

Sermon 19, Thou Shalt Not Swear, Matthew 5:33-37

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Proposition: All speech is binding because God hears it. So be absolutely truthful.

Many years ago, I was eating a stolen cookie at lunch. I would hide it under the counter, then surreptitiously pull it out and take a bite from time to time. Well, it had been a little while since my last bite when Mom cornered me. "What were you just eating?"

"My soup," I said innocently.

"No, I saw you eating a cookie. Where is it?" Her pertinacity soon discovered it, and confronted me with the hard evidence of a half-eaten cookie.

"You were lying!" Mom said, a bit too triumphantly for my taste.

"No I wasn't, Mom. You asked what I was just eating. I was just eating my soup. Some time had elapsed since I was eating the cookie."

Well, believe it or not, I was given the punishment due to lying, and my lawyer skills did nothing to save my behind.

It was a lesson I could have avoided by taking to heart the words of Jesus in our text this morning. You see, He warns against all those lawyer tricks in our passage today.

Why should you listen? Because you've been the lawyer too. Evasions, mental reservations, technicalities, exaggerations, "spins:" I'm sure you've used all of these techniques,

with varying degrees of success. What is Jesus' attitude toward such an approach? I can promise you that listening to His words today can save you a very painful lesson in the future, as I discovered to my cost.

Again, we are in the Sermon on the Mount, looking at the righteousness of the Kingdom as contrasted with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. This morning we consider the fourth antithesis of the six in Matthew 5. What I hope to show you, with God's help, is that all speech is uttered in the presence of God. Therefore, it is binding and must be absolutely truthful. Because all speech takes place in the presence of God, it is binding and must be absolutely truthful!

I. The Law: Perform Your Oaths, v. 33

Well, as with the other five antitheses in this chapter, Jesus first cites the law. We find one statement of this law in Leviticus.

A. Moses' Teaching: Oaths Are Binding, Lev. 19:12

In Lev 19:12, it is written, "And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD." Now, just a brief aside here: what is an oath? Well, it is a solemn invocation of God, calling on Him to witness that what you are saying is true. It is virtually equivalent to a promise or a vow. You can think of the presidential oath of office:

Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." (U.S. Const. Art. 2, Sec. 1, cl. 8)

Abraham Lincoln and other presidents have included at the end of the oath the phrase "So help me God," but the word "swear" includes this idea in itself. Interestingly, the Constitution allows one to affirm rather than swear — though as we will see, according to Jesus affirmations are just as binding as oaths.

So Moses taught that you must keep every oath you make.

B. The Pharisees' Interpretation: Oaths to the Lord Are Binding

The Pharisees, on the other hand, emphasized it this way: Oaths *to the Lord* are binding. The implication, of course, is that other oaths, by other things, aren't quite as binding. They taught that one could swear by the temple and not be bound, but that if one swore by the gold of the temple, that was binding. "Well, Mom, I didn't *just* eat that cookie!" In other words, as long as you used the right formula, you could lie as much as you pleased.

II. Jesus' "Yes, And:" No Form of Swearing Can Legitimize Lying, Because All Speech Is Binding, vv. 34-37

Jesus, on the other hand, is restoring the purity and integrity of the law. Mental reservations, or particular non-binding oaths, are out.

A. If You Plan to Break Your Oath, Don't Ever Swear, v. 34a

This “swear not at all” has been interpreted wrongly by some sects in the Church.

1. An Erroneous Interpretation: Jesus Categorically Forbids Oaths

Some churches teach that Jesus did not allow oaths, and they appeal to this text. And it sure looks like Jesus says, “Don’t swear at all.” What could be more clear than that?

a) God Commands Oaths, Deut. 10:20

Well, the problem is that God commanded oaths. He didn’t just permit it, as He did divorce and polygamy. He commanded it as a positive good and as an act of religious worship. The Psalmist speak of paying vows to the Lord by offering sacrifices in the Temple. How could God have been worshipped with something morally repulsive to Him?

b) Jesus Accepted an Oath, Matt. 26:62-64

Further, we can’t say, “Well, the NT is different.” Jesus remained silent in the face of false accusations until the High Priest put Him under oath. Then He spoke. He didn’t reject the oath. He allowed Himself to be placed under oath, and He then testified, though He had refused to do so when not under oath.

c) Paul Took Oaths, 2 Cor. 1:23, 1 Cor. 15:31

Paul solemnly called on God to witness the truth of what he was saying, *as he was writing inspired Scripture*. If all oaths are wicked, then what was the apostle to the Gentiles doing? Clearly, it is unacceptable to say that his letters preserve examples of him sinning. We should instead believe that his oaths were justified.

2. Therefore, Jesus Was Speaking Hypothetically

And, read with the right tone of voice, it’s easy to see that Jesus was saying, “*If you’re going to swear falsely*, you’d better not swear at all.” The point is not to never swear. The point is that swearing as a way of making your words non-binding is evil. Taking a “non-binding” oath so that you can break your word with impunity is wicked. It’s wrong. It’s sinful. It’s a violation of God’s commands. It should never be done. The point is not to forbid all swearing, but rather to say, “If you’re going to swear like that, don’t swear at all!”

Seen this way, then, the no-oath interpretation starts to sound like the legalistic Pharisaical interpretation. “As long as I don’t ever say, ‘I swear,’ I haven’t sinned.” No! If you think that way, you’re thinking like a Pharisee. Rather, you should recognize that the forbidden oath is the oath which legitimizes lying. If you swear like God did in Hebrews 6, or like Paul did in 2 Cor. 1, then you’re not sinning at all! If you take an oath with an intention of performing it, regardless of whether you said “I swear by the Temple” or “I swear by the dust on the floor of the Temple,” you are not violating Jesus’ command here.

B. All Oaths Without Exception Are Taken in the Presence of God, vv. 34b-36

But Jesus goes on to expose the flaw in the Pharisees’ reasoning. They held that oaths under a certain form weren’t binding. But Jesus demonstrates by a few choice examples that every oath is made where God can hear it, and thus every oath is binding.

Think first about this coupling of “heaven” and “earth.” What does that mean? It means “everywhere.” From the highest point to the lowest point, God is there.

1. Oaths by Heaven (God's there), Isaiah 66:1a

If you swear by heaven, that's just like swearing by the name of God Himself. This includes saying things like, "Good heavens!" Jesus, quoting from Isaiah, makes it clear that God is enthroned in Heaven. So if you're swearing by heaven, God is listening.

2. Oaths by Earth (God's there), Isaiah 66:1b

The earth is God's footstool — and so, if you swear by it — He's listening. Of course, if Earth belongs to God in such a special way, then everything on earth does so as well.

3. Oaths by Jerusalem (God's there), Psalm 48:2

Don't swear by Jerusalem, either. We could swear by the church, or by some other earthly city; the principle is the same. God claims Jerusalem for His own, but the rest of the earth and every other city belong to Him just as much.

By the way, we should think about just how well Jesus knew Scripture. When He thought of Jerusalem, He thought of a tag by which it's described in a Psalm. When He thought of Heaven, He thought of Isaiah's words. When you think of various things, do words and phrases of Scripture come to mind? Do you constantly think about and allude to Scripture when you're talking? Read pre-20th century English authors, and you'll see this all the time. They knew the word of God back then.

4. Oaths by Your Head (God rules it)

Well, God may have heaven and earth and Jerusalem. But surely your body is your own, right? Wrong. God rules your body too. You have no control over your head. You can't change the color of your hair just by thinking. (Interesting on the divorce debate that Jesus doesn't say there that you can't get divorced, but here He says you can't color [i.e., dye] your hair. Hmm.)

C. Your Speech Must Be Trustworthy, v. 37a

No matter what you swear by, your speech must be trustworthy. You must be believable. One commentator¹ gave the example of a dad saying, "I'll take you out for ice cream on Saturday if you help me clean up the yard today."

His little girl responds, "Do you promise?"

Why would she say that? Only because he has broken commitments in the past. A promise is a way to "amp it up," to make it more binding.

Do people need to ask you for a promise? Does your speech need a guarantee? Can we trust that you will be where you said you'll be, that you'll do what you said you'll do, that you will keep your word no matter how difficult? Brothers and sisters, everything you say is in the presence of God. Every time you tell a story with a little bit of exaggeration or "spin," every time you say "I'll be there" and miss it, every time you say, "I'll do it" and don't, you're lying. You are failing to keep this command of God. You might as well be swearing by the half-burned sheep's wool in the corner of the altar. You might as well just tell an outright lie.

¹ Dan Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount*, in loc.

As Christians, we should be noticeable for how utterly reliable our commitments are. As I have had occasion to observe more than once from this pulpit, you figure out quickly which people are flaky and which are reliable. Most people are flaky. Some are really flaky. But God isn't flaky. He is totally reliable. Every word of His proves true. And so we, His people, ought to be perfectly trustworthy too. If you're not, then repent. Turn away from lying. Abandon your wickedness. God can forgive even the sin of lying. But you must want to stop lying, and be trying to be truthful, if you expect Him to take your repentance seriously. How seriously do you take someone you know to be a liar? But if you're sincere in your desire for forgiveness, sincere in your longing to be a truth-speaker, then I assure you that Jesus' death is for you. He paid the price of your lies, and He will make you able to speak the truth.

D. Oaths Exist Because Lies Exist, v. 37b

Jesus wraps up the passage by asserting once again that oaths exist because of evil. If people were reliable, there would be no need to call God to witness your oaths. But since people are flaky, and people tell lies, they require some kind of extra guarantee. In a society with some fear of God, calling on Him to witness "ups the ante," makes it just a little more certain that you'll hear the truth.

Oaths themselves aren't evil, but they exist because of evil — sort of like cops.

The scribes and Pharisees thought that if they swore a certain way, they could violate it with impunity. I used to think that if I could just put the right emphasis on the word "just," I wouldn't be guilty of lying to Mom about that cookie. But Jesus shows us a different way, a way in which we speak only the truth, all the time, a way in which we don't swear lightly, but only at times of great need.

Do you want to walk in this way? Do you want to be reliable instead of flaky? Then come, follow Jesus. He never said a falsehood, and if you spend time with Him, you'll be truthful too. Amen.