

Yes, Yes...No, No

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 May 1995

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] We are currently making our way through the sayings of Jesus that we call the Sermon on the Mount. And I've been calling this series, Gospelized Humanity.

Gospelized Humanity, because as I have been arguing, what Jesus is doing in his sermon is describing, not legislating, but describing the new kind of humanity which emerges from the power of his gospel.

Jesus' gospel gives birth to a new breed of men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers. Jesus came into the villages of Palestine, announcing God's good news for the world, saying, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near.

Or, as we might want to paraphrase that, history has reached a major crisis point. God's future is now spilling into the present. Or, as we might want to paraphrase it, it is time for heaven to invade earth.

It is time for light to break through the darkness. Or, as we might want to paraphrase it yet one more time, the moment of fulfillment has come. The Holy Spirit is now being poured out upon broken human beings.

[1 : 21] In his sermon, then, Jesus the gospelizer, Jesus the good newsizer, Jesus the good news incarnate, describes what happens when the reality of this gospel grabs hold of an individual or a community.

If you are able, would you stand for the reading of the word of God today? Our text is Matthew 5, 33 through 37. And, at first glance, it's a rather sleepy text.

That is, it's not immediately apparent that this has powerful implication for the world. But we'll be surprised by the power it has to set free.

Jesus is speaking. Hear the word of God. Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vow to the Lord.

But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

[2 : 31] Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your word be, yes, yes, or no, no, and anything beyond these is of evil.

Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago, you helped Matthew, the tax collector, write these words down on paper. And now we pray, in your mercy and grace, that you would take them off the page and cause them to come alive in us as never before.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. Amen. Now, to be honest with you, when I set out this half year long series in the Sermon on the Mount, I was not all that excited about preaching this text in a separate sermon.

In fact, I'm not sure yet I really have the text, that I really understand it. In light of all of the great needs, in light of all of the great challenges of our time, why bother with this apparently simple text?

I was immediately drawn to the text that come before and after it, to the text on murder and anger and adultery and lust and active non-retaliation and loving one's enemies.

[3 : 54] I was drawn to those texts. But this text, it seemed kind of ho-hum by comparison to those others. Why, in the light of the great fears of our time, give a Sunday morning to this text and do it on Mother's Day to boot?

Well, a number of factors brought me to my senses. First, when I was ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacraments, I made a promise.

And the promise was that I would preach the whole counsel of God, not just the text I liked to preach and understood. Second, and more important, Jesus never wastes his breath.

Jesus never speaks an idle word. If he spoke this text in the middle of all those other more powerful and apparently more relevant texts, I need to listen to him.

He clearly thinks it's significant and I need to hear him out all the way. Third, in this text, Jesus works with two of the Ten Commandments.

[5 : 08] Whereas in all the other, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you passages, he only works with one command of the Ten Commandments. And I thought to myself, that's a clue of a level of significance, isn't it?

To work with two of the Ten Commandments and one saying. He is working here with the third commandment, you shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. And the ninth commandment, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

One of the commandments comes from the first tablet, the other commandment comes from the second tablet. Is he drawing the two together here? Is he suggesting that this whole matter of integrity actually draws the whole of the law together?

Fourth, the more I thought about it, it turns out that the issues Jesus raises in this text are at the heart of the crises and needs and movements and challenges of our time.

The issues Jesus addresses in this text are at the heart of the massive relational breakdown we're experiencing in our time. There are many essential ingredients for healthy relationships and for healthy community.

[6 : 20] Ingredients such as tenderness and affection, respect and compassion. But at the heart of it is the need for integrity and faithfulness. Is it merely coincidental that the apostle Paul, when he begins to talk about the armor of God, this armor that we are to put on and enable us to stand against the powers of evil, that he begins with the belt of truth.

Stand firm, having girded yourself with truth. Well, what is Jesus after in this apparently sleepy text? Clearly he is saying that when the kingdom of God breaks in, when heaven invades earth, there is a new birth of integrity and faithfulness.

Gospelized people are known for integrity and faithfulness. Words are taken seriously, promises are taken seriously, promises and words spoken with great care and reverence.

Well, as important as that is, Jesus' major concern lies at a deeper level. And let me try to get at this. And again, I'm not sure that I'm getting there.

All weekend long I wrestle. I'm not sure I've got it yet, Lord, but I'm going to give you what I think I've got. His concern lies at a deeper level. And I think we get at it by wrestling with Jesus' exhortation in this text, make no oath at all.

[7 : 58] Did you see that in verse 34? Make no oath at all. Thus, many of our Quaker friends and our Mennonite friends will not take an oath in the business realm or in the court of law.

Make no oath at all. No oath at all. None at all. I raise the question because this seems to fly in the face of his other revelation of his will in the rest of Scripture.

In the rest of Scripture, we find positive teaching about oath-making and taking. For example, Moses commands the people of Israel, you shall fear the Lord your God, him shall you serve, and to him you shall cleave and swear by his name.

You shall swear by his name. Jeremiah speaks of the day when the Gentiles will join Israel. Then it will come about that if they will really learn the ways of my people, if they will learn 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.

Thus, many of God's chosen ones throughout Scripture are found taking and making oaths. Abraham, for instance, the friend of God, when he sent his servant out to find a wife for his son Isaac, extracts an oath from the servant.

[9 : 26] Jacob extracts an oath from Joseph, and Jonathan asks for an oath from David and got it. We find the apostle Paul, who surely knew this saying in the Sermon on the Mount, making oaths.

Romans 9, 1, I'm telling the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 1, 23, I call God as a witness to my soul.

What is more to the point is that in a number of places throughout Scripture, we find God making an oath. He does not appeal to a higher authority as we need to do.

I mean, what higher authority would God appeal to, but he does take a number of oaths. For instance, in Genesis 15, God promises Abraham that Abraham and Sarah are going to have a child from their own loins, and God promises Abraham a special land where they'll be able to raise their family, and Abraham says, how shall I know that I will possess this?

What assurance can you give me, God, that you're going to fulfill your promise? Now, God's word alone should have been good enough. And later in salvation history, God will make that clear.

[10 : 40] My word is sufficient. But at that point, Abraham needed more. Is that because Abraham's word is not good enough, and he assumed that other people's words was not good enough, including God's word?

Whatever the case, in that case, God condescended to Abraham's need, and he makes an oath. No for certain, God says. And then goes through this elaborate cutting of a covenant ceremony.

On Mount Moriah later, God says to Abraham, I, by myself, I have sworn that I will indeed bless you. The writer of the book of Hebrews finds great comfort in the fact that God took oaths.

Great assurance. Hebrews chapter 6, verses 17 and 18, he says, In the same way, God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of promise the unchangeableness of his purpose, interposed with an oath.

And then there's Jesus himself taking an oath. At his trial, the high priest says to him, I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.

[11 : 50] In that case, Jesus is being placed under a legal oath. And he accepts it and responds, you have said it for yourself. So what is going on here in the Sermon on the Mount?

What is going on when Jesus says to us, make no oath at all? Well, consider the nature of an oath. An oath is asked for or made only in the context of doubt.

Right? In the context of doubt. And the oath is intended to bring assurance by calling God in to witness to the truth and calling God in to avenge the untruth.

There are at least four aspects to most oaths. First, there is a formal declaration of the truth. Second, there is an acknowledgement that I am making this claim for truth in the presence of the living God.

Third, there is an invocation whereby God is called upon now to be a witness to my conscience. And fourth, there is an imprecation in which the oath taker is inviting the living God to reveal and then avenge any lie that might be in this oath.

[13 : 06] It means oath taking should be done lightly. Now, in Jesus' day, people were trying to get out from under the weight of this oath. The Pharisees in particular did not want to be found guilty of taking the name of the Lord, the God, in vain.

You and I don't want to be found guilty of that either. So they argued that when you make or when you take an oath, do not use the Lord's name. If you don't use the Lord's name in an oath, then you can break it without any severe consequences.

That's kind of neat, isn't it? Swear by something else, they say. Swear by heaven or swear by earth or swear by Jerusalem or swear by the hair on your head. The Pharisees took this to ridiculous extremes.

And Jesus takes them on for all of the sophistry involved in this. For instance, in Matthew 23, there are a series of woes that Jesus gives. Jesus says, Woe to you blind guides who say, If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing.

But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he's bound by the oath. You blind fools. Which is greater, the gold or the temple that made the gold sacred? And you say, If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing.

[14 : 23] But if one swears by the gift that is in the altar, he is bound by the oath. You blind men. And he goes on with that, exposing the game playing that people were doing at that time. Jesus is saying that all these subtle distinctions that we make in the oath are irrelevant.

Make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. The point, the point is, however you try, you cannot avoid some reference to God.

However you try, you cannot avoid some reference to God. Even if you don't use God's name in an oath, you are using God. Even if you use your own name in an oath, you are invoking God because you would not be able to make that oath unless God had given you the breath to do so.

We can never avoid bringing God into the picture, Jesus is saying here. He is everywhere and in everything. If you swear by heaven, you're bringing God in because it is his footstool.

If you swear by earth, you're bringing God in because heaven is the throne. The earth is the footstool. If you swear by Jerusalem, you're bringing God in because it is the city of the great king.

[15 : 44] All cities are the city of the great king. If you swear by the hair on your head, you're bringing God in because even though it's your head and not another human being's head, it's ultimately God's head.

Jesus is saying there, therefore, that there is no way that we can avoid bringing God in on oath-making and oath-taking. Every oath, however small, brings God into the picture and carries with it all the weighty consequences.

So make no oath at all. You're better off not to make an oath at all. But Jesus' concern here goes deeper still.

And see if I can get a handle on this and see if I can help you. Notice the word evil in the text, the last word of the text. Anything beyond this is of evil?

Jesus never uses the word evil lightly. Make no oath at all because oath-making and oath-taking involves encountering evil.

[16 : 54] That's what he's saying. Make no oath at all because oath-making and oath-taking involves encountering evil. What? It's not that an oath is evil.

That's not the point. Rather, it's that an oath is only asked for or given because of evil. Evil in our own hearts or evil that comes from the evil one whom Jesus calls the father of lies.

Oath-making and oath-taking brings us into encounter with evil. If there were no evil, there would be no need for oaths. The reason we humans ask God for an oath, as Abraham did, is that we do not trust the word of other people.

We do not even trust our own words and we push that distrust, that suspicion onto God. Oaths are asked for only because of the presence of evil.

Now, here's Jesus' point, I think. Make no oath at all because each time you do, you are giving credit to evil. You are letting evil now come onto the stage of this encounter between another person.

[18 : 12] One of the signs of a collapsing society is the amount of paperwork required to do business together. That huge amount of paperwork is a blatant sign that evil is at work.

Right? You wouldn't need all that paperwork. I can remember the day. Many of you can surely remember the day. I can remember the day my dad bought a pickup truck on the shake of a hand.

You can't do anything like that anymore. You bring a refund to save on, and you have to fill out forms. So help me God.

So help me God is not a sign of godliness in a society. It's a sign of recognition of evil. That people do not mean what they say and say what they mean.

Make no oath at all because each time you do, you are giving evil space to work. It goes deeper. And the person that helps me see this the most is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

[19 : 25] Dietrich Bonhoeffer acknowledges that oaths are intended as barriers against untruth. They're barriers against the lie. But, says Bonhoeffer, in trying to be a barrier against the lie, the oath actually grants to the lie, quote, a certain right to life, close quote.

Bonhoeffer writes this. Listen. The Old Testament had expressed its condemnation of the lie by the use of the oath. But Jesus destroys the lie by forbidding oaths altogether.

The oath which the Old Testament set against the lie is seized by the lie itself and pressed into service. I'll say that one again. The oath which the Old Testament set against the lie is seized by the lie itself and pressed into service.

It is thus able through the oath to establish itself and to take the law into its own hands. So the lie must be seized by Jesus in the place to which it flees in the oath.

Therefore, the oath must go since it is a protection for the lie. Powerful words. Jesus seizes the lie and he seizes it in the very place where the lie feels it has a right to live in the oath.

[20 : 51] I say to you, make no oath at all. No oath at all removes the protection of evil. No oath at all takes away evil's playground.

There is no place for it to work or to hide anymore. The practical question of course is then what do we do when we are asked to take an oath by a higher authority as we are in a courtroom or as Sharon and I recently were when our daughters were finally naturalized as U.S. citizens.

I agree with Martin Luther and company who make a distinction between making oaths and taking oaths. Making oaths and taking oaths.

When a higher authority asks us to take an oath we can do it as Jesus himself did in the trial. But we are not to make an oath.

Our word is to be sufficient. Even when however we take an oath we are to acknowledge the sad reality of evil and to be on guard.

[22 : 00] No oath at all breaks the spell of evil. Simply saying yes, yes, no, no breaks the spell and now evil has no place to hide.

I taught the Sermon on the Mount in Manila in 1987 at a seminary there and I had students from nine different Asian and Middle Eastern countries in that class.

Wonderful, wonderful stretching experience for me. And we were going along just fine in the Sermon on the Mount until we came to this sleepy text. And then everything exploded.

I mean it was a huge explosion for which I was not ready at all. In fact, I planned to skip over the text. The reason for the explosion was that in many of those nine countries represented in my class one of the greatest cultural values one of the most deeply held cultural values is smooth interpersonal relationships.

Smooth interpersonal relationships. Meaning that you always want the other person to feel good in an encounter with you. You always want the other person to go away feeling good about the encounter.

[23 : 14] That's not a bad concept. The problem was that in order to ensure this feeling good you are always simply to tell the other person what you think the other person wants to hear.

If the other person if you think the other person wants to hear yes you will answer yes. If you think the other person wants to hear no you will always answer no. So whenever I asked the Filipino members of the staff of Union Church of Manila to do something for me I always got a yes answer.

Even when there was absolutely no intention to do anything about it. Well you can imagine how terribly exasperating that was. You can also imagine how this creates the context for much manipulation and creates the context for very convoluted relationships.

You never know where you are. Yes yes no no anything more than that is of evil. The students in the seminary class were incensed with this text. I kept saying it's Jesus is saying it's not me.

Incensed with the text. Now they had no problems with the other text that we westerners get incensed with. They had no problem with the non-retaliation thing. They saw how smart that was.

[24 : 34] But they had big problems with this. Finally one of the students spoke up to me and angrily said Professor Johnson if we took this text seriously it would turn our whole country upside down.

To which I responded it would indeed. And now you have just discovered the radicalness of the kingdom of God.

if this text were taken seriously here our country would get turned upside down too.

Which is why I rejoice in this promise keepers movement that has emerged in our time. All the promise keeper movement is doing well not all but basically what it is doing is calling men to be men of integrity and faithfulness.

There are seven promises that men are being asked to sign on to. Number one to honor Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to his word. That would be sufficient.

[25 : 41] Right there. Number two to pursue vital relationships with other men. Number three to practice spiritual, moral, ethical and sexual purity.

unity. Number four to build strong marriages and families. Number five to support and participate in the mission of the church. Number six to reach beyond racial and denominational barriers to affirm our unity in Jesus Christ.

And number seven to influence the world by being obedient to Jesus' great command and great commission. When men take the word of promise seriously, evil loses more of its playing ground and there are going to be great changes.

When women take the word of promise seriously, evil loses its playing ground and there are going to be great changes. When teachers, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, mothers and dads and children take the word of promise seriously, evil loses its playing ground and there's going to be profound change.

Yes, yes, no, no. Anything more than that is of evil. Anything more is giving evil the space to live and to work.

[27 : 05] Yes, yes, no, no removes the covering and allows us to walk in the light. Boy, I want to walk in the light.

I want to walk in the light more than ever before. I want to speak with as much consistency as I can to speak honorably at all times. But how, Lord, how to do this?

Three things can help us follow Jesus in his radical way. The first is confession. To confess the power of the lie at work in our own souls.

You know what I mean. To confess the temptation to ignore the truth or cover the truth or stretch the truth or twist the truth. To confess that deeply embedded tendency to put a spin on the facts.

To confess the desire of image making alive in our souls and in our societies. Bonhoeffer hits the nail on the head. He writes, only those who are in a state of truthfulness through the confession of their sin to Jesus are not ashamed to tell the truth wherever it must be told.

[28 : 20] The cross is God's truth about us and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. Second thing we can do is to realize that Jesus exhortation here emerges from Jesus character.

He is truth incarnate. He is utterly faithful. He always says what he means and he always means what he says. He never plays games with us. His yes is always yes. His no is always no.

And he speaks this word to us trusting in the power of his own word to create that same character in our hearts and minds. That we will be transformed into his likeness.

And the third thing that can help us is to realize that Jesus himself is the great yes to all of God's promises. One of my favorite texts, 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 19 to 20.

The Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us, was not yes and no, but yes in him. For as many as may be the promises of God in Christ, they are yes.

[29 : 26] Jesus is the final assurance that God is going to fulfill all of his promises. That's because Jesus is the embodiment of the promises.

In Jesus, all the promises of God are yes. God has said an ultimate yes in the person of Jesus, which means then that the universe is on very solid ground.

Simply to promise yes, yes, no, no, not only breaks the spell of evil, but it reestablishes us on that solid footing. When we simply promise yes or no, it is a sign that we are finally finding our security in the living God who always keeps his promises.

Well, let's do this today, if you don't mind. I'd like to take just a few moments now and help us reaffirm some key promises that we have made.

I like the way Presbyterians do this. Presbyterians just ask a question and all they ask from it is a simple yes or simple no, a simple I do or simple I will. Presbyterian questions never require, so help me God or on a stack of Bibles I swear.

[30 : 39] Just yes, yes, no, no. Here's what I'd like to do. Would you mind just closing your eyes and bowing your heads? This is going to be between you and the Lord, although I'm going to invite you to give the response out loud if you'd like to.

You can say it quietly, deep in your own soul, but you're invited to say it out loud too if you'd like to. I'm going to just name a couple of promises and ask you to reaffirm them by simply saying yes.

Mothers, I ask you to reaffirm the promise you made at your children's baptism or dedication.

Remember, I promise to point my child to Jesus, to teach my child to know and love Jesus, to pray my child to Jesus.

Will you say a new yes? Fathers, I ask you to do the same.

[31 : 52] You took the same promise. Will you say a new yes? Yes. Spouses, I ask you to reaffirm the promises you made at your wedding.

Remember, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse.

Will you say a new yes? Deacons, elders, and pastors, I ask you to reaffirm the promise you and I made when we were ordained, the promise to shepherd the flock, to lead the people of God, to feed them the word of God.

Will you say a new yes? Yes. Members of this church, I ask you to reaffirm the promises you made when you joined the church.

Will you say a new yes? Yes. Yes. All of us who know ourselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ, I ask you to reaffirm the promise we made to him, the promise to lose our lives for him, the promise to die to self lordship.

[33 : 37] Will you say a new yes? Yes. We promised to love him, to love his people, and to love the world for which he died.

Will you say a new yes? yes, Lord. Lewis Smedes is right. We are never more like God.

We are never more like God than when we keep our promise. When the kingdom comes, when heaven invades the earth, there is a powerful emergence emergence of integrity and faithfulness.

Yes, yes, no, no. Anything more of that comes from evil. Amen.