

3. **Duplicity and the Ethic of the Kingdom** (5:33-37)

Jesus' next example case also involves a component of Israel's ethical practice that didn't involve an explicit commandment of the Sinai Covenant. Certain circumstances did require an Israelite to take an oath, but such oaths served the cause of the particular legal issue to which they were attached (cf. Exodus 22:10-13; Numbers 5:11-31). At the same time, God recognized the common use of oaths in human society and so addressed how Israel was to understand and approach them within the framework of their covenant obligation to Him (Leviticus 5:4; Numbers 30:1-16).

In general terms, oaths took two forms in Israel's life under the Law of Moses: The first form was directly religious and pertained to a solemn commitment to devote (consecrate) something or someone to the Lord. The Old Testament commonly refers to such oaths as *vows*, and examples included sacrificial vows, the Nazirite vow and other vows of consecration, and even the entire nation's occasional formal vows to the Lord (cf. Leviticus 7:16, 27:2-8; Numbers 6:2ff, 21:1-3, 30:1ff; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; etc.).

The other form of oath certified the veracity of an assertion or the commitment of a promise. Such are the oaths God demanded in certain legal contexts. These served to bring closure to an inquiry, but also heightened a person's culpability should he be found to be a liar (cf. again Exodus 22:10-13; Numbers 5:11-31 with Hebrews 6:13-18). A contemporary counterpart is the "swearing in" ritual used in formal hearings and trials.

- a. Both forms of vows are implicated in Jesus' instruction, but His focus was on the way all oaths implicate God, whether or not they are taken in His name (cf. 5:33 with Leviticus 19:12). It is notable that God encouraged invoking His name in oaths as a way to sharpen Israel's consciousness of the ever-present danger of idolatry (cf. Deuteronomy 6:13-15, 10:20-22). But, for the people, swearing by God's name was viewed as lending gravity, and so greater certitude, to whatever was being pledged. (Compare the modern-day practice of invoking God in courtroom oaths, symbolized in the act of laying one's hand on the Bible.)

Over time, the use of God's name in oaths led to the practice of appealing to all sorts of sacred entities in oath-taking. By the time Jesus was born, the Jews were in the habit of swearing by the temple, its altar, the gifts offered there, and even the holy city of Jerusalem itself. *Most importantly, expanding the list of sacred "witnesses" to oaths allowed for assigning to each a relative power to bind the swearer to his word* (Matthew 23:16-22). The rabbis formulated this structure with all seriousness, but the reality is that a formal hierarchy of oaths was simply another means by which the people of Israel attempted to secure a sense of personal righteousness in the midst of their actual dishonesty and unfaithfulness.

- b. This dynamic is important in resolving Jesus' apparent contradiction of the Law and His Father's directives to Israel. In certain situations, God had commanded His people to bind themselves with oaths; now the One who claimed to come in God's name and authority was forbidding this practice for His followers.

- Once again, those who maintain that Jesus was simply clarifying and reasserting the moral law are forced to argue that He wasn't changing any commandment. A common contention is that, rather than calling His hearers to refrain from the use of oaths, Jesus was affirming to them that they must demonstrate absolute integrity both in taking and in fulfilling their oaths. This interpretation is said to find support in the fact that God Himself and His divine Son are willing to bind themselves by oaths (cf. Psalm 110:4, 132:11, and Genesis 22:15-18 with Hebrews 6:13-18; ref. also Matthew 26:63-64). How could Christ forbid as sinful ("of evil"; v. 5:37) what He and His Father engage in themselves?

- The quandary with taking Jesus at face value is that it seems to set Him at odds with His Father. But whatever the challenges in reconciling Jesus' instruction and God's previous directives to Israel, *an unbiased reading leaves no doubt that He was calling for an end to the practice of oath-taking prescribed under the Law of Moses*. Jesus' citation ("You have heard...") accurately expressed Israel's obligation under the Law (ref. again Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:1-2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23), and the way He phrased it specifically highlighted the need for integrity in making and keeping oaths. What, then, would be the point in simply reasserting that demand ("You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall fulfill your vows,' but I say to you that you are to fulfill your vows")? Clearly Jesus wasn't reaffirming the need for integrity in oaths; He was calling His hearers to refrain from oaths altogether: "*But I say to you not to swear an oath at all*" (5:34).

And yet, as with the previous example cases, Jesus wasn't casting aside the Law's authorization and treatment of oaths; He hadn't come to abrogate the Law but to fulfill it. What He was calling for was a new understanding of oaths that recognized this practice as being fulfilled in Him. *As with every component and interest of the Law of Moses, its teaching regarding oaths was being transformed – that is, "Christified" – in Him, and the result of this transformation is that the sons of His fulfilled kingdom no longer have any need for them.*

- Regardless of their form or particular referent or concern, all oaths reflect the inherent weakness and failure of man in his fallen condition. It is precisely because people's intentions, words and deeds are characteristically set at variance that there is a place for oaths. The universality of human sin explains the ubiquity of human oaths.

- This is as true of religious vows as it is of non-religious ones. In the case of the latter, the oath is intended to reinforce the certitude of a statement or commitment. In truth, it contributes nothing unless it takes the form of an enforceable contract; nevertheless, an oath conveys a *sense* of seriousness that has an emotional effect beneficial to the one making it. The graver the oath, the greater the sense of the credibility of the swearer.

Religious vows are somewhat different than non-religious oaths. An oath is a reinforcing addendum to a declaration or commitment, whereas a vow is the commitment itself. Biblically, vows are made to God and are expressed as formal and binding self-commitments. For this reason, they may or may not be attended with an additional reinforcing oath. And yet, in their own way, vows also reflect the reality of human sin; were it not for man's fallenness, he would have no need to make vows to God.

The reason again is that, in its essence, sin is *estrangement*. It began as estrangement between man and God, and the result of that foundational separation was alienation at all levels within the created order, including even man's estrangement from himself. In turn, estrangement brings distance, isolation, fear and distrust. This is affirmed in the biblical account of the Fall and is verified in every person's life experience.

- c. The fact and effects of estrangement underlie God's use of oaths and vows in His relationship with His covenant "son" Israel. Though bound to God by covenant, the sons of Israel remained alienated and distant from Him (and one another) in their hearts. Like all of Adam's race, God's covenant people were estranged from everyone and everything; alienation had effectively rendered each Israelite an island, imprisoned within his own thoughts, desires, interests, and concerns. Interpersonal interaction continued, but it had become self-referential; self-concern formed their attitudes and desires and framed their decisions and actions.

Estrangement precludes true integrity and oaths and vows provide a tangible and powerful witness to this truth. In the realm of sinful humanity, self-reference is the ultimate sacrosanct ethic, and it is the reason that the world runs on lies; in the end, there is no truth in the fallen creation. This is blatantly obvious when it is recognized that every deviation from integrity and authenticity constitutes a lie.

- Most people define a lie as a misstatement of fact, and this narrow definition allows them to regard themselves as truthful. But when lying is more accurately defined as deviation from integrity – that is, deviation from the "truth" of conformity to one's true nature and purpose, it's easy to see how the Bible can condemn all men as liars (Psalm 116:11; cf. Isaiah 59:1-8; Romans 3:1-18). In their alienation and unbelief, all people "live a lie": *They may in some fashion acknowledge their created status as divine image-bearers, but they invariably deny the true God who created them, preferring to conceive self-referential, self-serving "gods."*
- Beginning and ending with themselves, human beings are stripped of access to the truth and thereby consigned to live in the darkness of self-delusion and deceit. However much they may discover and learn, they are never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:1-7). Though a person may never *tell* a lie, it remains that his *life* is a lie. Whatever his "sins," they all testify that he is a liar (Revelation 21:8).

So it was for the sons of Israel: Whatever their “righteousness” in their relationship with God and one another, they lacked the integrity of authenticity. Who they *were* differed from what they *said* and *did* (Matthew 15:1-9; 23:13ff), and God used oaths and religious vows to shine the spotlight on this truth.

Thus it wasn’t always sufficient for witnesses to simply state their relationship to a given situation or circumstance. In certain instances at least, God demanded that they take an oath in His presence (ref. again Exodus 22:10-13; Numbers 5:11-31; cf. also Deuteronomy 21:1-7) – not because He didn’t know the truth, or because an oath would prevent a person from lying, *but ultimately because of what an oath reveals about the kingdom of God and those who are its citizens*: God’s kingdom is a kingdom of truth and its subjects must themselves be defined and determined by truth. The need for and use of oaths in the Israelite kingdom (whether or not those oaths were actually honored) testified to the prophetic and preparatory nature of that kingdom; they highlighted the integrity and authenticity that would one day be realized in the kingdom of Messiah’s new creation.

The same was true of Israel’s religious vows. While none of them was compulsory under the Law, certain religious relationships and obligations were initiated by means of a vow. So an Israelite could freely choose to become a Nazirite, but, having done so, he was obligated to take a public vow of separation to the Lord (Numbers 6:1-21). Various sacrifices were also associated with personal vows (ref. Leviticus 22:21-23; Numbers 15:1ff; Deuteronomy 12:10-11). By covenant, the sons of Israel were *sons of God*, so that submissive devotion and Father-son communion were at the very heart of the Israelite kingdom. But because of estrangement, what should have been natural and spontaneous was a matter of conscious determination and declared commitment expressed by formal, public vows and rituals.

At bottom, the kingdom of God is about the divine-human intimacy that is at the center of the relationship between the Creator and His creation. Thus the kingdom provides the answer to the age-old question of meaning epitomized in Pilate’s query, “What is truth?” Because of *who* man is and *why* he is, human integrity in authenticity consists in a life of love – the love that is boundless and uncompromised devotion to the true God, but that also extends outward to seek the true good of one’s fellow man (as well as oneself).

The kingdom of God is concerned with the truth that is love, and it was precisely Israel’s lack of love in its fallen state that called for oaths and vows. Though the sons of Israel could *speak* to the truth of love and *consciously commit* themselves to it, they could not *fulfill* it. In this sense, it was impossible for Israel to fulfill the Law’s requirement: They could not avoid making false vows (Leviticus 19:12). Formal oaths and vows served to highlight the principle of integrity that marks God’s kingdom, but for this very reason they also showed the people of Israel that the Israelite kingdom was not the true kingdom and they were not its sons. When the true kingdom arrived – the kingdom promised by the Law and prophets, the integrity portrayed in Israel’s oaths and vows would at last be realized. Now that day was dawning; in the kingdom of heaven, *yes* is *yes* and *no* is *no*.