

Integrity and Righteousness
Matthew 5:33-37

God's Standard of Righteousness

There are many attacks against the Bible today. One of them is that the Bible is not relevant to our time. I think we have all seen the foolishness of such an argument as we have been studying the Sermon on the Mount. One might think that a sermon delivered close to 2,000 years ago would be at least a little archaic to modern society, but we have found that what Jesus says applies just as directly to today's situations as they did then. This is evidence that we are dealing with the Word of God and not just a nice speech by a good man.

God's standard of righteousness has never changed. He is holy and nothing flawed with sin can stand before Him. The problem is that man cannot meet that standard on his own merit, though men constantly try to find some way to do so. The Jewish religious leaders thought they were doing so by keeping their many traditions which became a substitute for the Law given by God to Moses. This shift in standards fooled both themselves and the people into thinking they were righteous. However, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus corrected both their teaching and practices and warned that those who would enter heaven must have a righteousness surpassing the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). How could that be?

In the beginning of the sermon in the section we refer to as The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), Jesus described the character qualities of the truly righteous. The first one is that they would be poor in spirit. The righteous are humble people who know that they have nothing and in fact are nothing before God. They come to God as beggars asking for His grace and mercy upon them. They are granted entrance into the kingdom of God. They know their own sinfulness and so they mourn and are comforted. They rely upon God alone and so they are meek and given the promise that they will inherit the earth. The hunger and thirst within their souls is to be righteous, and God promises to satisfy that desire. The truly righteous understand the mercy God has given to them and so they extend that mercy to others. Their desire is to be pure in heart and not just in behavior. They are promised that they will see God. The righteous also want others to experience the blessings they have received from God so they strive to be true peacemakers, and so are told they will be called sons of God. The result of such a righteous character will be insult, slander and persecution by the unrighteous. Even so, the righteous rejoice for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and the righteous who have gone before them have been treated the same way.

In our own time, there are those that have tried to make The Beatitudes a Christian substitute for the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, but man cannot develop these characteristics on his own and become righteous any more than people could obey the Ten Commandments and become righteous. God's standard is not just effort or even achieving some high percentage of righteous behavior and character. God's standard is perfection, and no man can reach that on His own. It can happen only by the imputation of a substitution. That is what Jesus offers man by His sacrificial death on the cross. By God's grace, His sinless perfection is judicially granted to be our standing before God through faith in Jesus. This the same as it was for Abraham who believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. By God's grace, we are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Unrighteous

Ever since Adam took of the forbidden fruit and sinned against God's direct commandment to him, men have been evil of heart. There are three ways in which men display their unrighteousness. First are the immoral unrighteous who are openly evil in their behavior (Romans 1:18-32). Second are the moral

unrighteous who do the same as the openly evil except to a lesser degree. They condemn bank robbers and scam artists, yet they think nothing is wrong with pilfering from work and cheating on taxes. Then there are the religious unrighteous which Jesus speaks against so strongly in the Sermon on the Mount. They may even believe they are following God, but in reality they are following a man made system designed to give the illusion of earning God's approval. The world is still filled with all three types of unrighteous people. The church often has many of the religious unrighteous.

It does not take much effort to find these folks. They are very busy trying to keep their rules and regulations. They have the external facade of righteousness by the things they do or do not do. This separation from worldliness makes them appear to be good, but their attitudes of self-righteousness reveal the true condition of their hearts. Their separation from worldliness is outward and legalistic which sucks away joy and leaves pride when they are successful at keeping their list of rules. When they fail to keep their list of right and wrongs there is either anger or depression that they have failed rather than sorrow that they have displeased God. Their self-righteousness is more important than having true righteousness.

We have already looked at several specific examples of the self-righteous teaching and practice of the scribes and Pharisees. They taught that murder was only committed if you physically caused the death of someone else. But Jesus said that murder begins in the heart. If you are angry with someone you are guilty before the court which was the same punishment the Scribes taught for murder. If your anger was expressed by calling someone a name, then you were guilty before the supreme court. And if that anger was expressed by slandering the person's character, you were guilty enough for hell. True righteousness is not just avoiding murdering someone, it is dealing with people in a loving manner so that anger does not break relationships, and when anger does occur it seeks to be corrected quickly and the relationship reconciled.

Jesus has also exposed their self-righteousness by teaching that adultery was also a matter of the heart and not just the physical act. They thought themselves to be righteous because they spoke out against adultery and punished those who fell to it, yet they were blind to the own evil in looking at women to lust after them. In our own time, there have been too many professing Christians that will condemn the adulterer while excusing their own evil practices of girl or guy watching and addiction to pornography. True righteousness avoids both physical adultery and adultery of the heart.

We have also seen Jesus expose the self-righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees concerning divorce. They practiced divorce for nearly any reason and taught that all was fine as long as the legal work was done. Jesus showed that their practice only increased adultery. Getting the legal work done is important, but that does not make a person righteous. Only in a divorce that is caused by the sexual immorality of the spouse can the innocent party remarry without committing adultery. Divorce is caused by sin and hardness of heart, but all sin can be forgiven with repentance and confession to the Lord. However, that will require the humility that comes with the true righteousness of a changed heart which is something the self-righteous do not have. Religious traditions and adhering to a man made list of do's and don't's have never made anyone righteous.

Integrity and Righteousness - Matthew 5:33-37

This morning we continue our examination of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:33-37 we find yet another area of sin that is still as rampant today as it was then.

33 *"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.'* 34 *"But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 "or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 "But let your statement be, Yes, Yes; or "No, no"; and anything beyond these is of evil.*

In one of my illustration books there is the story of a widow that had become a Christian but was in a hard financial position because a friend had borrowed some money from her and then left without ever repaying it. She wanted everything in her life to be right for Christ and she owed money to a Jewish lawyer. She went to him and told him of the circumstances and promised to pay the fellow each week as she earned the money. She also told him that she had just accepted Jesus as her Savior and that she wanted her life to shine for Jesus Christ. When the last installment of that money was paid, the Jewish man responded, *“I have had much dealing with people who said they were followers of Christ. Until now, I have never been much impressed.”*

Too often those claiming to be Christians are no different - and sometimes even worse - than non-Christians simply because they do not keep their word. They lack integrity and cannot be trusted to keep their promises. How much shame has been cast on the name of Jesus because professing Christians prove themselves to be of low integrity in their work, business and personal lives? That should grieve our hearts. People had the same problem at the time Jesus walked this earth. God commanded the Jews to not steal, deal falsely or lie to one another (Leviticus 19:11), yet these things were so common by those claiming to follow God that an elaborate system of vows was developed. People used vows in the effort to convince others that they were telling the truth, yet they would still leave a way out of their vow in case they changed their mind later.

Vows: Now making vows was not wrong in itself. In fact we find properly made vows throughout Scripture. Hebrews 6:16 states, *“For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.”* The name of something or someone greater than the person making the vow was invoked to give greater credibility to what was said. The idea is that the one called on in the vow was witness to what was said and was to avenge if what was said turned out to be a lie. Oaths were therefore taken to be confirmation of truth. It ended a dispute because it invited judgment on the one that did not keep his word.

To swear effectively then, there must be some reference to something greater that can and will hold you accountable. It may be sentimental to swear on some ancestor’s grave, but unless you believe their ghost will haunt you if you break your vow, there is no credibility added by such an oath. Imagine an atheistic evolutionist trying to gain credibility swearing by natural selection or some extinct animal he thought was his ancestor - *“I swear by Homo habilis I am telling the truth.”* What danger does he face if he lies? Does he fear his offspring would degenerate into missing links in millions of years?

Most oaths usually make reference to God because there is nothing higher and so it adds credibility. Official oaths in the United States until the last generation were commonly made by placing a hand on the Bible and usually concluded with a prayer of “so help me God.” This was actually required for some offices. The idea was that the person was calling upon God to judge them if he or she did not fulfill the oath. The rise of secularism had diminished this practice and by lawsuit forced its discontinuance in some cases. People can “affirm” they are telling the truth or will fulfill their duties, but the credibility of such an affirmation is only as high as the credibility of the individual.

God specifically provided that oaths made by the children of Israel were to be made in His name. Deuteronomy 6:13 says, *“You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name.”* Deuteronomy 10:20 adds, *“You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and shall swear by His name.”* Swearing by the name of the Lord was even seen as a mark of a Gentile that was following God. Jeremiah 12:16 states, *“Then it will come about that if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the LORD lives,' even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they will be built up in the midst of My people.”* Swearing by the name of Baal was bad but swearing by the name of the Lord was good. They would be built up if they followed the Lord, but the next verse made it clear that He would destroy those that did not.

A vow was only to be made for serious matters for it emphatically marked a matter as being of great importance. Leviticus 5:4-6 established the serious nature of the vow by requiring a confession and a guilt offering to the Lord for the sin of the man who made an oath and did not keep it no matter how thoughtlessly the vow was made.

Binding and Non-Binding Oaths: The Scribes had twisted the meaning and importance of oaths and made them into a means of manipulation. They developed a system by which some oaths were binding while making others were not and therefore worthless. In Matthew 5:33 Jesus quotes the common teaching given by the Scribes, *“You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.”* The quote does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament for it is a compilation of several Scriptures which the Scribes twisted to into their own interpretation. The first part of the Rabbinic saying comes from Leviticus 19:12 which warns not to, *“swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.”* The last part comes from Numbers 30:2 and Deuteronomy 23:21 which states, *“When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you.”* These passages actually demonstrate the serious nature of making a vow, but the scribes twisted them for their own purposes. The Scribes taught that only vows made in the name of the Lord were binding and so any other vow did not have to be kept. It was on this basis they built an elaborate system of binding and non-binding oaths. The essence of the purpose of this system is seen in the Yiddish proverb, *“He who tells the truth saves himself the trouble of swearing.”*

The same practices are still is around today. Children make a promise but cross their fingers thinking that doing so means they do not have to keep the promise. The same thing occurs with what is called “king's X.” Modern lawyers understand this concept very well because they earn their living pouring over documents trying to either find a way out of keeping a contract or making the other party keep the contract. They are not concerned about the original intent of the parties making the contract. Their interest is the specific language of the fine print that might allow them to manipulate things to the advantage of their client. Lawyers can write long and elaborate contracts into which they insert some sort of clause to make the contract non-binding so that their client does not have to keep their promises. Such lawyers are essentially very good at lying legally. Long gone are the days when agreements were made between honest men with just a verbal agreement and a handshake.

We get some insight into the complex system of vows used by the Scribes and Pharisees within our text. They would swear by heaven (vs 34), by earth (vs 35), by Jerusalem (vs 35) and by their own heads (vs 36). Over in Matthew 23 we get additional insight when Jesus pronounces His woes upon them for it. Matthew 23:16-22, *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.' You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”*

Jesus completely destroys their line of self righteous thinking in just a few lines by completely refuting the basis of their belief. They knew they could not make false vows to the Lord, so in their perverted thinking they tried to distinguish between what would be of the Lord and what would not. They were mistaken because God does not distinguish between secular and sacred. Nothing has changed.

Our government may separate church and state, but God does not. In Romans 13 Paul even calls the sword government officials bear *“a minister of God,”* and he calls the officials themselves, *“servants of God.”* God will hold government and government officials accountable for the responsibilities He has

placed upon them. People may try to distinguish between secular and sacred, but God does not. There is no secular job as compared to a sacred job. Regardless of who signs your paycheck, you actually work for the Lord as Paul states in Colossians 3:23–24, ²³ *“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”* The same principle applies to whatever you do at home, for recreation, or in being social. All of those things are as important to God as your being here today to corporately worship Him. Paul said in Colossians 3:17 that *“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”*

Their first error was distinguishing between secular and sacred because there is no difference in God's eyes. Their second error is the illogical way they tried to distinguish between the two, and perhaps this just reinforces the point that everything belongs to God and reflects of Him. In Matthew 5 Jesus points out that Heaven is God's throne, Earth is His footstool, and Jerusalem is His city. In Matthew 23 Jesus points out the temple as well as the gold in it, the altar and the sacrifice upon it all belong to God. Jesus also pointed out the foolishness of swearing by your head because you cannot even control that. It all belongs to God so no matter what you swear by you are invoking God into the picture and He will require the vow of you.

Integrity: The whole system of vows developed by the scribes and Pharisees was an effort to escape having to tell the truth because they did not have integrity. That is why Jesus commands the practice to stop. The followers of Jesus Christ are to be people of integrity. Righteous people are honest people so that making vows makes no difference in telling the truth. We need to be like the man who was asked by a potential employer if he would be honest with him if he was hired. The man looked at the employer and said, *“It doesn't matter if you hire me or not, I will be honest.”* Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Jesus states that anything beyond that is of evil because it speaks of an underlying dishonesty which is trying to be hidden.

Those who are truly righteous need to stand out as different from everyone else. Winston Churchill once quipped that *“Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.”* That is never true of a righteous individual and so should never be true of the person who professes to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Let me add a footnote here. Jesus is not making a blanket statement excluding all vows for the following reasons. A) God instituted making vows by His name in the Old Testament and Jesus is not contradicting the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17-18). B) Jesus Himself commonly used the phrases “truly I say” and “truly, truly I say . . .” which are forms of vows. In addition, Jesus responded to vows placed upon Him by others. At His trial Jesus did not respond until Caiaphas said, *“I adjure you by the living God . . .”* (Matthew 26:63) and Jesus then replied without a rebuke to Caiaphas for the vow. C) The apostle Paul made vows (Romans 9:1 & 2 Cor. 1:23). D) God made vows to Abraham (Luke 1:73) and David (Acts 2:30) and in fact swore by Himself since there is none greater (Hebrews 6:13) and by doing so demonstrated to men the unchangeableness of His purpose (Hebrews 6:17). The prohibition Jesus gives here is not against all vows, but it is against both the vows made in order to manipulate others and the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oaths used in order to make an impression or to spice daily conversation (Hendriksen).

Tragically, that too often is the case among professing Christians. As I stated in my introduction, one of the horrible stains on our Lord Jesus Christ are the many who profess to know Him and yet still lack basic honesty. Being a Christian should immediately invoke in other people the sense that you are an individual of the highest integrity and can be completely trusted. Instead it is almost the opposite in many circles. One person put it this way, *“You can't believe some people even when they swear they are lying.”*

We talked about divorce last week and the sad fact is that there is no noticeable difference in the divorce rate between unbelievers and those professing to be Christians. All divorces break the vows two people made to each other.

Do you keep your vows? Are you like the man described in Psalm 15 who walks in integrity and will swear to his own hurt and will not change. Do you keep your promises? Honesty should be a hallmark of the Christian in not only in keeping promises, but even in routine conversations.

The story is told of Immanuel Kant's father who while riding through the forests of Poland encountered a band of robbers. They demanded all his valuables and asked him *"Have you given us all?"* They only let him go when he answered, *"All."* When he was safely out of their sight, his hand touched something in the hem of his robe. It was his gold, sewn there for safety and quite forgotten by him in his fear and confusion. At once he hurried back to find the robbers and having found them, he said meekly, *"I have told you what was not true; it was unintentional. I was too terrified to think. Here, take the gold in my robes."* Then to the old man's astonishment, nobody offered to take his gold. Presently one went and brought back his purse. Another restored his book of prayer, while still another led his horse toward him and helped him to mount. They then unitedly entreated his blessing and watched him slowly ride away. Goodness had triumphed over evil for the robbers knew that because of his honest, they were in the presence of a godly man.

The Christian is to be controlled by truth. Is your integrity such that you are known to be truthful? Scripture is full of admonitions against lying such as Proverbs 19:5, *"A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who tells lies will not escape."* There is also the warning of Revelation 21:8 which states that the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. We are to be righteous people of integrity who have no need to swear in order to convince people we are telling the truth. We are honest in all our dealings which includes not only in business and filling out our income tax forms, but even our phone manners. Do you ever say that so and so is not there when they are right there with you? That is a lie and it is dishonoring to God. There is no need to lie, for lying does not honor our Lord and no lie will ever be justified before Him.

In ancient Greece, Diogenes supposedly went around with a lantern even during the day and told people he was looking for an honest man. He never found one. I pray that were Diogenes here today, he would find each of us who claim to be Christians to be honest people of the highest integrity who can be trusted and do not need to swear because our yes means yes and our no means no; people that do not profane the name of God but instead bring glory to it because they reflect Him in righteousness.

Sermon Notes: Integrity and Righteousness
May 25, 2014 - Selected Scriptures

God's Standard of Righteousness

Men cannot meet God's required standard of righteousness on their _____

The Beatitudes describe the _____ qualities of someone who is truly righteous

Man _____ develop these character qualities on his own any more than he can keep the 10 Commandments

The Unrighteous

The three categories of _____ are: 1) Immoral, 2) Moral, 3) Religious

The religious unrighteous are marked by: pride, _____ & anger / depression over failure instead of sorrow

The unrighteous may refrain from murder, but they _____ their anger and hatred - Matt. 5:21-26

The unrighteous may refrain from physical adultery, but they use their eyes to _____ in their hearts

The unrighteous may get their legal work done in a divorce, but they multiply _____

Integrity and Righteousness - Matthew 5:33-37

Too many professing Christians are no different from non-Christians because they _____ their word

Vows are not wrong in themselves - _____ 6:16

An effective oath must be made in reference to something _____ that will hold you accountable

Most oaths usually make reference to _____ because there is nothing higher and so it adds credibility

God provided for oaths to be made by Israelites in _____ - Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:29, Jeremiah 12:16

A vow was to be made only for _____ matters of great importance - Leviticus 5:4-6

Binding and Non-Binding Oaths: The scribes twisted making vows into a means of _____

Matthew 5:33 is a _____ of Leviticus 19:12 with Numbers 30:2 and Deuteronomy 23:21

The Scribes taught that only vows made in the name of the Lord were binding - and so _____ truth

Yiddish proverb: "*He who tells the _____ saves himself the trouble of swearing.*"

Lawyers are often needed in modern life because other lawyers are good at legal _____ in contracts

The scribes and Pharisees developed a very complex system of _____ - see Matthew 5:34-36; 23:16-22

God does not make a distinction between the secular and the _____ - all is to be done for His glory

_____ is to be done for God's glory - Colossians 3:17, 23-24

_____ belongs to God: Heaven is God's throne, Earth His footstool, Jerusalem His city, etc.

Integrity: The scribe's system of vows was developed to _____ telling the truth - they lacked integrity

Christians are to be righteous which requires _____ - your word is binding. Yes is yes and no is no

Jesus is not making a blanket statement that excludes all _____

A) God _____ making vows in His name and Jesus does not contradict the Old Testament

B) Jesus commonly used the phrases, "Truly I say" and "truly, truly I say" which are forms of _____

C) The Apostle _____ made vows (Romans 9:1 & 2 Corinthians 1:23)

