

The King Who Calls Us to Integrity in Speech

Matthew 5:33-37

As a pastor, you get asked a lot of hard questions. Questions about doctrine or things that are hard to understand in the Bible; questions about life and how to deal with this, or ‘why is this happening to me?’ But for me, perhaps the most dreaded question I get asked every day is this: “What time are you going to be home for supper?” I dread it, not because it’s a particularly hard question, and not because it’s an unfair question. It’s very fair, and quite important for my wife as she times dinner and makes sure we can share it as a family. I dread it because I know there’s a strong likelihood that I’m not going to keep my word again. I will say 5:30, because I think that’s the right answer and because it will make me look good—the faithful husband who comes home to rescue his wife from the chaos of four small children during that most bewitching hour of the day. But then I, almost invariably, will try to get one or two more things done, such that it’s 6 or 6:15 by the time I actually walk through the door. That’s of course pretty self-centered, unloving, and disrespectful way to treat my wife and family.

Now for some of us that may seem like a rather small example of dishonesty (though if you’re a mom with small kids, you know it’s right up there with lying under oath in federal court). But I share that as a confession, but also as just one example of the many ways we are all prone to use our words for dishonesty and selfish gain, whether we’re trying to manipulate someone or escape some responsibility—all in effort to build our own self-glorifying kingdom.

What our passage reminds us, however, is that there’s only one King of heaven and earth, and following him means *saying what we mean*, and *doing what we say*—whether it’s what we say at home, in our families, or at church. What we say at work, in our business dealings, or at school, or at the salon, or on Facebook—wherever we are. Jesus is the King who calls us to integrity in speech. So as we look at this passage, let’s ask God to expose our hearts and any dishonesty that’s there, and then to change our hearts through his gospel, that we might honor Jesus as King with respect to our speech.

Why Oaths Matter

Our passage this morning, Matthew 5:33-37, is part of what’s called the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus lays out his vision for life in his kingdom—under this rule and reign as King. Verses 33-37 are part of a larger section where Jesus is showing us how his vision of kingdom life doesn’t overturn or do away with God’s law in the Old Testament—what God had already said to his people about how to live—but rather, how he fulfills the law. The law itself was actually pointing forward to Jesus and his kingdom. This is in contrast to the religious leaders of his day, groups like the scribes and Pharisees, who acted like gatekeepers of the law, but whose obedience to it was only skin deep. They neglected the heart, so that their “righteousness” was phony and superficial (cf. 5:20). But Jesus and the righteousness of his kingdom go below the

surface, which is what he is demonstrating in 5:21-48, where he gives six examples how he and his kingdom actually fulfill the heart of the law.

So far Jesus has dealt with the question of murder—how keeping the law is not just about what we do with our hands, but also in our hearts. Similarly we looked at the holiness of marriage last week, how avoiding adultery is more than just not sleeping with someone’s wife, or filing the right paperwork for a divorce, but guarding our hearts and upholding God’s creational design for the permanence of marriage.

Today, Jesus addresses the subject of swearing on oath. Verse 33: “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’” Now, unlike the previous examples, this is not a direct quote from the Old Testament, but a summary of several passages. For instance:

- Leviticus 19:12: “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.”
- Deuteronomy 23:21-23: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.”

And because Jesus is talking about oaths sworn *to the Lord*, it also touches on the third commandment: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Exod. 20:7, ESV). To swear to God, and then to break your oath, is to use his name in an empty or vain way.

So what is an oath, and why does Jesus care what we do with them (or more generally what we do with our speech)? Merriam-Webster defines it well: An oath is “a solemn usually formal calling upon God or a god to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says; [it is] a solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words.”¹ Think of what happens before someone testifies in court: they place their right hand on a Bible, and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, “so help me God.” What they’re saying is that you can believe what I’m about to say, because I’m calling on God as witness, and if I lie, he has the right to strike me down (or something like that).

Now in a perfect world, where everyone was trustworthy and able to trust others, oaths would be unnecessary. As John Stott has said, “Swearing (i.e. *oath-taking*) is really a pathetic confession of our own dishonesty.”² But in the fallen world we live in, where people are prone to lie and suspicious of others doing the same, oaths can be a helpful convention. They add gravity, sometimes consequences, to the words being spoken, helping people take them seriously. We see lots of examples throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments:

- Joshua charging Achan to tell the truth in Joshua 7:19: “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oath>.

² John Stott, *Essential Living: The Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1978), 102.

- Ruth pledging her commitment to Naomi in Ruth 1:17: “May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”
- And Boaz pledging his commitment to Ruth in 3:13: “As the LORD lives, I will redeem you” (ESV).
- Paul calling on God as his witness that he is telling the truth in Romans 1:9 or Galatians 1:20.
- Even God himself swears on oath—not because he’s prone to dishonesty, but because we’re prone to unbelief: “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear” (Isa. 45:23; see also Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:20-22).

We do similar things today. We say things like “I swear!” or “I swear to God” or “I pinky swear.” “Cross my heart and hope to die!” Newly elected officials take an oath of office. Medical doctors swear to uphold the Hippocratic Oath. The wedding vows we make are an oath before God and man that we’re going to keep our promise of marriage. Even business contracts are a kind of oath—a solemn agreement that we are saying what we mean and we will do what we say.

And as this passage reminds us, swearing under oath is no small thing. In fact it’s intended to be a big thing—not something to be done lightly. As Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 says:

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake."

Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

The Old Testament spoke often of the seriousness of keeping oaths, and Jesus upholds that seriousness here—we are called to tell the truth and keep our word.

But Jesus does have a problem with what had become of oaths in his day, particularly with what religious leaders like the Pharisees were doing with them. They had taken a convention that was designed to promote truthfulness and trust and turned into a vehicle for dishonesty and selfish gain. So Jesus says in Matthew 5:34-36:

But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

The Pharisees used oaths in two ways: first, *to manipulate the trust of their hearers*, impressing them with big language of how serious they were, but then second, *to create an escape clause out of their words*, in case it became expedient to go back on their word. They dressed their speech in oaths to create an impressive and imposing wall around their words, making their words appear secure and trustworthy. The oath was like a fortress, guaranteeing the safety of believing this person. But within that imposing wall, they also included a secret escape hatch. So whereas it looked like they were serious and trustworthy, they could always get out of their words if they needed to.

The way they created that escape hatch was through a complex system for deciding which oaths were binding and which ones weren’t. For instance, listen to Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:

“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?¹⁸ You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.²¹ And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Matt. 23:16-22)

Even later rabbinic tradition reflects this kind of posturing. For instance, one whole tractate of the *Mishnah* was devoted to oaths, and suggests that when someone has broken an oath: “If . . . he says: By heaven and earth, they are free; [he’s not guilty for breaking it. But if he swore] by any of the divine names, or by some other divine attribute, so they are guilty.”³

Similarly, here in Matthew 5, the Pharisees’ assumption was that if they swore by something other than God, they didn’t have to keep their oath. And so they swore by heaven, or the earth, or Jerusalem, or themselves. People would still be impressed by their oath and so trust them, but they had a way out if they needed it. ‘I had my fingers crossed behind my back!’ Claiming to keep the letter of the Law, the Pharisees were butchering its spirit, using their words to get what they wanted out of life, in effort to build their own kingdom instead of God’s

And O how we do the same thing today with our words. We too want certain things out of life, and want them on our own terms. And so we use words to manipulate others. We exaggerate to make our point. We stretch the truth, or perhaps give just a half truth. We make flowery promises that we don’t intend to keep. We even say things like “I guarantee it,” or “I swear I’m telling the truth,” we sign the dotted line, knowing in our hearts that we don’t mean it—whether we’re speaking to a business client, a friend, a spouse, our own children.

We say things we don’t mean, and we don’t do what we say. It’s like when I use the word “soon” in my family. My wife says to me, “You keep using that word. But I do not think it means what you think it means.” “Soon” means within a relatively short frame of time. But because I’ve used that word so many times but not done very quickly what I said I would *soon* do, now when they hear that word, they’re like “Oh great. That means it’s going to be tomorrow.” What it really means is that dad is too selfish—he can’t take himself away from what he’s doing to love his family, or else too obsessive—he can’t turn off thinking about work or some conflict or matter. What it means is that dad’s agenda is crossing with God’s agenda, and I want my agenda to win.

We’re also pretty good at finding ways of getting out of what we said we would do. From our endless creativity in explaining why I can’t turn in my homework (“My house is being fumigated and I don’t want to go in there and suffocate just to get it”; “A sudden wind blew it out of my hand and I never saw it again”⁴), to the common but ever unconvincing, “I know that’s what I said, but that’s not what I meant,” we are masters of excuses and escape clauses. As soon as we

³ M. Shebuoth, ch. 4. *Babylonian Talmud, Book 9: Tracts Maccoth, Shebuoth, Eduyoth, Abuda Zara, and Horioth*, Translated by Michael L. Rodkinson (1918): 61-62. Available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/t09/shb05.htm>. See also D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 153.

⁴ <http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/random/articles/111594/title/61-funny-excuses-not-doing-homework>.

realize that our goal and agenda, that our glory and kingdom will be better served by *not* keeping our word, we find the nearest exit.

We claim to be honoring God and following him. But we've hijacked the system to use it for our own selfish means. After all, our glory and our kingdom—getting what we want and demand out of life—is at stake.

Jesus has no tolerance for such treasonous duplicity. There is only one King of heaven and earth, and those who follow him say what they mean and do what they say (which is what the Law was after in the first place).

Why Oaths Don't Matter

So it is, as Don Carson says, that “If oaths designed to encourage truthfulness become occasions for clever lies and . . . deceit, Jesus will abolish oaths (v.34).”⁵ Look at v. 34 again: “But I tell you, Do not swear at all. . . .” And then v. 37: “Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

From these verses, some traditions have suggested that Christians should never swear under oath in any circumstance, even in court of law. While I applaud the seriousness with which they take these words from Jesus, I think that position lacks nuance and misses the big picture a bit. Again, elsewhere we see the apostle Paul swearing under oath (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10), we see God swearing under oath. Even Jesus himself testifies under oath later in Matthew 26:63-64: “The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. . . .”

So while Jesus doesn't seem to abolish the convention of oaths in its entirety, he issues a very strong correction in two ways. First, he closes the loopholes that the Pharisees thought they could exploit, slamming their escape hatch in their faces. Second, he suggests that oaths should be essentially unnecessary for members of his kingdom who speak the truth and keep their word for Jesus' sake.

Jesus closes the Pharisees' loopholes. He dismantles the faulty logic of their oath system by reminding them that any word uttered in creation is spoken before God, and therefore binding, regardless of the precise formula of the oath. Again, they thought that as long as they swore by heaven and not the God of heaven, they could break their word. Jesus rebukes them, reminding them that everything in creation falls under God's jurisdiction, which means that every oath involves him, and that they themselves have no claim on what they're swearing by, and no power with which to back up their words.

Look at v. 34 again: “But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black” (5:34-36). Your system, by which you thought you could look good while avoiding accountability to God, is broken. Because whatever you swear by and wherever you say it, you do so in the presence of God.

⁵ Carson, 153.

And if that's the case, then why depend so much on oaths? If they are so easily hijacked and manipulated, and if whatever we say, with or without an oath, should be true, then, Jesus says: Just say what you mean, and do what you say. Don't worry about oaths. Let your Yes actually mean yes, and your No actually mean no, and avoid the evil one's temptation to use your words for your own selfish gain. Followers of Jesus should be known for their integrity of speech. Paul urges Titus in Titus 2:7-8: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us." As Sinclair Ferguson says, the Christian "does not need to call on God to witness what he says because God is watching him and is present as he speaks, knowing his heart through and through. Anything beyond this straightforward honesty in our speech comes, says Jesus, from the evil one."⁶

So what does that look like? If our hearts are so prone to selfishness, such that our words are so prone to dishonesty, how do we speak with integrity?

What's interesting is that the very reality that condemns the Pharisees' false speech (and ours with them) is also what motivates and enables us to say what we mean and do what we say as followers of Jesus—and that's recognizing that God is King.

Think about why we exaggerate. Why we lie or tell half-truths, why we don't mean what we say. Because we're trying to control some person or situation in order to get our way. So we have to manipulate their approval, or marginalize their influence. We have to impress them so they like us and make much of us. Listen to how Paul Tripp describes it:

Often our words reveal an attempt to control things for our own good. We are moved by a personal sense of what we want or what we think would be good, and *so we speak in a way that guarantees we will get it*. We defend, accuse, inflict guilt, manipulate, rationalize, argue, cajole, beg, plead, or threaten, all for the purpose of controlling a person or a situation. . . . Our words often reveal that we are not so much trusting in the Lord as we are trying *be* him.⁷

And there's the underlying problem. We want to run things, we want the kingdom, and the glory, and power, forever and ever *for ourselves*. Not only is that a treason against God worthy of hell, it's the most miserable existence possible under the sun, to take upon ourselves the responsibility for running the world, without having the *ability* to pull it off. Our lives become a roller coaster of guilt and shame in our failure, of pride in our success, of anger when our plan is blocked, of despair when the whole thing unravels. And afterward, we face judgment.

But the beautiful and liberating truth of the gospel is that *we are not king, we don't have to be king*, because *Jesus is king*—and he's a good king. He is our sovereign and sufficient King, who is in control of every situation, who has the authority and the power to accomplish all his will, and who has the grace and mercy to do so for unworthy sinners like us. Colossians tells us:

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 97.

⁷ Paul Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of your Communication Struggles* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 46-47 (italics mine).

he might have the supremacy.¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:17-20)

There is forgiveness in Christ for our deception and sin—he died on the cross for our sins and rose again to give forgiveness and new life to all who trust in him. And there is freedom in Christ to turn away from our sin and follow him—even with our words—to say what we mean and do what we say. And it all flows out of recognizing him as our sovereign and sufficient King.

If God is *sovereign*, if he's in control, that means I don't have to be. I don't have to use my words to manipulate, or impress, or grasp for control; I can speak truthfully and *say what I mean*—even if it doesn't provide the results I'm hoping for. Even if it means my boss might pass over me for a promotion, or my classmates might dismiss my ideas at school. I can speak the truth and trust God with the results, because he is the sovereign King who will be faithful to work out his all his good purposes according to his perfect will.

If God is *sufficient*, if he is enough, that means I can trust him to supply for me everything I need. I don't have to fudge the truth to be accepted; because I'm accepted in Christ. Neither do I have to look for a way out of my words, as though I'm going to miss out on some good thing if I keep them. Because whatever it is I think I might gain by breaking my word, Jesus is better than that. Whether I'm simply trying to cross off one more task on my list, or trying to get more money or more power; whether I'm thinking about trading my old spouse in for a new one—whatever it is that would cause us to break our word is not only an affront to God's holiness and an offense to our neighbor, it pales in cheap comparison to the satisfaction available in Christ. If our hearts are satisfied in him—if he is to us the greatest treasure this world affords—then I don't have to trade him in for something less; I can honor Jesus and keep my word, because he is enough, , because is in control of and at work in whatever situation I'm in, and because he is worth it.

Even when our flesh is too weak to keep our word (to either stay the course, or to take what we know will be a hard and costly step of obedience)—Jesus is our strength in weakness. Through his Spirit, he supplies all that we need, by changing our hearts, and by giving us the ability to follow him, if we will *trust* him instead of trying to *be* him. Jesus is enough.

God is our sovereign and sufficient King. And because he is in control, and because he is everything we need, those who follow Christ can say what they mean, and do what they say. Paul Tripp says, “Only when I submit to the rule of God, who has a perfect plan and is in complete control, will I begin to live and speak as he has purposed.”⁸ The integrity of our speech begins with saying no to our self-glorifying agendas and grows by surrendering to Jesus, our sovereign and sufficient King.

⁸ Tripp, 69.