

# Yes, Yes...No, No

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[ 0 : 00 ] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the past few weeks, we have been following Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest preacher who ever lived, into his now famous Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever preached. Through his you have heard it was said, but I say unto you sayings, he has been drawing us deeper and deeper into one of the deepest desires of his heart.

He has been drawing us deeper into deeper into his passion for righteousness. Righteousness, right relationship, right relatedness.

In his sermon, he is taking us into the full orb ed right relatedness for which we were created.

Through his six, you have heard it was said, but I say unto you text.

[ 1 : 15 ] Jesus has been drawing out the original intent of the law as given to Moses on Mount Zinai. On another mount by the Sea of Galilee, the lawgiver himself, now in our flesh and blood, draws out the fuller meaning of the law, thereby taking us step by step into the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven.

Thus far, he has spoken to us about obviously critical issues, murder and anger, adultery and lust, marriage and remarriage.

Today, in the text we just read, Jesus is going to now speak about the issue of making oaths. I say to you, make no oath at all.

Now, on first hearing, doesn't this feel just a little bit anticlimactic? Oaths?

Oaths? This is as big a deal as murder and anger, adultery and lust, marriage and remarriage? Apparently so.

[ 2 : 28 ] Words matter to the preacher on the mount, especially words of promise. Why? Because authentic righteousness, authentic relationships are made and sustained by words.

Yes, by deeds, but fundamentally by words. Authentic relationship involves meaning what we say and saying what we mean. Yes has to mean yes and not, well, maybe or not maybe.

And no has to be no and not, well, it all depends. Words matter and especially words of promise.

After all, the preacher on the mount is himself the word. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. All things came into being through him and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we beheld his glory. Glory is of the only begotten of the father, full of grace and truth. But I say to you, make no oath at all.

[ 3 : 44 ] It turns out that this seemingly anticlimactic text opens up for us the nature of reality as few texts do.

It turns out that this text opens up for us the consequences of the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth as few texts do. It turns out that this text helps us realize just how brilliant Jesus of Nazareth really is.

But I say to you, make no oath at all. Jesus is here working with two of the Ten Commandments. Jesus is working with the Third Commandment. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. And he's working with the Ninth Commandment. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

As you likely know, the Ten Commandments were originally given to us in two halves. Written on two stone tablets.

[ 4 : 45 ] On the first tablet, we have Commandments 1 through 4. Dealing with our relationship with the living God. You shall have no other gods between us. You shall not make any images of God.

You shall not take the Lord's name in vain. You shall honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. The second tablet contains Commandments 5 to 10. Dealing with our relationship with one another. Honor your father and mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet. In his making no oaths saying, Jesus is working with a text from both of the two tablets.

From both halves of the law. And is this not suggesting just how significant this apparently anticlimactic saying is? And is it not suggesting that somehow the issue around oath integrates the law as few other issues do?

So what is Jesus getting at in this section of his sermon? Clearly he is saying that when the kingdom of heaven invades earth, there is a birth.

[ 5 : 56 ] There is a resurgence of integrity and faithfulness. When Jesus and his new world order gets a hold of us, we become people of integrity and faithfulness.

We take words more seriously. We take promises more seriously. Entering into those promises with greater care and reverence. But as important as all that is, it goes deeper.

And we get at his deeper concern by grappling with the command, make no oath at all. No oaths at all?

None at all? Thus our Quaker friends and many of our Mennonite friends refuse to take an oath in any business transaction or in a court of law.

Make no oath at all? Never? What Jesus says in this text has fresh relevance for me and Sharon because we will be taking our oath of Canadian citizenship on March 16th.

[ 7 : 03 ] That's the day that First Baptist Church was formally constituted 125 years ago. We will be asked to say, I swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Those of you who were born here probably haven't had a chance to do this.

I will swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, Her heirs and successors, And that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada And fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen.

O Canada, Our home and native land, True patriot love, In all thy sons come and we'll stop there. Today, First Baptist, This week, Rogers Arena. So what does it mean when Jesus says, Make no oath at all?

He does not say, Make no promise at all. Just no oath at all. A promise is a simple, I will, Period.

[ 8 : 27 ] An oath. It involves taking God into the picture, Invoking the presence of God, And invoking God as the security for the promise.

Make no oath at all. Now, if you know the rest of the Bible well, You know that Jesus' command initially seems to fly in the face of what God has revealed elsewhere.

Because in the rest of Scripture, Oaths are treated positively. For example, In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses commands the people of God, You shall fear the Lord your God, Him you will serve, And swear by His name.

Jeremiah speaks of the day when the Gentiles will join Israel and writes, 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 people to swear by Baal, Then they will be built up in the midst of my people.

Throughout the great story, Many of God's chosen ones make oaths or extract oaths from other people. Abraham, The friend of God, For instance, When he sends out his servant to find a wife for his son, Extracts an oath from the servant.

[ 9 : 40 ] Jacob extracted an oath from Joseph that he would bury his bones in the promised land. And Jonathan asked for an oath from David and got it. The apostle Paul, Who surely knew the Sermon on the Mount, Seems to make an oath.

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

What is even more significant is that in a number of places in the story, God himself seems to take an oath. God does not appeal to any higher authority.

There isn't any, But he does seem to take a number of oaths. Genesis 15, For example, God promises Abraham that he will have a son. It will come from Abraham's body and Sarah's body.

And then God promises Abraham that he will have this particular piece of real estate for him and his descendants. Abraham asked God, How shall I know that I shall possess it?

[ 10 : 41 ] That is, What kind of assurance can you give me that what you say you will do? Now, God's word should have been enough. And later in the story, God makes this clear.

His word should have been enough. But at that point, Abraham feels that he needs more than a word of promise. Is that because Abraham lives in a society where words of promise were not enough?

Is it because Abraham's own word of promise is not enough? Whatever the case, God descends to Abraham's felt need and takes an oath.

No for certain, God says, And then goes on to cut a covenant. Later in the story, God will even say, By myself I have sworn I will indeed bless you. The writer of the book Hebrews seems to celebrate God's taking and making oaths.

And he finds great assurance in it. Hebrews chapter 6. In the same way, God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of his purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement.

[ 11 : 53 ] And then there is the fact that Jesus himself seems to take an oath in his trial before the high priest.

The high priest says, I adjure you by the living God. Tell us if you are Messiah, the son of God. Jesus is placed under a formal oath, and it appears he does not refuse it.

You have said it yourself, he says. But note, Jesus seems only to come up to the edge of this oath, so to speak, for he says, you have said it yourself, meaning they are your words, meaning I'm echoing your words, meaning I myself would have to add nothing.

So what is going on in the Sermon on the Mount? Why does Jesus say, make no oath at all? Oaths are asked for and made only in the context of doubt.

Right? In the first century, oaths were made to give assurance by calling God to witness the truth and by asking God to hold people accountable for the untruth.

[ 13 : 12 ] Oaths began with a formal declaration of the truth and then an acknowledgement that these words are being spoken in the presence of God and then God is invoked to witness to the faithful intent of these vows and then to reveal and punish any lies.

Nothing to be entered into lightly. Now again, you can see there's a difference between a promise and an oath. A promise is simple. I will.

Period. An oath brings God into the picture. I will. And I call God as my witness. Now in Jesus' day, people were trying to get out from under the weight of such oaths.

The Pharisees in particular did not want to be found taking the name of God in vain. Neither do we. So they argued that if you make or take an oath and do not use the Lord's name, swear by someone else, swear by something else, and you can get off the hook.

If you don't use the Lord's name, you could break the oath without any consequences. Say, I swear by heaven or I swear by earth or I swear by Jerusalem or I swear by the hair on my head.

[ 14 : 30 ] all supposedly ways to avoid bringing God into the oath. Now, the Pharisees, some of the Pharisees, took this to ridiculous extreme.

And Jesus exposes all the silly sophistry. In Matthew 23, he has a series of woe to you sayings. 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 his oath. You blind fools, which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing.

But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he's bound by the oath. You blind men, which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

He who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. He who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. So Jesus there is exposing all the game playing.

[ 15 : 33 ] He's saying that all these little subtle distinctions just don't cut it. So to free us from game playing and to make sure that righteousness happens, he says, just don't make any oath at all.

Either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. His point, however we try, we cannot avoid bringing God into the picture when we make an oath.

There's simply no way we can avoid that. Even if we do not explicitly use God name, we are still going to involve God. For even if we swear by our own name, it's God who gave us the breath to do that.

And so we're bringing God into the picture. You can never avoid bringing God into play. God is everywhere and involved in everything. If I swear by heaven, I'm bringing God in because it's his throne.

If I swear by earth, I'm bringing God in because it's his footstool. If I swear by Jerusalem, I'm bringing God in it for it is his city. Every city is his. If we swear by our own head, even though it is my head and not your head, it is ultimately God's head.

[16:54] Our whole body is his. There's simply no way we can avoid involving God in the making of oaths. So, make no oath at all. Now, it goes deeper.

Jesus is taking us deeper. And he's taking us into the nature of reality where we live and work. Do you hear the word evil in the text?

Do you see the word evil in the text? It's verse 37. But let your statement be yes, yes, or no, no. Anything beyond these is of evil.

Or, anything beyond these is of the evil one. Now, you know that Jesus never uses the word evil lightly. Make no oath at all because making and taking oaths brings us into an encounter with evil. Into an encounter with the evil one. It does? Not that an oath itself is evil.

[18:09] Not that taking and making oaths are themselves evil. But because an oath is only needed because of evil. Evil in our hearts.

Evil in human systems. And the evil one whom Jesus calls the father of lie. Of whom Jesus says there is no truth in him. who seeks to undo all righteousness. Who seeks to undo right relationships. Oath taking and making not evil in and of themselves brings us into an encounter with evil. The reason we humans ask God for an oath is that we do not trust the word of others and we do not trust our own word and we transfer that suspicion onto God.

Oaths are made because of the presence of evil. And here is Jesus' major point. He wants us to understand the true reality where we live and work.

Make no oath at all because each time we do we are giving credit to evil. Make no oath at all because each time we do we are giving credit to evil.

[19:26] Each time we take or make an oath we are implicitly acknowledging the place of evil in our lives and thereby we are letting evil onto the playing field.

It would not be on the playing field were it not for the oath. One of the sad signs of a troubled society is the huge amount of paperwork involved in simple business and legal transactions.

It says that evil is having a heyday with us. I remember when I bought my first car a used Volkswagen Beetle and I bought that car on a handshake.

I even didn't have the money. I had to go to the bank and he let me take the car on a handshake. volumes and volumes of pages are need to transact sales in our time because evil has been allowed on the stage and has too big a role.

Adding to the promise as God is my witness although sounding appropriately pious is a sign of ungodliness in a society.

[20:43] It's a sign of evil necessitating an oath. It's a sign that people don't trust people to mean what they say and say what they mean. And so Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in a startling way.

When I first read these I thought no way you can't translate Jesus this way. Listen to how Peterson translates in the message. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace.

than this line. In making your speech sound more religious it becomes less true. Make no oath at all because we are inadvertently giving room for evil to work.

It goes deeper yet and it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who helped me understand this. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that oaths are intended as barriers against untruth.

They're intended as barriers against the lie. That makes sense doesn't it? Initially anyway that an oath is a barrier against untruth that it's a barrier against the lie. But says Bonhoeffer in his cost of discipleship in trying to be the barrier against the lie the oath actually grants the lie a right to life.

[22:11] Say that again. In trying to be the barrier against the lie the oath actually grants the lie a certain right to life.

Here's how Bonhoeffer explains it. 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.

Here as there it is the same question of the destruction of untruth in the life of a believer. Listen. 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 very place to which it flees in the oath.

Therefore the oath must go because it is the protection of the lie. I'll read all that again or half of it anyway. The oath which the Old Testament set against the lie is seized by the lie itself and pressed into service.

[ 23 : 13 ] It is thus able through the oath to establish itself and take the law into its own hands. So the lie must be seized by Jesus in the very place to which the lie flees in the oath.

The oath must go because it is the protection of the lie. Wow. I told you this apparently anti-climatic saying opens up the nature of reality as few texts do.

Jesus seizes the lie and seizes the lie in the very place where it seeks to have a right to life in the oath. No oath at all takes away the protective cover of the lie.

No oath at all keeps evil off the playground. No oath at all means evil has no room to work. So what are we to do when we are asked to take an oath?

Especially when asked to take an oath by some authority like the government of Canada. What are Sharon and I to do March 16th? I agree with Martin Luther and company who make a distinction between making an oath and taking an oath.

[ 24 : 35 ] When a legitimate authority like a legitimately constituted state asks us to take an oath we can. We acknowledge that it's sad that we have to do this because of the presence of evil but we can do that.

But the key is we do it without adding anything pious. Simple yes. But we ourselves are not to make an oath.

Our word is to be enough. No oath at all breaks the spell of the lie. The simple yes yes no no pushes back the lie.

The lie has no place to work. Now a number of years ago I taught through the whole sermon on the mount at a seminary in Manila. And in that class I had 30 students from nine different countries of the world.

In each of those nine different countries there was a deeply held cultural value usually called smooth interpersonal relations. Now those of you from those countries where smooth interpersonal relationship is a value you know what kind of hot water I got into in teaching this text.

[ 26 : 01 ] Smooth interpersonal relationship means that you always want the other person to feel good about you in an encounter. Not a bad value.

I want people to go away from an encounter with me and feel good about me and feel good about the encounter. So it's not horribly bad value. It's just that in wanting to please that other person and have that person feel good about us we are tempted to tell them what they want to hear.

So if I think that you want to hear yes I'll tell you yes even though I mean no or vice versa.

And those of you who have lived with those cultural dynamics know the potential for manipulating lives and you know how convoluted relationships can get.

Well as the class worked through Jesus yes yes no no anything more is of evil. The students grew incensed. They had no problem with the other text in the sermon on the mount that drive westerners crazy.

[ 27 : 16 ] but they had a big problem with this one and finally one of the students stood up and said angrily which was crossing the cultural value said angrily to me professor Johnson if we take this text seriously it will turn our societies upside down to which I responded now you know what it means for the kingdom of heaven to break into the earth the kingdom turns societies upside down when we take Jesus words about words seriously evil loses its place on the stage when men and women boys and girls lawyers and plumbers and doctors and nurses and husbands and wives take Jesus word about words seriously the kingdom of heaven advances in the city yes yes no no anything more is playing with evil how

Jesus so Jesus how are we now to follow you in this radical dimension of your kingdom in three ways first we confess we confess the power of the lie at work in our own hearts we confess the

temptation to ignore the truth twist the truth cover the truth stretch the truth we confess this tendency in our soul to put a spin on the facts we confess this tendency in our society to do image making again Dr.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer nails it only those who are in a state of truthfulness through confession of their sin to Jesus are not ashamed to tell the truth wherever it must be told and then this the cross is God's truth about us and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful confess second we realize we realize he says what he says because he is who he is he is truth incarnate he always says what he means and means what he says he never plays games with the facts he never plays games with us his yes is always yes his no is always no and he says what he says to heal our souls he says what he says to establish his character in our souls so we realize that his words come from his own character third we remember that

Jesus Christ is God's great yes to all of God's promises second Corinthians 1 19 and 20 for the son of God Christ Jesus who was preached among you by us was not yes and no but yes in God for as many as may be the promises of God in him they are yes Jesus is the assurance that God keeps all his promises God needs say no more Jesus is the embodiment of all the promises God has said his ultimate yes you can see them to simply say yes yes or no no not only breaks the spell of evil it also and more fundamentally puts our feet on solid ground to simply say yes yes or no no is a sign that we are finding our security in the living word who always keeps his promises and as we continue following

Jesus further into his kingdom we discover that Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes is right when he says we are never more like God than when we keep our word so be it amen amen me