

Speaking Honestly

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[0 : 00] Our scripture this morning is taken from Psalm 34 and Matthew chapter 5 verses 33 to 37. Psalm 34.

I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord.

Let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant and their faces shall never be ashamed. The poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. O taste and see that the Lord is good.

[1 : 03] Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. O fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack. The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Come, O children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is there who desires life and loves many days that he may see good?

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his heirs toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

[2 : 07] Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones. Not one of them is broken.

Affliction will slay the wicked and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Matthew chapter 5 verses 33 to 37. Again. You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no.

[3 : 14] Anything more than this comes from evil. Here ends today's reading. Some time ago I heard the story of a pastor who had two men in his church, two businessmen who were involved in a dispute that they did not seem to be able to work out.

And he decided to help them, so he invited them. He decided he would have them over to his house to understand what the issue was and he invited the first businessman over.

And the man proceeded to tell him what had happened. And he listened and he said to the man, You're right. And the man left and the next day he had the second businessman to come over.

And he proceeded to tell him what happened and he shared the same thing. He told him exactly what happened. The first guy said and the pastor looked at him and said, You're right.

You're right. And so when he left, his wife walked into the living room and said, I know I shouldn't be listening to your conversations, but I couldn't help it. And I saw you tell both of those men they're right.

[4 : 34] And the two of them can be right. And he said to her, You're right. You're right. I think some of us can identify with the pastor.

We all understand the situation he faced. Sometimes we have a hard time telling the truth. Sometimes we have a hard time saying to a person, not you're right, but you're wrong. And maybe it's because we don't want to hurt the person's feelings. And so we struggle in telling them anything that we think would upset them. But sometimes we have a hard time telling the truth if what we need to say would put us in an unfavorable light. And we do anything but tell the truth. And there are all kinds of other reasons why we sometimes don't tell the truth.

This passage that we have come to as we continue our sermon series in the Sermon on the Mount is one in which Jesus addresses the issue of taking oaths or swearing.

[5 : 48] But when we consider it more closely, what we see is that Jesus is addressing the issue of the need to speak honestly. It was a problem in Jesus' day and it's a problem in our day.

And the reason is that we are fallen people. And so we approach the truth in fallen ways. We don't tell the whole truth.

And sometimes we tell outright lies. And even in some cases, we invoke God's name. We swear in God's name to support our lies in an attempt to get people to believe the lies that we tell.

And brothers and sisters, I believe that we'd all agree this morning that lying is a serious sin. But it's more serious when we invoke God's name in it. It's more serious when we try to cover a lie with God's name to deceive others to believe us.

And these five verses that we've come to this morning, Jesus addresses this practice. And I want us to consider how we can make application to our own lies.

[7 : 11] But first let me pray for us. Oh, Father, we come to you now as those who sometimes struggle to tell the truth.

But we come to you as those who sometimes tell outright lies and would even invoke your name to make the lies believable.

Lord, you draw near to us now and would you speak to our heart. Lord, you know each of us. You know us through and through.

Nothing about us is hidden from you. And I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you would speak to all of our hearts. Lord, would you grant us repentance where we need to repent.

And I pray that you would bring lasting change in all of our lives. Father, I pray for your grace to be faithful to proclaim your word to your people this morning.

[8 : 16] Would you be with us now in Jesus name? Amen. In these five verses, as he was seated on the mountain with his disciples gathered around him.

In contrast to the dishonest practice of the Pharisees swearing to cover up their lies. Jesus makes this point. That was true in his day and it is certainly true in our day.

Disciples of Christ are called to unqualified honesty in speech. Those who belong to Jesus are called to unqualified honesty in speech.

That's the point that Jesus makes in these five verses. And it's a sobering point. Especially for those of us who belong to him.

In these five verses, we see Jesus doing what I can summarize as two things. And I want us to consider them in our remaining time. First, we see Jesus condemning dishonest speech.

[9 : 35] In these five verses, Jesus condemns dishonest speech. Associated with the practice of taking an oath or swearing.

And I believe that for most of us, the immediate question that comes up is, is swearing wrong? Is it wrong to take an oath? Some people say that it is.

And they would not take an oath. There are many Christians who hold to that view. They believe they should not take an oath in any way, shape, or form.

But is that what Jesus is saying? For us to really see what Scripture says, we need to consider some verses.

First of all, if we start in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 6.13, we are actually told to swear by God's name. This is what it says.

[10 : 35] It is in the Lord your God. It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve, and by his name you shall swear.

So we're called, God's people are called to swear by his name. And then in Leviticus 19.12, You shall not swear by my name falsely.

And so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. So here in Leviticus 19.12, Jesus is not prohibiting swearing, but he's prohibiting false swearing in his name.

He says, don't do that. Then we have examples in the Old Testament of saints who took oaths or who swore or made other people to swear.

You may recall as we were working through Genesis, in Genesis 24, when Abraham was trying to secure a wife for Isaac, how he called his servant and made him put his hand under his thigh and made him swear to God that he would not take a wife of among the Canaanites for Isaac.

[11 : 47] And then there's another one. We've not come to this yet, but in Genesis 47, Jacob, when he was dying, he made Joseph swear, put his hand under his thigh and swear that he would not bury him in the land of Egypt, but that he would take him and he would bury him in the land of Canaan to be with his fathers.

And then when we come to the New Testament, we find examples of swearing. Jesus, when he was before Caiaphas in Matthew 26, Caiaphas was questioning him and Jesus was not responding. And then Caiaphas used the form of an oath to get Jesus to respond to him. It's in Matthew 26, 63. Caiaphas said, I adjure you by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God. And Jesus didn't correct him, but Jesus answered.

It was at that point that Jesus answered Caiaphas. And then we have the Apostle Paul's example. A few times in his letters, he took oaths or a form of an oath.

[13 : 03] For example, in Romans 9, 1, he said, I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.

So he's saying, I swear in the witness of the Holy Spirit, by the witness of the Holy Spirit, that what I am saying is the truth.

And then in 2 Corinthians 1, 23, Paul writes, but I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrain from coming again to Corinth.

Now, Paul doesn't use the word swear or oath, but it is the same formulation. It is the same idea that he's calling God to witness something that he is saying.

And the reason that it's very similar is that's what an oath is. An oath is invoking God into our situation and saying, I swear in God's name, I swear by God's name, God is my witness.

[14 : 13] We're bringing God to stand as a witness in what we're saying. And finally, I think the best example of swearing that we have in the Bible, the most significant one, is where God himself swears.

And we find this back in Genesis 22, you may remember this, when Abraham did not withhold Isaac and he willingly was offering him up on the altar.

And the angel stopped him, but the Lord said to him, now I see that you would not withhold your only son from me. And God goes on to swear to him that he was going to give him offspring that could not be numbered.

And he did it because of Abraham's weakness. Abraham had a hard time believing God would give him one son. And even more so, that he would have a multitude of offspring.

And the writer to the Hebrews picks up this account in Hebrews 6, 13 to 18. Here's what he writes. For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you.

[15 : 37] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves. And in all their disputes, an oath is final for confirmation.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath. So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast the hope that is set before us.

So the writer to the Hebrews affirms swearing in general, and he uses God's own example of swearing to Abraham in a positive way.

So these examples help us to see that both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the taking of oaths, or the swearing in different situations, was acceptable.

It was permitted. It was not condemned. So then what is Jesus condemning in these five verses here in the Sermon on the Mount?

[17 : 00] What Jesus is condemning is not swearing, but the abuse of swearing. He's not condemning the taking of oaths, but he's condemning the abuse that takes place, or that was taking

place, in taking oaths, because it was part of an attempt to deceive.

In the Pharisees' day, this practice of swearing had changed. It had changed over time. And it changed over time because people recognized that when they swore by God's name, it was a very serious thing to invoke God's name.

And so what the Pharisees did was they developed a system of swearing in different ways about different things when they didn't really want to keep their word, when they were attempting to deceive about what they were actually saying.

They actually perfected this practice of swearing. Later on in the ministry of Jesus, we see Jesus addressing this in Matthew 23, verses 16 to 22.

It gives us an understanding of what he was addressing here in the Sermon on the Mount. This is what Jesus says to the Pharisees. Woe to you blind guides who say, if anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing.

[18 : 29] But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools. Which is greater? The gold of the temple that has made the gold sacred.

And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it's nothing. You don't have to keep it. But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.

You blind men. For which is greater? The gift on the altar, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred. So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and everything on it.

And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits on it.

Here again, Jesus is not prohibiting swearing, but what he is doing is he's correcting the deceptive abuse of swearing that the Pharisees engaged in.

[19 : 37] They believe that if you swore by one thing but not another thing, then your word did not have to be kept. And what Jesus says to them in short is, stop your foolish, deceptive games and keep your word.

Now look again at what Jesus says in Matthew 5, beginning in verse 34. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one here white or black. So Jesus said, don't take an oath at all.

Now does this mean that we should never take an oath, no matter what the circumstances? I think by all that we've seen so far and considered so far, that's not what Jesus is saying.

The kind of oath-taking that Jesus is prohibiting is trivial oath-taking, trivial swearing in the normal course of life. It was all associated with dishonest speech, and Jesus was calling his disciples to distinguish themselves from the Pharisees from taking oaths in the normal course of life.

[21 : 12] And so if I were to give some modern examples of where taking an oath would be improper, here are a few. Imagine a mother, she's put some money on her dresser, the money is gone, and she says to her children, who moved the money that I put on the dresser?

And they all say, not me. And then she looks at the one child who she thinks and she suspects is guilty. And the child says, I swear it wasn't me.

Well, there's no need for that kind of ordinary, commonplace swearing. It's enough to say, I didn't take it. I promise you, I didn't take it.

Or a husband who's with his wife and his phone rings and he says, I'll call you back. And his wife says, who was that? And he says, that's Tom from the office.

He said, Tom, don't call you at home. You sure that's Tom? He says, that's Tom. I swear to God that was Tom. Not necessary.

[22 : 20] It's that kind of trivial conversation that Jesus is addressing. The Pharisees did that in the normal course of things.

Or a friend says to you some story that is just unbelievable. And the friend says, for real? And he says, take my oath, hope to die.

It's that kind of trivial conversation that we should not engage in. You say to a friend, okay, I'll come and pick you up in an hour.

And your friend knows that you don't know time. And what does the person say? I swear. We don't need to do that. These are examples of ordinary conversation that happen all the time and there's no need to invoke God's name into what we're saying to make it believable.

But what about if you're going to court? Or what about if you've been elected to an office that requires some kind of a pledge to be faithful in office?

[23 : 38] There are some people who will go and they will solemnly affirm. But what is that? even a solemn affirmation is an indirect form of swearing because who are you solemnly affirming to?

And so in a court of law, I believe that it is perfectly fine. It is a serious circumstance. It is a matter where the, it is a situation where the truth matters.

and I believe it's perfectly fine to hold God's word and swear by almighty God that the evidence you'll give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And the same is true for an official office where you need to, without any uncertainty, communicate that you will be faithful in the discharge of your duties.

Personally, I think there's nothing more sobering than someone who is committed to the Lord, someone who is following the Lord Jesus Christ and being honest in their dealings to hold up God's word and swear and say, I swear by God's name that I will tell the truth, I swear by God's name, I will fulfill my duty.

[25 : 03] Now this certainly comes down to a matter of conscience. If your conscience tells you that you can't do that, well then certainly go ahead and follow your conscience. But what my point is this morning is that Jesus was not prohibiting that kind of solemn, serious, non-trivial taking of an oath.

what he was addressing was voluntary, trivial swearing that takes place to increase believability in the ordinary course of things.

This brings me to my second point. In these verses, not only does Jesus condemn dishonest speech, we also see him commanding honest speech.

The honest speech that he commands is in verse 37. Look again at what it says. Let what you say simply be yes or no.

Anything more comes from evil. What is Jesus saying? What Jesus is saying is that in the ordinary course of conversations, we should speak plainly and honestly without adding oaths to increase believability.

[26 : 35] He says anything more than that is rooted, it stems from evil. If you have the English Standard Version, you'll see a footnote and it actually gives an alternative rendering of that and it says, instead of evil, it says, is from the evil one.

we read in John 8, 44, that Satan is a liar and the father of lies.

And let me bear this in mind. I think what Jesus is saying to us is he is telling us that if we add additional words to our speech to try to increase believability, it comes from Satan or is associated with Satan and his deception and his lies because his words cannot stand on their own.

And this should be motivation to all of us to be honest in our ordinary speech and simply tell the truth by saying yes or saying no.

In James 5, 12, James echoes these words of Jesus and he says, above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath that your yes be yes and your no be no so that you may not fall under condemnation.

[28 : 05] Again, the general tenor of what James is addressing is in our ordinary conversations that there ought not be a need among God's people to be adding something else to increase believability in the community of the saints.

And see, this goes two ways. I should have no motivation to add to my ordinary undertakings with you to increase believability.

And you should have no motivation to put pressure on me based on my representations to add to them some oath, some kind of swearing so that you might believe.

And the idea is among God's disciples, among Christ's disciples, that we are able to speak ordinarily to one another and just let our yes be yes and our no be no and leave it to the unbelievers who in their ordinary conversation need to add, I swear I take my oath hope to die because they traffic in another kingdom we do not.

We live in the kingdom of light and our undertaking should simply be yes and no because we belong to Christ and we walk in the light and we are children of the light.

[29 : 37] And so the bottom line to make a distinction between what we're addressing here is we're addressing Jesus was certainly distinguishing and scripture distinguishes between trivial oath-taking and serious oath-taking.

And here's the reality. If we follow this rule, most of us, and I would venture to say the overwhelming majority of us, will never swear an oath in God's name.

there are some of us who have never been to court and will probably die before we ever go to court. So we won't find ourselves in that situation of having to swear in some official capacity in that way about the truth.

And I would, as I know, none of us have been elected to any high office where we need to take an oath. and perhaps for most of us, at least that will remain the case.

And so these circumstances where we need to invoke God's name in official capacity, in a serious manner, when the truth is at stake before some body, some tribunal, that's not the lot for most of us.

[30 : 58] And so swearing in God's name, for most of us, just won't arise before we leave this earth. And therefore, in our ordinary conversations, it has no place at all.

And brothers and sisters, let's hear this this morning. Let us remove from ourselves the pressure of when we have allowed our yes to be yes, and we say what the position is plainly, that we don't feel the pressure to try to invoke something else, God's name or whatever else, to increase believability. And then, in our dealings with one another, let us take their word, take their word on the surface and trust God with it.

You trust the Lord with it. Entrust it to the Lord, the one who knows all, who sees all, rather than trying to bring pressure on the person, because the last thing we want to do is bring pressure on someone to lie in God's name.

And so, oath-taking has no place in our ordinary course of life. So, how can we grow in honest speech?

[32 : 24] How can we grow in this honest speech that Christ is calling his disciples to? how can we grow in maintaining peace in our hearts, letting our yes be yes, and our no be no?

I think the primary way that we can grow in letting our yes be yes, our no be no, and giving honest speech is we need to grow in the fear of the Lord. We need to grow in the fear of the Lord.

And by the fear of the Lord, I don't mean the terror of the Lord. Instead, I mean reverential worship of God. I mean a holy awe of God, remembering who he is, and remembering that all of life is lived before his holy gaze.

All of life. There's not a moment of our lives that escapes his gaze, that escapes his awareness.

But sadly, we can be people who fear people more than we fear God. We can be people who make a greater effort for the approval of others, especially when we want them to believe us, than seeking and desiring God's approval.

[33 : 55] In the first scripture that was read this morning in Psalm 34, here's what the psalmist says in verse 4, I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

one of the greatest fears that we have as people is we worry about how people see us, what people think about us, what people can do to us.

And sometimes when we have an ordinary speech and someone is not believing us, what is operating right there is some kind of a fear, some kind of an inappropriate fear towards that person and the temptation not to leave our yes as yes and our no as no, but to add something to it.

And the Lord tells us, no, you don't add anything to it. You let your yes be yes and your no be no.

But if we fear people, we'll be tempted to add something else to that to believe them.

And in that moment when we do that, we're not fearing the Lord enough who has told us not to do that. The psalmist says, I sought the Lord and you delivered me from my fears.

[35 : 18] Brothers and sisters, this is still the remedy for fears. It's still the remedy for those things that bring fear in our hearts, that we seek the Lord about them.

And let the Lord do his work in our hearts. Let the Lord cause us to grow in conviction and fearing him so that we don't fear people. So that we can say with the psalmist, I will not fear what man can do to me.

The psalmist feared the Lord. What do you fear this morning? And when I ask that question, what do you typically fear?

What are the kinds of fears that grip your heart that will tempt you and cause you to go beyond just normal, plain speech but feeling the compulsion to add something else to it?

I remember a number of years ago I sat in on a court matter that I was very familiar with and I saw the defendant go to the witness stand take up the Bible and swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth and he told lie after lie after lie the truth said how does a person do that?

[36 : 51] The only way that a person does that is if they don't fear God and when we don't fear God it's evidence that we don't know God because if we know God if we know him as he is we will fear him when a person does and claims to know God the God they know is an idol of their own making is not the true and the living God of scripture the God has revealed himself to us when we know the Lord we will have a holy reverential fear for him to truly know God is to truly fear God the psalmist in verses 11 to 13 psalm 34 this is what he says come oh children listen to me I will teach you the fear of the Lord what man is there who desires life and loves many days that he may see good keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit turn away from evil and do good seek peace and pursue it we can learn the fear of the

Lord we can grow in the fear of the Lord and the psalmist associates the trajectory of our lives of our lives the direction of our lives the quality of our lives by bridling our tongues by keeping our tongues from evil by refusing to speak deceit brothers and sisters when we guard our tongues when we watch our speech we give evidence that we fear the Lord because he knows all and he sees all we remember that all of our speech is uttered in the presence of the Lord whether we take his name or not in an oath when we consider this passage in the

Sermon on the Mount the dishonest speech of the Pharisees and Jesus condemnation of it point to a deeper issue they point to a deeper issue that all of us are guilty of in one way or another to one degree or another regarding not being honest in our speech whether we took oaths with or without God's name or we lied outright or we said yes when we really meant no and vice versa in a few moments we are going to close with a song and one of the lines in this song says speaking about God says only you are truth unending only you have never lied and that is the truth

God alone is the one the only one who is truth unending God alone is the only one who has never lied but the rest of us we are infected by the same fallenness of Adam and Eve that was so clear on that day in the garden when they sinned and God came to Adam and said what have you done and he deceptively blamed his wife and when God said to Eve what have you done she deceptively blamed the serpent none took responsibility but sisters we have the same disease that our forefather Adam and his wife Eve had that we have been tainted with sin and we aren't able to tell the truth perfectly only the

Lord the Lord alone tells the truth perfectly I imagine that there's some this morning you're hearing this but you know you don't know the Lord and I suspect what is in your heart is you're thinking I need to be more honest I need to really work on telling the truth and I'm committed to doing that but I say to you this morning that that's not your real problem your real problem is not that you need to lie less and tell the truth more the real problem is you need a savior lying is only a symptom of a problem lying is not the problem itself lying is a symptom of a greater problem and the solution to that greater problem is you need a savior you need a redeemer you need one who is able to transform your heart and your life one who is able to bring a change on the inside of you that will be shown and manifested on the outside of you and the reason and the way that he's able to do that is he himself hung on the cross he hung on the cross for liars he hung on the cross for sinners like you and me and his promise is that all who come to him he will never turn them away he promises that he will give a new heart a new heart from which new desires will come a desire to tell the truth

[43 : 15] I'm sure there are those of us this morning who have come to Christ we could recall before we came to Christ we told lies and thought nothing of it and then Christ did a work in our hearts and when we told a lie or when we deceived after Christ did that work in our hearts we felt condemnation sorry we felt conviction our hearts were convicted by what we said and that's evidence of a changed life the evidence of a changed life is not perfection but the evidence of a changed life is the ability to come under conviction and to recognize when we have fallen short to those of us who have trusted Christ I just want to encourage us this morning as we think about how we might respond to this message let us resist the tendency to brush off the spirit's conviction regarding our need to grow in speaking honestly let's thank

God for his spirit's conviction and let's repent where we need to repent and by the grace of God let us grow in honesty of speech but here's what we shouldn't do let us not look at ourselves and to ourselves and to our honesty and speech for acceptance before God because we will not find it instead we need to look to Christ we need to look to the one who has never lied the Lord Jesus our Savior who was perfectly truthful and he's perfectly truthful for us because we cannot be truthful for ourselves and I pray that by grace as we seek to grow in this way let us ultimately look to the Lord and let us trust in him the perfect one who is perfectly truthful let's pray Father we ask for your help

that you would help us to be those who would let our yes be yes and our no be no in the ordinary course of our dealings with others

Lord may we be reminded that all of life is lived before your face and your holy gaze and may we by the grace of God seek to be men and women of the truth who will let their yes be yes and their no be no and who will do the same for their brothers and sisters Lord work in our hearts we pray in Jesus name Amen