

Oaths and Dishonesty

Matthew 5:33-37

In today's world the truth is hard to come by. Whether you are in politics, business, sports, education, or marketing, lying and deception is commonplace. We are always just one newspaper article away from the next scandal and cover up. We have been taught that the world cannot be trusted and the truth does not sell. If you want to keep your place, or get ahead, deception is the way to do it. And if it's not boldface lies, we learn the skillful art of embellishing or not telling the whole truth. It's one thing for a sinful world to engage in deception, it's another thing for God's redeemed bride, His church, to engage in such behavior.

And sadly, lying and deception is commonplace within the church. I do not have any fancy stats, but I know that it is true, at least more than it should be. Our God is Truth, we are people of the truth, and therefore it is the height of hypocrisy that we would lie. It's not just on resumes and tax statements, it's in the every day stuff of life, guarding our reputation, presenting ourselves as better than we are, hiding from others in accountability groups, from our spouses and children.

This morning, this is the situation that Jesus is speaking into, our opportunity to shine as lights in the world. If you are just joining us, we are in a study in the book of Matthew, Jesus is the promised King, and as the King, in the sermon on the mount, He is the new law-giver for the new people of God. He's not doing away with the law of Moses, but He is raising its standard, calling for His people to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. Jesus has been hitting on various subjects—lust, anger, divorce, and today, the subject of oaths.

Let's read from Matthew 5:33-37, **“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.”**

Jesus again opens up with “you have heard it was said” referring to the teaching of the Pharisees. This is not a direct quote of the OT but built on several verses, for example,

Ex. 20:7, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” (3rd commandment)

Lev. 19:12, “You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God.”

Num. 30:2, “When a man vows a vow to the Lord, ... he shall not break his word.”

Moses taught that oaths added a level of truthfulness to what was being said or done, or as a commitment to perform some action. It had a larger function, however. The point was to increase truthfulness in all of life, not just on some occasions and not on others. It was a reminder that all of life was lived in the presence of God and therefore we should be truthful.

The reason this was necessary was because truthfulness, like today, was hard to come by. You don't need something like an oath unless the normal condition is dishonesty and deception.

Swearing in an oath was essentially calling God or some other object as your witness. The effect was to promote the likelihood that what was being communicated was truthful. If you swore in the name of God, you were in effect saying let God judge me if I am telling a lie.

If it was an object, you would destroy it. Let that object be destroyed.

The whole design was to promote truthfulness, not destroy it. Though vows and oaths in the OT were not commanded, but they were allowed for, and if you made one, it was a serious deal, you were expected to keep it or else be punished.

By the time of the Pharisees, they again, like in matters of divorce, had turned this whole system of truth-telling on its head. They built it on the same laws meant for the increase in honesty, and cleverly contrived an elaborate scheme of loopholes that actually promoted dishonesty.

How did they do this? They created different types of oaths. They continued to regard vows to the Lord as important. We see that in our text, you have heard that it was said, you shall not swear falsely and perform your vows to the Lord. The emphasis was on the type of vow, though, the type that was to the Lord. Yeah, they said, if you swear to the Lord, you definitely should do that.

But what they also had, were other types of vows—vows that did not invoke the name of the Lord, and those you could break. It was the equivalent of crossing your fingers behind your back while talking to someone. You were free to deceive. You were free to not keep your word.

You see how backwards that is.

Do you see how they have completely missed the point. It became all about the formula of vow, not about the honesty that the vows were designed for. And so truthfulness was relegated to only times when the divine name was invoked, or some object, people expected you to be truthful.

Listen to Jesus rebuke harshly this type of thinking in Matthew 23:16 **“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”** Matthew 23:16-22

It was all about the formula for making a vow—not about being honest. “Camouflaging reality in technicalities.” -Holman. They were evidently using a lesser to greater argument about what oaths are binding. The temple they thought, was lesser, so those oaths were not binding, the gold however, gold is greater, so if you swear by it, you are bound. The same with altar’s and gifts on the altar.

Jesus flips it on his head, using their own argument against them... **“For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”**

Jesus takes what they thought to be lesser and makes that the greater. There can be nothing greater than God himself. That’s the ultimate. Jesus points to this in v.22 about heaven. And if we return to our text today, that’s where we see Jesus’ main teaching on oaths.

5:34 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.

Here’s His logic... The Pharisees could swear by heaven, and Jesus says, well what is heaven, is it not the throne of God? And they could swear by earth, and what is the earth, is it not God’s footstool Jesus says. And they could swear by Jerusalem, and to that Jesus says, is it not the city of the great King, God Himself.

What Jesus makes clear to them and why He rebukes them so strongly is that there is no difference in an oath formula, this distinction between those that mention God and those that do not, is false. Or distinctions between lesser to greater things, is false. Every oath, He says, points back to God.

The other reason He rebukes them is for blasphemy. To swear by an object was to be able to destroy that object, which signifies authority. And they could swear by their head, and to that Jesus says, even your head, what you think you have most control over, you really don't have control over that either. Your life is not yours to destroy, cause you can't even make one hair white or black. That is something that God can do because it belongs to God and He's over it.

There are some powerful implications from Jesus logic here regarding the sanctity of life. Life is not ours to take. No matter how small, old, or useless that life is, it is not ours to take because it belongs to God.

Jesus is catching them in their selfish, man-made loophole, for dishonesty and deception. And deception was running rampant. They messed it up.

This is why Jesus says, emphatically, **“Don't swear at all, Don't take any oaths v.34, and then in v.37, “let what you say be simply yes or No; anything more than this comes from evil.”**

Don't swear at all. You betray yourself when you do. One scholar paraphrases it this way... “Whenever I utter the formula “I swear to 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.” - Dr. Helmut Thielicke

Oaths are unnecessary for the christian. To use oaths is to betray the honesty that should characterize all of our speech. Disciples of Christ are marked by truth so there is no need to back up their statements with an oath. All of our speech is “before the presence of God.” He's our witness all the time, not just when we use His name. And people don't need assurances from us because christians tell the truth.

John Stott compares the reality of divorce in the OT to the reality of oaths in the OT, “If divorce is due to human hard-heartedness, swearing is due to human untruthfulness. Both were permitted by the law; neither was commanded; neither should be necessary.”

Are oaths strictly forbidden? You may be thinking about oaths in court of law or in a marriage ceremony. Though some have taken Jesus' words here to include all oath swearing, I think it is better to consider that what Jesus is after is everyday conversation. We see many characters in the OT making oaths. We see Paul, the apostle, using oath language, things like, “God is my witness, i am not lying” is an oath. We even see Jesus Himself put under oath at His trial and He accepts it, and speaks boldly under it.

Biblical teaching supports the use of oaths in formal ways, in very serious matters, but not in everyday conversation.

Let's move into the practical.

Why do we lie?

1a. The devil in the beginning mixed falsehood with truth and so brought down Adam and Eve. All deception is the work of the great deceiver Satan. The Devil is the “Father of lies” (John 8).

1b. At its base, lying is rooted in sin, we are sinners, and so we lie, Matthew 12 “Out of the overflow of your heart the mouth speaks.” The sin of lying can be seen in terms of idolatry—prizing something over God Himself. God is the Truth. We must equate God with Truth. To lie is therefore to pursue something other than God at God's expense. It is to seek satisfaction, value, approval, acceptance, pleasure, hope, somewhere other than God.

Lying is reaching arm to get what is not ours to take, the forbidden fruit. If we have to lie to get it than it's not ours to take. Lying is evidence of idolatry.

We can do this in a variety of ways. First we may cover up sin. We lie about our sin to God, to ourselves, and to others. Covering sin is lying.

We place our hope in our performance before God, we will lie about our performance to make ourselves look better than we are (though we may be so deceived that we actually believe the lie) Ex. believing we are good, self worship. Joy comes when we realize the truth about ourselves, that we are sinners, that our righteous acts are filthy rags to God and our only hope is Jesus performance for us, not our performance for Him. We place our hope in our reputation, so we lie to others, we want to look good in front of others, we think that's where our joy and peace is going to come from. So we tell our accountability group that we are not struggling with pornography, that our marriage is great, that everything is great, or there's depression, anxiety. Our fear of God has been replaced with a fear of man. We lie because we have forgotten that submission to God alone is what matters. And yet we lie to others, submitting ourselves to what other people want.

Lying is distrust of God and His promises. Think of the matter of trust in how lying creates an artificial reality. It's an illusion, it's not real. We create false realities because we do not like the reality that is. We do not like the truth, and so we make stuff up. We tell people the fish was 5 lbs rather than 4, that you made an A instead of a B. Lying to create your own reality is disbelief and distrust of God's sovereignty and His goodness. You've decided that God is not in control and He is not looking out for you, so therefore it's up to you to change reality, or at least try to fool yourself and others about reality.

Why? Lying is the promotion of self-glory at the expense of God's glory.

How do we move forward in telling the truth?

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

How do we move past lying. We have to see ultimate truth. Bonhoeffer relates our truthfulness to discipleship, and centers it on the cross of Christ... *"in the question of truthfulness, what matters first and last is that a man's whole being should be exposed, his whole evil laid bare in the sight of God. But sinful men do not like this sort of truthfulness, and they resist it with all their might. That is why they persecute it and crucify it. It is only because we follow Jesus that we can be genuinely truthful, for then He reveals to us our sin upon the cross. The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. When we know the cross we are no longer afraid of the truth. We need no more oaths to confirm the truth of our utterances, for we live in the perfect truth of God."*

The most truthful man is the man who has nothing to hide and nothing to fear. Every man has something to hide that has not had his sin exposed before God and taken care of by God. The cross is the great exposor of sin and the means by which the fear of condemnation is removed. Perfect love casts out fear. That is why you can be truthful, because you no longer need to fear the truth. We lie because we fear who we are and fear not getting something we desire. In the gospel, we are forgiven, redeemed, children of God with an eternal inheritance of God's presence.

God is holy, sovereign, and full of love and grace for you. Therefore the truth becomes your friend. We are free to be who we are, before God, to ourselves, and before others, and we are free to trust God with all of life, with our reputation, with our finances, with our career. We lie to get something, but God in Christ says we already have it. That renders lying unnecessary, and lying the evidence of our unbelief in the gospel.

Learning our truth before God and in God, worshiping God as the truth, we are then naturally led toward imaging God to the world. God is imaged in truthfulness. Satan is imaged in lying. We want the world to see that God can be trusted, He's given us His Son as His great oath, not because God may lie, but because we are so slow to believe. We image truth to a dark world. It is one of our great apologetics to adorn the gospel. Speak the truth in the world of unbelievers.

How much should truthfulness then reign in our fellowship, which is together founded on the truth, and worship and rejoice together in the truth. Falsehood between us destroys us. Truthfulness binds us together.

We must not present ourselves to one another, that's hypocrisy, that turns us into pharisees and legalists. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. We don't need to exaggerate ourselves to one another, or exaggerate stories. If the fish is 5 lbs, don't tell everyone it was 7. That is of the evil one. We aren't to be paralyzed in this, but we are to be careful. We want our word to match reality, because that matches God. Can you imagine what life would be like if we couldn't trust God's word, there would be no rock, everything would be sinking sand.

This also applies to us as a very non-committal generation. Not just that don't commit, but we commit with our words and not our lives. This might be ministry related, say you are committed to this body, and don't show up, don't give. Or it could be non ministry matters, like an rsvp to an event. If you say you are going to do something, do it.

We are thankful this morning that we have a hope that is greater than ourselves. We will fail to perfectly image God in His truthfulness, but we have one, Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God and the exact representation of His being. Jesus displayed truth perfectly for us. He is our hope and the One whom we worship.