

Mt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22

The Call to Honesty in our Speech

But let your communication be yea, yea; Nay, nay... 5:37

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount we have been noting the high ethical standards of the Kingdom of Heaven. These standards are not new. These standards should have been the standards of the Jews in Christ's time but they had obscured and in many instances had nullified the original laws of God by their tradition. To a great degree they had so rationalized their approach to the laws of God that the end result of their reasonings was to externalize those laws. The condition of your heart was a matter of little consequence so long as you bore the appearance of conformity outwardly.

You have perhaps heard along the way the story of a little child who was disciplined by his parents for taking a toy away from his younger sibling. His reluctance to give back the toy and his poor attitude that accompanied his forced compliance of giving back the toy led to the child being sent to his room. In his anger the child said to his parents something that was plainly obvious for them to behold when he retorted: *I'm obeying on the outside but not on the inside.* According to the Pharisees understanding of the law such a compliance was all that God expected when it came to obedience to His laws.

And so this ethical portion of the Sermon on the Mount amounts to a number of calls that are issued by Christ:

There's the call for consistency between the internal state of the heart with the external actions of obedience. Apart from this consistency obedience is not really being rendered. This call for consistency between heart and actions is then applied in a number of different ways.

There's the call for purity when it comes to our relations to others. *Thou shalt not commit adultery* Christ reminds them in v. 27 but then adds *But I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.* You see in Christ's words the call of consistency between heart and actions?

And then there's the call for marital fidelity in vv. 31,32. By comparing this statement of Christ to Mt. 19:4ff it becomes clear that the standard of the Kingdom of Heaven is for one man to be married to one woman and that man is not to put asunder what God has joined together. There is allowance for divorce under very narrow circumstances and Christ makes it plain that the only reason for such an allowance is on account of the hardness of their hearts. And so we see may draw the lesson again that where the heart is properly maintained so that it doesn't become hard – then divorce need not ever take place.

You begin to see the pattern, then, between heart attitudes and external actions. If your righteousness is to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees then there must be consistency between the heart and the actions. Apart from such consistency we become nothing more than white-washed sepulchres.

We come now to the portion in Christ's sermon that presents to us no less a challenge than the other areas that He has covered. Verses 33-37 have to do with our communication or our speech. The word *communication* in v. 37 comes from the very familiar Greek word *logos*. It's the word that is often translated by the English term *word* (Jn. 1). It refers to the words that we speak – in particular you could say that it refers to the practice of keeping your word.

And so by following the pattern in our analysis of Christ issuing to the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven the call to consistency and the call to purity and the call to fidelity, we could say that in this section of the sermon we find:

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You might recall from our earlier studies in the beatitudes that I pointed out that the first two beatitudes in particular amount to a call to honesty. When, by the grace of God, we are able to acknowledge our spiritual poverty and our sin then we have gained the grace and the humility to be honest before God. It's a testimony to our depraved natures that it takes grace to enable us to be honest. Now in this particular section of the Sermon on the Mount we are dealing with a very practical aspect of that honesty – honesty with regard to our word. Honesty when it comes to speaking the truth and honesty when it comes to keeping our promises – that's the subject before us now and I'd like you to consider with me first of all:

I. The Meaning of This Call to Honesty

It's important for us to understand what Christ means and what He doesn't mean in this passage. There are those, you see, that look upon this portion of the Sermon on the Mount and draw the conclusion from Christ's words that there is absolutely no place in the Christian's life for oaths to be taken. Not even in a court of law is such a thing proper. And so I've read that Quakers in particular interpret this passage as an absolute ban upon the taking of an oath in any way, shape, or form or in any circumstance.

If you could picture a Quaker in a court of law being called upon to raise his right hand and place his other hand on the Bible and then the judge would ask him *Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?* His answer would have to be – *Christ had told us plainly in His word to swear not at all neither by heaven, or by earth, or by the city of Jerusalem, or by my own head.*

We might admire a man under such circumstances for the courage of his convictions but our admiration would have to be curtailed by a right understanding of what Christ said and meant. Is this what Christ meant when He said *swear not at all?* Was it a type of Pharisaical legalism to call for the use of oaths? After all the words of v. 33 never appear in the Old Testament where Christ says *ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths.* This is not a direct quote from the Old Testament. And so the question might naturally arise – Is

Christ actually nullifying an illegitimate practice? – to which the answer would have to be given – no, not at all. Even though the words of v. 33 cannot be directly found in the Old Testament – that does not take away from the fact that the Lord, in Old Testament times, did call for the taking of oaths and the Lord did issue regulations for the keeping or the nullifying of oaths or vows.

Deut. 6:13 *Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.* And in Lev. 19:12 the matter is put negatively in terms of what is prohibited: *And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I [am] the LORD.*

Beyond these regulations we find several examples in the Old Testament of the legitimate use of oaths or vows. So we find Abraham calling for an oath from his servant in the matter of finding a wife for Isaac. And we find Jacob calling for an oath from Joseph; and Joseph call for an oath from his brethren that they would not leave his body in Egypt; we also find Jonathan soliciting an oath from David.

As Lloyd-Jones points out – *You cannot read the Old Testament without seeing that, on certain special occasions, these holiest of men had to take an oath in a most solemn and serious manner. Indeed we have higher authority for this in the passage which describes our Lord's own trial. In Mt. 26:63 we are told that 'Jesus held his peace'. He was being tried by the high priest. 'And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.' Our Lord did not say: 'You must not speak like that.' Not at all. He did not condemn his using the name of God in this manner. He did not denounce it on such an occasion, but seemed to regard it as perfectly legitimate. Then, and only then, in response to this solemn charge, did He reply.*

We find the same practice utilized by the writers of the New Testament – Paul in particular says in Rom. 9:1 *I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.* And in 2Cor. 1:23 *I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth.*

We find the epistle to the Hebrews and wonderful and blessed account of God Himself resorting to the practice of binding Himself by an oath with the design of giving His people a strong basis of assurance regarding salvation. So we read in Heb. 6:16 *For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.*

17 *Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:*

18 *That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:*

19 *Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;*

This passage shows us that purpose that oaths were designed to serve. They were to provide an end to all strife. The solemnity of such a thing in which God was called on to bear witness to what was put forth for the truth or what was promised was such that it would strike the fear of God in the conscience of the man making the oath or taking the vow. God in such an instance was viewed as the vindicator of truth and the avenger of all falsehood. And in the context of that solemnity an oath would be the end to all strife.

I can't pass over this section in Hebrews 6 without making the observation that God in condescending grace would bind Himself by an oath in order to minister strong consolation to believers in Christ that they would be safe in Him. *Because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself* we read a couple of verses earlier in Heb. 6.

And so an oath used by men served the purpose of moving an area of controversy into the context of the solemnity of the fear of God and in that context it became the settler of the controversy. And an oath used by God Himself continues to serve the purpose of giving the people of God a strong basis of assurance for their salvation. It is sufficient for God to simply give His word. Unlike sinful men, God is always true to His word – but to minister even stronger assurance God goes so far as to bind Himself to the promises of salvation by an oath.

Obviously, then, Christ does not intend to ban the use of oaths absolutely when He says *swear not at all*. He is calling for a correction to an abuse. And He's also calling for a higher standard of honesty in our words no matter what the occasion of our speaking may be. This leads to my next consideration – we've seen something of the meaning of Christ's call to honesty – consider next:

II. The Reasons for This Call

Just as in the other ethical matters that we've covered in our study of this section so does it apply here as well that the Pharisees had a way of twisting something legitimate in such a way as to nullify it altogether.

They knew that the 3rd commandment said to them – *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain*.

So they reasoned that if they stopped short of actually using the Lord's name then they would avoid violating the 3rd commandment. And so they bound themselves by oaths of lesser degrees. They would swear by heaven, or by earth, or by the city of Jerusalem. And by looking at Mt. 23 we can add that they swore by the temple or the gold of the temple. They would swear by the altar, or the gift on the altar. And in this fashion they were able to flatter themselves that they were guarding themselves against the very serious offense of taking the Lord's name in vain.

We also discover from this passage in Mt. 23 that they accomplished something else that was very shrewd on their part. Since they were not swearing by the name of God but by various other things not only were they preserved from taking the Lord's name in vain but they were also to varying degrees less bound by their oaths.

Do you expect me to keep my word they might reason when I only swore by the temple? Now if I had sworn by the gold of the temple I might be bound to a higher degree. Or had I sworn by the gift of the altar, rather than the altar itself then my adversary might have cause to hold me to my word.

This is the nonsense that Christ sweeps away by saying in effect that whenever you're swearing by anything that relates to that which is sacred you are in effect swearing by God Himself and thus using His name in vain by the use of such frivolous oaths. It's God you see, that dwells in the temple. It's God that sits on the throne in heaven. The gift on the altar and the altar itself are pictures of Christ and earth is God's footstool and the city of Jerusalem is Christ's city. So all of these oaths which were regarded as having varying degrees of solemnity and varying degrees to which they bound a person were all in fact one and the same thing according to Christ.

We may view such a practice as existed in the days of the Pharisees as being rather juvenile and amusing – a little bit, I suppose, like a child raising his hand to pledge to tell the truth but having his other hand hidden behind his back with his fingers crossed thus nullifying his pledge.

The thing we must note from this Jewish practice, however, is that it represents but one of many sure manifestations of our depravity when we search for ways to twist our words and our reasoning so that we flatter ourselves into thinking that we have cleverly excused ourselves from the simple and straight forward practice of speaking the truth.

The lie was invented by the devil and it's from him that we learn to master all the subtle uses of it. It's interesting to notice just how many kinds of lies are classified in publications that write on the issue. There is lying by omission. There are white lies. There are emergency lies. There is perjury which is the practice of lying under oath. There is the practice of misleading or the practice of exaggeration just to name a few.

Augustine, according to the article on wikipedia divided lying into 8 different categories: Lies in religious teaching. Lies that harm others and help no one. Lies that harm others and help someone. Lies told for the pleasure of lying. Lies told to "please others in smooth discourse." Lies that harm no one and that help someone. Lies that harm no one and that save someone's life. Lies that harm no one and that save someone's "purity."

Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic theologian and scholastic philosopher divided lies into three kinds: the useful, the humorous and the malicious. All are sinful according to Aquinas. Humorous and useful lies, however, are venial sins. Malicious lies are mortal sins.

All of this underscores the truth of what Christ said in Jn. 8:44 that the devil is the inventor of the lie and those that enter into that practice resemble him. And while we may smugly view this Jewish practice that we've been contemplating that existed in Christ's day let's not forget that we're the ones that live in the day in which a man's innocence or guilt has been determined by the way we define the word *is*.

We're the ones that live in a day that has produced multi-paged contracts that are designed to bind a man to meet his obligations. You may spend hours signing all the papers you need to sign when you purchase a home and yet after all that you may still get a lawyer who will find a way to excuse you.

What a far cry is all this from what was once the slogan of the London Stock Exchange dating to the year 1801 when it was said: *My word is my bond*. In those days bargains were made with no exchange of documents and no written pledges being given.

The form of violation may be different but the sin is essentially the same when we fail to live up to our word. And since I'm on the subject of the 3rd commandment and have not touched upon this matter for some time – could I remind you that slang terms like the terms *golly*, *gosh*, and *gee* are all forms of taking the Lord's name in vain. Look up the words in the dictionary and see for yourselves the definitions that are given to those terms and may the Lord deliver you from what many would regard as innocent expressions.

I believe the same thing could be said for oaths that that the Lord Jesus said regarding divorce – *from the beginning it was not so*. It was because of man's fallen condition that certain conditions would arise that would make it needful to impress the solemnity of speaking the truth. Such is the subtle reasoning of man that comes from his sinful nature that men search for ways to escape their obligations and make their words less than binding.

The subjects of the kingdom of heaven are called to a higher standard. And this brings me to my final point in our analysis which is:

III. The Aim Behind This Call to Honesty

I have already put forth the arguments against viewing Christ's teaching the way the Quakers view it which is to eliminate the use of oaths or vows altogether. While I don't believe that the scriptures eliminate the use of such things under the right conditions I do think that Christ's aim is to elevate our communication to the level that is expressed in that English proverb: *my word is my bond*. That expression actually predates the time when the London stock exchange adopted it. Originally the full expression went like this: *An honest man's word is as good as his bond*. The saying is traceable to a book of English proverbs published in the year 1670. It appears to be a saying that grew out of the Puritan era.

And isn't this what Christ means when He says in v. 37 *let your communication be yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatever is more than these cometh of evil*. Do we not find in this precept a very simple call for the subject of the kingdom of heaven to be straight forward when it comes to telling the truth.

It would seem like such a plain and obvious matter that you would scarcely think it necessary for the Christian to have to be so exhorted. And yet we find that not only Christ, but Paul in many of his epistles having to place stress on the same thing.

So we read in Eph 4:29 *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers*.

And in Col 4:6 *Let your speech [be] alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.* I believe these exhortations call for truth and they also call for tact of diplomacy. Often times it is because the truth is hard or in some cases maybe even inappropriate that we resort to twisting or disguising the truth.

I believe that the best way to meet these exhortations is to remember the Lord's call throughout this section for consistency – consistency between our hearts and our actions and now consistency between our hearts and our words. *For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh* our Lord says in Mt. 12:34.

And so the best way to attend to what we say and how we say it and when to say it or whether to say it at all comes back again to this practice of tending to our hearts. The challenge we face is admittedly a great one. James tells us in the third chapter of his epistle that *the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell.*

We have watched with anxiousness and alarm, haven't we, as the fires have raged in California. We can certainly draw the spiritual analogy from such tragedies that the effects of our words can spread just as fast and be just as devastating.

And so we face the challenge even as sinners saved by grace to tame something that is harder to be tamed than wild beasts. We must tame our tongues. We must gain self control. We must avoid twisting and distorting the truth and as I say the way to tend to our tongues is to tend to our hearts. Pr 16:23 *The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips.*

May the Lord so fill our minds and hearts with Christ and His love and joy and peace in believing that we learn to rise to the standard of the kingdom of heaven by answering the call to honesty in our speech.