

Sermons on Matthew

Matthew 5:33-37

Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes'

With Study Questions

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Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

Preface

I have four objectives this morning. I would like us 1) to be aware of the smug religious climate prevalent during the giving of Jesus' sermon; 2) to be wise to the fact that religious leaders can become liars; 3) to fearfully inspect God's disposition toward lying; and 4) to consider the ultimate lie.

A Smug Religious Climate

A Hypocritical Church

In examining Christ's words it is critical to grasp the religious climate of first century Jerusalem. Later in this gospel, the Pharisees (the religious leaders) receive from Jesus bitter chastisement and the fitting epithet—**"white-washed tombs...full of dead men's bones"** (Matthew 23:27). Their religious activities were a show of piety, but their moral lives and dispositions revealed they were dead on the inside.

Over twenty times in the gospels, these religious leaders would be referred to as hypocrites. Who, at one time or another, has not felt like a hypocrite? What Christian, at one time or another, hasn't been accused of being a hypocrite? How do you know you're not? Generally speaking we feel like, or are accused of being, a hypocrite based upon some moral

failure in our lives. Does this put us in the same religious phylum of the Pharisees? Not necessarily.

The word hypocrite—*hupocrites* - was actually a drama term. Greek and Roman actors would wear large masks with mechanical devices used to augment their voices. A hypocrite pretends to be something they're not. This is what the Pharisees did. The testimony of the Pharisees was that they were more righteous than the others. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (commonly viewed as a despised person) begins,

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others (Luke 18:9).

There is a big difference between being weak and being a hypocrite. Observe the variant dispositions of the Pharisee and the tax collector as they assess their own ethical condition.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:10-14).

The Pharisee (although thanking God) glories in his own righteousness. The tax collector would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven but genuinely called upon God's mercy which is found in Christ. The tax collector, though full of sin and weakness, was not a hypocrite. He knew was a sinner and confessed it before God. And it was the tax collector who went down to his house justified (pardoned before God).

Exceeding the Righteousness of the Pharisees

The context of this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees—a righteousness necessary to enter God’s kingdom (Matthew 5:20). In the above parable both men were sinners. But somehow the tax collector possessed a righteousness that exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisee. This was made manifest by his humble heart and recognition of his own sinfulness.

Jesus is giving six examples of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. In studying these, there is ample opportunity for self-evaluation. The hypocrite will nestle into a comfy disposition of self-deceit and contentment. Like the rich young ruler, his response to the words of Christ will be **“All these things I have kept from my youth” (Matthew 19:20).**

On the other hand, the true follower of Christ will recognize how far he has fallen short of Christ’s law. In thought, word, and deed the true disciple will ever be repenting and will ever know his deep need for a Savior who is Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

The sincere Christian (Ephesians 6:24) will recognize his heart to be murderous and adulterous (Matthew 5:21-30). The sincere Christian will not seek to alter God’s word to accommodate his own quirks and fancies (Matthew 5:31, 32). The sincere Christian, though weak and prone to failure, will seek to obey God’s law both inwardly and outwardly.

The sincere Christian will never trust any level of success to approve himself before God but will ever grow in his understanding of his need for Jesus. Ironically a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is a righteousness that produces a profound understanding of one’s own unrighteousness.

Religious Liars

In these examples we have seen how inward dispositions transition into outward actions. Those who nurture lust will inevitably seek to justify their dissolution of their marriage. In the example before us we see Jesus’ instruction moving from the breaking of the marriage vows to the breaking of vows in general. All of the sudden the religious leaders are liars!

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

Legitimate Oaths and Vows

When Jesus says "do not swear at all" that relates to the examples He's about to give—heaven, earth, Jerusalem, etc. Vows and oaths¹ are not necessarily sinful. There are occasions when they are demanded.

You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name (Deuteronomy 6:13).

Abraham made an oath to the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:22-24). There was an oath between David and Jonathon (1 Samuel 20:16). Paul made oaths (2 Corinthians 1:23). Jesus spoke under oath (Matthew 26:63, 64). God made an oath (Hebrews 6:17). Oaths and vows are quite common. We perform them in marriages, when we become citizens, soldiers, attorneys, doctors, deacons, elders and pastors.

Frivolous Oaths

Jesus is not contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture here. He is addressing frivolous oaths that had become part of their religious rituals.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.'¹⁷ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the

¹ Vows are made to God; oaths are made to men before God.

gold? ¹⁸ And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged *to perform it.*' ¹⁹ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? ²⁰ Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. ²¹ He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it (Matthew 23:16-22).

In this system the veracity (truthfulness) of their statement could be determined by the weightiness of that by which they swore. In other words they were playing religious games with the truth. Jesus makes the point that everything they swear by (heaven, earth, Jerusalem) is owned by God—even their own heads. Playing games with oaths is still lying. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'.

During a communicant examination, the elders will ask children to give an example of a sin. The most common answer is lying. Children see this very clearly; it is so obvious. Yet these religious leaders were able to find biblical justification for lying. And they weren't merely lying but combining their violation of the Ninth Commandment (bearing false witness) with a violation of the Third Commandment (using God's name in vain).

Never, ever think that wearing a robe, or a collar, or standing behind a podium makes people exempt from lying.

God's Disposition Toward Lying

A genuinely honest person is a rare and valuable commodity. It is very common to conceal the truth or give half-truths. People develop clever ways of avoiding giving relevant information; whether in the way they speak or the forms they fill out.

People make promises then fail to follow through. We have our own built-in fine print in all our commitments. We would be better off just saying "no, I'm not interested" than doing a tap-dance.

Jesus says let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.' Let's not underestimate God's intense hatred for deceit. On a list of seven things the Lord hates, it's listed twice.

These six *things* the Lord hates, Yes, seven *are* an abomination to Him: ¹⁷ A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, ¹⁹ A false witness *who* speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren (Proverbs 6:16-19).

In the case before us, it became religiously acceptable and expeditious to lie. Jesus exposes people who operate this way as people outside the kingdom of God. The Bible concludes with this sin as a representative sin of those excluded from the tree of life.

Blessed *are* those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. ¹⁵ But outside *are* dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie (Revelation 22:14, 15).

The Ultimate Lie

I don't think I'm dove-tailing too far to ponder the ultimate lie. Jesus uses the antonym of a lie to describe Himself in the fourteenth chapter of John:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Jesus doesn't merely tell the truth; He is the Truth. Earlier in John we see a very heated conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus presses the truth issue to a level that should affect us all:

They [*the Pharisees*] answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰ But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹ You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We we,re not born of

fornication; we have one Father—God.”⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me.”⁴³ Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word.⁴⁴ You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it.⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me.⁴⁶ Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?⁴⁷ He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God (John 8:39-47).

I haven’t time to exegete this entire passage, but I’d like to draw our attention to the line of reasoning Jesus pursues. First, people do the deeds of their father (their god); their actions will reflect their highest authority. Second, ultimately there are two options as to who this god will be—the true God or the devil; there is no autonomy. Third, those who refuse the words of Christ are revealing who their true father is—the father of lies, the devil. Finally, those who hear God’s word – who recognize it as true and seek to obey it - are of God—who is truth.

There is perhaps no subject that more tap-dancing is done around than the person of Christ. Mankind is called to respond. We are to let our ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and our ‘No’ be ‘No.’ May God grant us the wisdom, faith and repentance to say ‘No’ to the lie and ‘Yes’ to the Truth.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the religious climate at the time of the Sermon on the Mount (page 2).
2. What does it mean to be a hypocrite (page 3)?
3. What was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus' parable (page 3)?
4. What are some characteristics of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (page 4)?
5. Are all vows and oaths wrong (page 5)?
6. What makes a vow or oath sinful (pages 5, 6)?
7. What can we learn from what happened to the religious leaders of Israel (page 6)?
8. What is God's disposition toward lying (pages 6, 7)?
9. What is the ultimate lie (pages 7, 8)?