

# Keeping Your Word

**Preached by:** Matthew S. Black

**Text:** Matthew 5:33-37

**Date:** June 9, 2013 10:30am

**Series:** King of Kings! (Book of Matthew)

**Introduction:** Open your Bible to **Matthew 5:33-37**. We are continuing in a series entitled: “King of kings.” This morning we are talking about “Keeping Your Word”.

## Tellers of the Truth

Have you ever been lied to? As **Psalm 116:11** says, “All men are liars.” Every person on earth is a liar. Lying is a way of life in this world. What we are going to find out today is that for those who are part of Christ’s Kingdom, this way of life STOPS as we follow Christ. Jesus is the Truth and His people by definition are tellers of the Truth.

## McDonald’s Manipulation...

Yet lying continues on in various forms in the world. Have you ever looked at the pictures of the food at McDonald’s or another restaurant? It’s never the way it looks in the picture. The whole world is steeped in lies—presenting themselves falsely. Manipulation, shifting of the facts, cutting corners—all of this is deceit.

You know someone is a true believer when the Holy Spirit won’t let them keep on being steeped in lies. Over and over again, the Bible says God doesn’t lie, He cannot lie, and He searches the heart and desires truth in the inward parts. Our Lord is “the Truth” and His Word is truth (**John 14:6; 17:17**). Those who are citizens in Christ’s Kingdom are truth tellers!

The Bible teaches that once a person becomes a Christian, they are marked by radical truth telling. One of the things people do if they doubt us, is they make us swear or promise.

## Do You Promise?

I might say to Kristen, “If you help me clean up the yard today, I’ll take you out for ice cream on Saturday.” Kristen might reply, “Do you promise?” By that she means, “Do you mean it? Can I count on you?” The very request for a promise reveals that our “Yes” is unreliable. We as human beings are not trustworthy to tell the truth!

In our text we are about to read, Jesus essentially tells us that as Christians, we ought never need to use oaths or to swear by God at all, because everything we say ought to be truthful. As people of God, we of all people ought to keep our word at all times. We ought not need oaths to prove our trustworthiness.

## Reading of Holy Scripture

Let’s hear what Jesus says about us keeping our word in **Matthew 5:33–37**, “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 [or the evil one - NIV]."

This morning three things in this text that grab out attention. We're going to see:

- The OT **Practice** of Oaths.
- The **Lies** we tell.
- The new **Standard**.

### **God Concerned with Truth**

God is concerned with truthfulness in His people. He's not so impressed with our legalistic manipulation of words, but with a total truthfulness of our heart. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ is aiming for our heart. He wants His true people, citizens of His glorious Kingdom to have not superficial righteousness, but righteousness deep down in the heart – a righteousness that “exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees”. And our Lord gives us **six examples** of heart righteousness. The Spirit of God controls and keeps us

- from that rising, sinful **anger** that God equates with murder.
- He keeps us from **lusting** after someone's body – thereby committing adultery.
- He keeps us from utter selfishness, and **divorcing** our spouse (if married).
- And today, we are going to see God's Spirit keeps us honest and **truthful**.

Our speech is important.

### **The Message of the Kingdom: Repent / Everything Must Change!**

The message of the kingdom is found in **Matthew 4:17**, “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”” Jesus' message was the Kingdom promised in the Old Testament is now come in some form. The kingdom prophesied by Jeremiah, Isaiah and all of the prophets has now arrived in some preliminary form.

And what was the message of the prophets? What would happen when the kingdom arrived? There would be a new covenant! It would be a pouring out of the Spirit of God on all flesh. God would work in a new way. Not just with the Jews, but through the Jews He would reach all nations. That is exactly what happens. But what Jesus is talking about is that when the kingdom comes there is going to be on a radical change in the hearts of the people. So the message of the kingdom is repent – be changed – be converted.

What does conversion look like? We saw it in the beatitudes. It's a broken and contrite and humble heart. You are:

- Bankrupt of spirit
- Mourning for sin
- Meek and teachable
- Hungry for God
- Pure in heart
- Merciful toward others
- Peacemaking

- Persecuted

Essentially, you are totally surrendered. That's what it looks like. That's the root or heart of a kingdom dweller. If that's the root then what's the fruit? Salt and Light. You become a preserver of the rotting culture and you become a light to the darkness.

How do we know you are authentic? It's not enough to say you are God's child. You live like one. In a way it comes naturally. Like a fish doesn't need to know how to swim or a bird doesn't learn how to fly. You have a nature change.

But how does one enter into the kingdom? Jesus tells us in **Matthew 5:20**, "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter into the kingdom."

## I. The OT **Practice** of Oaths (Matt. 5:33)

**Matthew 5:33**, "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.'"

### Name Dropping

This morning I got a surprise phone call. I was shocked when I realized it was John MacArthur. He said he was listening to my sermons and he encouraged me to write a book. He told me to give you his greetings.

Of course I am kidding, but have you ever heard people who "name drop"? Why do we name drop? To make the person we mention look good? Or to make ourselves look good and to prove that we are trustworthy? I think we know the answer to that!

Christians ought to be so trustworthy that they do not have to make an oath.<sup>1</sup>

### Making an Oath is Not Sinful

Yet, oath-making is not only not sinful, it is, in fact, encouraged in Old Testament times! **Deuteronomy 10:20** says, "You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and *by his name you shall swear.*" Not only were they encouraged to make vows and oaths, but they were encouraged to do so in God's name!

In **Jeremiah 12:16** God basically says, **stop swearing by Baal** and swear by Me, and I will show you grace!

### Don't Break Your Word

So you could swear by God's name, but there was one vital stipulation. You had to tell the truth. God said in **Leviticus 19:12**, "You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."

Or consider **Numbers 30:2**, "If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, **he shall not break his word.** He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."

The idea is if a man makes a promise and swears by God, he is now not simply obliged to fulfill his word for a human being, but for God Himself. Once an oath is taken, the man's vow is now to God.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has dealt with the **sixth** commandment (*no murder*), and the **seventh** (*no adultery*), and today we are going to see how He deals with the **third** commandment (*don't take God's name in vain*).

## God Makes Oaths

Making oaths is not wrong. God makes oaths.

- We have the **Old and New Covenants or Testaments**, in which God makes oaths and promises to save us. A Covenant is a sort of vow or promise. God has promised to send a Savior and aren't you glad God always keeps His Word?!
  - God makes many oaths that He will send Jesus Christ into this world through Abraham's seed, through David's royal line. God uses oaths not because he is not trustworthy, but because we are not trusting.
  - You need to realize that God loves you and sent His Son to die a cruel death for you. He used oaths to comfort you, even though God never needs to use an oath. Yet He loves you that much, that He's willing to speak to you in a way that you know He means what He says.
  
- It is recorded in Scripture that **God many times makes oaths by Himself**.
  - Referring to God's oath to **Abraham** in **Genesis 22**, the writer of Hebrews says in **Hebrews 6:12–17**, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath...”
  - God makes an oath about **our Lord's priesthood** being legitimate and after the order of Melchizedek, quoting **Psalms 110:4**, we read in **Hebrews 7:21**, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’”
  - God swore never to send a flood again (**Gen. 9**).
  - God took oaths to guarantee His covenants (**Psa. 132:11; 95:11; 119:106**).
  - In **Luke 1:73** God swore in an oath to send the Redeemer
  - In **Acts 2:30** we read that “God had sworn with an oath to David that He would set one of his descendants on his throne.” This was an oath that Christ would be raised from the dead and seated on the true throne of heaven to rule over His people.
  
- **Jesus** Himself answered under oath when before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:63-64). They “adjured” Him in an oath “by the Living God” to say whether He was the Christ or not. Jesus affirmed that He was and said they would see Him “seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven”.
- **Paul** often made various vows, including what was likely a Nazarite vow for a time (Acts 21).

- **Paul** often called God as his witness in what he was writing in Scripture (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:10).

No matter what, the Law teaches whatever oaths we take as God's people are binding.

### **Why These Mosaic Laws? We are Prone to Lie**

So why did God give Moses these laws concerning oaths? Simply this – human beings are prone to lie. These laws place a bridle on man's proneness, because of the Fall of man into sin, to lie.

You can't have any kind of order in society with any great measure of gross deceit. So the purpose of this point of the law is to keep people honest.

In Moses' day, people, in trying to prove a point, might glibly and recklessly use God's name in a deceitful way. The Law of Moses was meant to curb this kind of behavior.

### **Childish Games**

I remember when I was a child, we used God's name constantly to win an argument. If we swore by God, it seemed to settle a matter, but it really was no more than a childish game. It was never long before someone who swore to God about something would say, "but I had my fingers crossed!"

By the New Testament times, many, but not all, rabbis had made so many exceptions to the making of oaths, that they meant absolutely nothing. You could swear by God, lie, and get away with it. Their were so many legalistic loopholes, that it engrained a deep deceitfulness in their hearts. Their use of oaths was like children saying, "I have my fingers crossed, so I don't have to tell the truth."<sup>2</sup>

You might say, "Well, I don't play those games!" Let's just wait a moment and look at the text and see today how we are all likely guilty of breaking our word.

Let's talk about...

## **II. The Lies we tell (5:34-36).**

**Matthew 5:34-36**, We hear Jesus: "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."

### **Context of the Oaths of Jesus' Day**

In Jesus day, the Scribes and Pharisees knew that making an oath was perfectly right to do, as long as one told the truth and kept his word.

But soon the Scribes and Pharisees began to look for a loophole – they wanted to be "so righteous" that they didn't want to swear by God's name at all. This way they could lie without actually breaking an oath.

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, R. K. (2001). *The sermon on the mount: The message of the kingdom*. Preaching the Word (126). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

So instead of swearing by God, they would swear by “heaven” or by “earth”, or by “Jerusalem”, or even by their own “head”.

### **Silly Rules**

Thus the swearing of oaths degenerated into silly rules – basically establishing a code of deceit, of when you can get away with lying and when you can’t (cf. Matt. 23:16-22).

The ancient Jews came up with categories, each one being removed slightly further from God’s name. So instead of swearing by God, they might swear by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem. Or they would simply swear by their own “head”, which was a way of saying, “As far as I know,” or “I hope I will be able to do that”.

Jesus says: swearing by anything is like swearing by God –

- Don’t swear by **heaven**, because it’s “God’s throne”
- Don’t swear by **earth**; it’s “God’s footstool”
- Don’t even swear by **Jerusalem**, because it is the “Great King’s city” – it is Christ’s city, the true David.
- Don’t even swear by your own **head**. Of course we can change our hair color by applying certain chemicals at the salon. But we cannot change the natural color of even one hair. God alone knows the future, and He alone will determine when you go gray! All oaths call God as our witness, and He upholds all things, even our hair color!

In a word, because of the culture of deceit, even oaths ceased to mean much of anything in Jesus day. They dismissed and excused their oaths that they meant absolutely nothing.

### **Our Day of Deceit**

Isn’t that how it is today? No one’s word means anything. We can’t trust the IRS.

- We can’t trust our elected officials. So we have elections.
- Often we can’t trust businesses. So we have the Better Business Borough.
- We can’t trust our fellow man.

### **Liars from the Womb**

The main reason there is a crisis in truth is that we are, in fact, liars from the womb. Right in the middle of the string of depravity in Romans 3 we read, “their tongues practice deceit” (v. 13). Our untruthfulness reveals our condition. No one had to teach us how to lie.<sup>3</sup> Psalm 58:3 says our lost condition begins from birth: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.”

What’s the answer to this culture of deceit? It’s not new. It wasn’t invented with the USA.

### **A New Heart**

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord lifts us to a new standard. He shows us how His followers will “exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees” (Mat. 5:20).

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, R. K. (1991). *James: Faith that works*. Preaching the Word (245). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

The new standard is possible by those who have a new heart, and not the superficial righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.

### III. The new **Standard** (Matt. 5:37)

What's the new standard? Jesus says in **Matthew 5:34, 37**, "Don't swear at all..." verse 37, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil [or the evil one - NIV]."

For a Christian, everything we say ought to be taken seriously and spoken in earnest honesty. That is what it means to let our yes be yes. No fudging the facts. No crossing the fingers. In all that we say we ought to speak, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

The standard of the New Covenant era when God dwells in all His people in a new way, everything we say should be as sacred as an oath. All that we do is raised to a new standard.

Our "Yes" ought not to mean "Probably." As children of God and partakers of Jesus' fellowship and Kingdom, we ought to be reliable people.

#### **The Evil One, Father of Lies**

Jesus says, rather than risk breaking God's law and lying with our tongue, we ought to speak plainly and honestly. Everything else tends toward **condemnation** and the **evil one**, who is the **father of lies**.

#### **Are Oaths Forbidden?**

In **verse 34**, Jesus seems to forbid oaths altogether. Is that the case? **Mat. 5:34**, "Do not take an oath at all." That seems pretty clear. Here is a question we must cope with. Do we follow Jesus by the letter or by the spirit?

**James 5:12** says, "above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."

There are those who go by the letter, such as the Reformation's Anabaptists, and later the Moravians and Quakers, and even the Mennonites and Amish will not take an oath in a court law. For them it is a matter of conscience.

#### **George Fox, Founder of the Quakers**

George Fox, the great founder of the Quakers, provided this famous rejoinder to the judges at Lancaster who sentenced him to prison for refusing to swear over a Bible that he would tell the truth:

You have given me a book here to kiss and to swear on, and this book which ye have given me to kiss says, "Kiss the Son," and the Son says in this book, "Swear not at all." I say as the book says, and yet ye imprison me; how chance ye do not imprison the book for saying so?"

Today because of George Fox's stand you do not have to lay your hand on a Bible in a court of law and swear to God that you are telling the truth. You may simply say, "I affirm that I am telling the truth."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Sermon on the Mount*, 127.

My wife comes from a Mennonite background, and so I admire their sincere respect for God's Word. I share that deep reverence. I admire George Fox and his followers, but I do not think they are correct.

- 1) **Abraham Swore** – Abraham made his servant Eliezer swear in **Genesis 24:2–3**. He said, “Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites...”
- 2) **Jacob asked Joseph** to swear that he (Jacob) would be buried, not in Egypt, but in Canaan (Gen. 47:29).
- 3) We've already established the places where **God** practices oath taking, not to mention our **Lord** as well as **Paul**.

### **Common Everyday Speech**

So how should we understand Jesus? Should disciples take oaths today? I believe we can, although, as I said, some Christians disagree. They say we must never take any vows. To take any military or civic position, we must swear an oath of loyalty to the nation and its laws. Therefore, this position entails a willingness to forego all public service.

Even those who take an absolutist interpretation of Jesus' words recognize that God still requires us to vow at times. At the very least, all Christians everywhere recognize the **marriage vows** and regard them as sacred.

### **A Different Approach**

Most Christians take a different approach. Following Calvin and Luther, among others, we distinguish between public and private speech. In private, among brothers and friends, we should simply tell the truth, so that the need for oaths disappears.

The context of the Sermon on the Mount itself argues that Jesus' prohibitions are in regard to private, everyday conversations. In our everyday life, we need to take Jesus' command and “swear not at all”. We need to keep God's name out of it!

### **A New Standard of Speech**

For the Christian, our word is our bond. Our Yes is our Yes. Our No is our No. Our Yes is not our “probably”. The new standard of speech, is that, as Kingdom citizens, we ought always tell the truth. We don't need an oath. All that we say is so sacred it is like an oath.

### **Telling the Truth is a Challenge**

Why is telling the truth so hard? It is because there is a battle every day.

**Flesh and Spirit** – The “flesh battles against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh”. There is a holy war that we engage in every day.

**The Word of God** – Jesus says in **John 17:17**, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” The new nature is such that for it to dominate, you must focus on the Word of God, as Psa. 1:2 says, “day and night”. The soldier in battle must never engage without his armor. Every part of our armor is attached to the Word of God.

**James 3:2, 6-8**, “if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of

unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

In order to tame the tongue, you must tame the heart! Christian, is your heart in daily, minute by minute surrender to the King?

### **Has God Tamed You?**

I wonder how many of you remember your tongue before you knew Jesus. Is God taming your tongue? The only way to tame the tongue is to tame the heart. Are you a believer here today? If you are not in Christ you have no power or accountability in your heart to tell the truth.

Be saved and the Spirit of Truth will dwell in you.

Christian, practice the presence of God, and let your word be your bond. Like God, say what you mean, and mean what you say. Put all practices of deceit aside!