deceit and the father of lies. We ought to be men and women of our word. We should never intentionally deceive others by using language that is ambiguous or tricky. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Of course, the best example of this is our Lord Jesus Himself. Have you ever noticed that Jesus never once tried to prove how right He was? He never once embellished His stories, so that He could command more attention and a larger following. Read His words. Read His responses when the religious leaders tried to trick Him. Read about His trial when

Pastor Stan Myers
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Pilate asked Him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He simply said, "Yes, it is as you say." I believe that's the longest sentence He used during His trial.

Jesus said what He meant, and meant what He said. He spoke the truth...all the time. Let's do the same. We have His nature. We have the capacity to be people whose words are so characterized by integrity that others need no formal assurance of their truthfulness in order to trust them.

Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say
Matthew 5:33-37

Main Idea: Our words ought to be so characterized by integrity that others need no formal assurance of their truthfulness in order to trust us

Old Testament Teaching about Oaths (33)

The meaning of swearing

The original purpose of swearing

The contemporary practice of swearing

Binding and non-binding oaths

Deceit dressed up in religious finery

Jesus' Revised Teaching about Oaths (34-37)

Oaths are prohibited (34-36)

The presumption of swearing by anything in God's creation

The presumption of swearing by oneself

No more than a simple 'yes' or 'no' (37)

Our Father is the God of truth

The devil is the father of lies

Application