

"Oaths"

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to Scripture. Turn with me to Matthew chapter 5, verses 33 through 37. That's page 760 in the Pew Bible, 760. As you know, we're working our way through the Sermon on the Mount this fall, learning what it means to be followers of Jesus. And as we said, this particular section of the Sermon on the Mount that we're in, roughly the second half or the final two-thirds of chapter 5, is about whole life righteousness. Like dye in a fabric that goes the whole way through, Jesus means for our whole lives, inside and out, to be lived in line with His gracious kingdom. So in chapter 5, Jesus gives us a number of examples of what this looks like.

And the topic of our text this morning, the area of whole life righteousness that Jesus touches on here today, is integrity of speech, the truthfulness of our words. So I'm going to read the text for us, and then I'll pray, and then we'll consider it together. Let me read Matthew 5, 33 through 37. Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but 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 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. Anything more than this comes from evil. All right, let's pray. Father, would you help us this morning to not just listen to this passage, but to hear it, to internalize it. Give us ears of faith by your Spirit to really hear what you're saying, and give us hearts that are soft to receive what you are saying to us. And through our time meditating on this passage, help us above all to behold your Son, Jesus, in all His beauty, who is the way and the truth and the life, and help us to become more like Him by your grace. In His name we pray. Amen.

Well, I wonder, have you ever found yourself wanting to make an oath? Maybe you're telling a true story about something, and, you know, maybe on the surface that story feels a little hard to believe, you know, the proverbial fish you caught on summer vacation or whatever. And you can start to see the incredulity, the kind of doubtful look growing on the face of your friend as you tell this story, and you say almost without thinking, no, I swear it's true. I swear. Or maybe you want to underscore a promise or a commitment that you've made, and you say, I swear I'll be there to pick you up at the airport on time, this time. And of course, sometimes we can insert things to intensify the oath. I swear on my mother's grave. Why is it always your mother's grave? Isn't that weird? I swear on a stack of Bibles, cross my heart, and hope to die. Why do we have this almost natural instinct to kind of underline the truthfulness of what we're saying?

[3 : 3 0] To mark it in some way, to bind ourselves to truthfulness at times? Well, I think these questions and that experience that we all have take us right into the heart of our passage.

And on the surface, our passage is about oaths. But under the surface, it's really about the difficulty we humans have with speaking truthfully.

So by way of outline for our time of thinking about this passage together, we're first going to consider the nature of oaths, and then second, we're going to look at the problem with oaths. And then finally, we're going to consider Jesus' approach to oaths altogether. You know, but the whole time, even though oaths is sort of the surface, this whole time, where we're going to be headed is Jesus' teaching about whole life integrity when it comes to our words, to speaking truthfully.

Okay, so first, let's consider the nature of oaths. In verse 33, Jesus says, Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

[4 : 4 2] Now, we've seen this pattern already in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, haven't we? Jesus starts by quoting an Old Testament passage, then He goes on to speak with authority about what God's law really means and how it applies now in light of His kingdom that's arrived.

You've heard it said, but I say to you. And here in our text, Jesus is quoting not just a single passage from the Old Testament, but a combination of a few passages. He's sort of synthesizing them. Passages like Leviticus 19.12, which says, That's God speaking there. Or in Numbers 30, verse 2, which says, Or a little bit of a longer passage, Deuteronomy 23, 21 through 23 says, Okay, so Jesus is synthesizing a number of passages from the Mosaic Law concerning oaths, concerning vows. And you know, as we look across the whole Old Testament, we see that oaths come up actually fairly often. And surprisingly, on the whole, they're considered in a positive light.

As we read the story of the Old Testament, we see figures like Abraham or Jacob or Joseph or Hannah or Saul or Ezra or Nehemiah all swearing oaths or making vows.

Now, of course, you do see some examples of rash oaths. You know, if you've ever read the book of Judges, there's that terrible scene in Judges 11 with Jephthah, right? But the problem there doesn't seem to be presented as a problem with oaths in general, but with the rash sort of oath that Jephthah made.

But perhaps most striking in the Old Testament is not just the number of human characters who make oaths, but the fact that God himself is an oath-making God. He makes oaths, he makes vows, he makes covenants with Noah and with Abraham and with David. God swears to preserve and bless Israel.

[7 : 16] He promises, he makes an oath to send a Redeemer to raise the Davidic Messiah from the dead. Why does God do all that? Well, in the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 6, we read this. It says, 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, that is, his word and his oath, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. So God makes these oaths then, not for God's sake, but for ours. He makes these binding promises for our sake, so that we and our doubts and our fears can have deep assurance that God will do what he says we will do, what he says he will do. So in reading the Old Testament, it seems that oaths weren't necessarily regarded as a bad thing, but they could be misused.

We see that as well. When we come to the Old Testament prophets, we see that by the time of the prophets, they were addressing several problems related to oaths and vows that had cropped up in the people of Israel. On the one hand, the prophets attacked the practice of taking oaths in the names of other gods, right? Which, of course, was a stark violation of the first commandment. Remember the first commandment, you shall know other gods before me. So, of course, the prophets were going to rail against the practice of swearing promises by these other false gods. But the prophets also address the problem of oath-breaking and of swearing falsely, that is, making an oath that you really have no intention of keeping or making statements under an oath that are outright lies. So we see that there were some problems that started to creep up in this practice of oath-making. And that leads to our second point. Not just the nature of oaths, but the problem with oaths. Given that Old Testament background, which seems to present oaths in a neutral, maybe even a positive light, it's a bit shocking when Jesus says in verse 34, but I say to you, do not take an oath at all. Now, some Christians have interpreted this verse as a blanket prohibition against every and all kinds of oaths whatsoever. If you look at church history, the Anabaptists in the 16th century, Quakers in the 17th century, were especially known for not taking oaths of any sort. And in the early church as well, many Christians avoided oaths on the basis of Jesus' teaching here. But I think the rest of these verses show us that Jesus' primary concern may not have been to create a new rule against oaths in general, but to address a specific problem with how oaths were being used and abused in his day. Notice how Jesus goes on to say, 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's the city of the great king. And don't take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Interesting, one commentator says, you know, in the ancient world they did have hair dye, you know, so you could sort of make your hair white or black. But we all know Jesus' point, right? You're not actually changing the nature of your hair. Now, what does Jesus mean by all that? Why does he mention all these different things that people might swear by? Well, there's a passage a little later in Matthew's gospel that sheds some light on this. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus in that chapter is speaking out against the

Pharisees, and he's condemning their hypocrisy and their self-righteousness. And in the middle of that chapter, one of the things that Jesus critiques is how the Pharisees had created an elaborate scheme of rules for oath-taking. And this elaborate scheme that they had developed had the effect of creating different levels for how binding an oath would be. Here's what Jesus says in Matthew 23, 16 through 22, Woe to you blind men who say, if anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools, for which is greater, the gold?

Or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it's nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift that's on the altar, he is bound by his oath.

You blind men, for which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes it sacred? So everyone who 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. So apparently in Jesus' day, if you were to say, swear an oath by the temple, that wasn't as binding as if you swore an oath by the gold in the temple.

[12:47] And if you swore an oath on the basis of the altar, well, that wasn't as binding if you swore by the gift on the altar. So you see, the Pharisees had created a system whereby oaths would be less binding in some instances and more binding in others. They had found a way, like we've seen week after week after week, to minimize the impact, the full weight of God's law about keeping your word.

And apparently this practice had become very widespread. There were lots of rash oaths being made because there was this system of gradation. So here was the problem with oaths. The situation in Jesus' day seems to be that oaths were not being used to reinforce the truth, but to shade the truth.

Oaths were being made that allowed you to get out of your obligation, not to hold you to it. The very thing that was meant to underscore truthfulness was being used to undermine it. And if you think about it, that very practice of swearing oaths in such a widespread, casual way, what it did was it created two levels of truthfulness.

There was one level of truthfulness when people were under an oath, and they have to be truthful. But then there was the rest of the time, there was that other level of truthfulness, sort of patched around by some of these faulty oaths, when people can say whatever they find convenient. But you know, this practice of oaths did something even more dangerous. Not just did it create sort of two levels of truthfulness, it also seemed to communicate that there were some things, there were some words, there were some promises that God was watching over, some things to which we were accountable to God, and then some things where we weren't.

[14:55] If I swear this kind of oath, then I'm really under obligation to God, but if I swear this kind of oath, or if I'm not swearing an oath at all, God's not really involved. But listen again to what Jesus says in our text in Matthew 5.

If you swear by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or your own head, do you really think you've avoided God? Who made heaven and earth?

Who decided that Jerusalem would be His dwelling place? Who created the hairs on your head? God. God is the creator and sustainer of all things.

All of our lives, all of our words are lived before Him. Everything we do and say is done in the presence of God.

Coram Deo, as the Latin phrase puts it. God hears every word we speak. And the problem with oaths is that it wants to relegate God to a corner.

[16:03] It wants to push God out of our everyday interactions, push Him out of our everyday words, out of our everyday promises, out of our everyday commitments, push God out of our emails, out of our dinnertime conversation, out of our social media posts.

Push Him out of those things. But friends, our words in every instance, in every way, are done in the presence of God.

And that's why Jesus says in His context, don't take an oath at all. If there's any practice that makes God small, pushes Him to the corner of our lives, gives us the illusion that we can live life without reference to Him, we should abandon it altogether.

And that brings us to our third point. What is Jesus' response to oaths? Well, we see it in verse 37. Let what you say be simply yes or no.

Anything more than this comes from evil. What Jesus invites us into is the simplicity of living our whole lives before God and letting our words always reflect that reality.

[17 : 26] If every word we say is spoken in the presence of God, then we can simply let our yes be yes and our no be no. integrity of speech and truthfulness in every situation.

What we say, we mean. What we promise, we intend to fulfill. Does this mean Christians should never take a formal oath in court or before taking a public office?

Well, some Christians, as I mentioned, have taken that approach. And I think we should respect their conscience in doing so. By the way, I found this out this week, that there's actually, you have a legal right to affirm the truthfulness of your statement and not just to sort of swear an oath by God. And did you know there was actually a U.S. president who did that? Isn't that interesting? We're not sure whether he did it out of deep religious conviction or out of guilt over some of his past mistakes. If you know who that was, you can talk to me afterwards. You'll get a prize. There's a little trivia for you. So some Christians have said, hey, we shouldn't be taking oaths at all. It's just participating in a system that creates two levels of truthfulness and diminishes our words.

[18 : 40] And I think there's actually some integrity there. On the other hand, you know, most of the Reformers, for example, thought that it was okay for Christians to take oaths under certain circumstances, if they were in a solemn occasion, if occasion called for it, so long as they weren't undermining the very point that Jesus was making in verse 37.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. So frivolous oaths, oaths that were meaningless, this should all be done away with. But a lot of the Reformers felt like oaths still had a place on the basis of that Old Testament picture that we talked about.

But I think we all agree that the goal here is to live all of our life before God and to let our speech always be with integrity. So in that case, taking an oath in court or when taking a public office perhaps could be okay.

I think that's between your conscience and the Lord. But you know, the principle here doesn't just stop at oaths, right? These formal oaths that still sort of exist in our culture. It's not just about explicit vowels or oaths.

This principle goes into every area of our lives. And I think that's really Jesus' point. Let all of your words be spoken with the same level of integrity. So practically, what might this look like for us today?

[20 : 05] What does truthfulness and integrity of speech look like? Where is it a challenge for us? What areas are we tempted to fall into thinking that there might be two levels of truthfulness that are appropriate?

I think social media creates a great temptation in this regard, doesn't it? Are the things that we say online spoken with integrity? Do we say them or write them or post them with the same care and regard for truthfulness that we ought to have as if speaking in the presence of God?

And this doesn't just apply to negative speech or criticism, right? How quick we are to flatter and to exaggerate too. This is the most amazing, incredible, beautiful, life-changing, earth-shattering, paradigm-shifting, worldview-shaping ice cream I've ever tried.

Really? I mean, did the ice cream actually change your life? But we flatter each other too, don't we? You look so beautiful.

You're my best friend. I could never live a day without you. You're the smartest. This is the smartest, wisest, greatest post I've ever read. Really?

[21 : 29] I mean, would your life actually expire if you did not know that other person? Is it the wisest, most grandiloquent thing you've ever read in your life? Okay, but I think we also need to be discerning as well about the media.

We don't just create, but we consume, right? In adult Sunday school a couple weeks ago, Tyler gave an excellent lesson about this. It was earth-shattering. It was paradigm-shifting. No kidding. He gave a really good lesson about this.

If you missed it, listen to the podcast. We posted it. You know, the rise of infotainment is a big area culturally where we don't live as if our yes means yes and our no means no.

We listen to shows that present themselves as news shows, but these shows bend the truth, they skew the facts, they repeat the same hearsay over and over, and then when challenged about the truth of their statements, the show hosts just say, hey, everyone knows this is just entertainment.

Is that how you've presented yourself? And as we kind of consume that stuff and give our implicit yes to that kind of entertainment, it seeps into all of our culture, right?

[22 : 32] Where we just sit loose to the truth so much of the time and then blame others when we get the facts wrong. But you know, it's easy to point the finger at those out there, isn't it?

Are we willing to ask the Holy Spirit to search our own hearts? Are we willing to pray the closing verses of Psalm 139?

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting. Interesting.

Do you know how Psalm 139 starts? It starts with this beautiful declaration, almost an awe-filled declaration of God's omnipresence.

Our whole life is lived before Him. And then the psalmist says, Search me, O God. Search me. I think if we prayed this prayer in earnest, we would find many areas where our yes does not mean yes, where our no does not mean no.

[23 : 47] But why? Why is it so hard to tell the truth? Why do we find ourselves saying yes when we should have said no?

Or saying no when we should have said yes? Why do we find it so hard to speak truthfully? I think underneath a lot of it is fear.

Fear that we won't be accepted by another person. Fear that we won't advance in our careers. Fear that we might hurt another person's feelings. Fear that we might be rejected. Fear that others won't see us as an intelligent or good or loving person.

And in those moments we're tempted to bend the truth. But you know, if we were to take those moments and pray, I think in those moments when we are tempted to bend the truth, if we pray for the Holy Spirit to show us what's underneath, I think we'll often see the idols of our hearts revealed. We try to live our lives in the presence of God. But there are deeper idols that we still cling to. And those things, those things that we prize end up shaping our words.

[25 : 05] That's one of the reasons why Jesus can say, let your yes be yes, let your no be no. Anything outside of that comes from evil. And you could even translate that comes from the evil one.

You see? Because we're clinging to false gods, giving the evil one a foothold to be shaping our lives. You know, think about it.

We think, I don't want to lose friends. So I bend the truth when they ask me what I think about this or that, right? We think, well, I don't want to get behind in my career, so maybe we're not completely honest when we fill out our quarterly report.

I don't want to disappoint my kids. They're so important to me. so we tell them a half-truth about why we were late to their recital. Now, of course, there are genuine moral dilemmas that Christians have faced in the past when it comes to truth speaking.

One thinks of Christians who hid Jews from the Nazis in World War II or Christians who helped to free slaves in the Americas. Was it wrong for Christians to prioritize the saving of innocent lives over telling the complete truth to the persecutors of African Americans or European Jews?

[26 : 29] Which moral priority should prevail in that situation? Telling the truth or literally saving a life? Now, most would say and most Christian ethicists would say that saving a life takes priority in that situation when there is a conflict of those values.

Menno Simmons, one of the founding pastors of the Anabaptists, who held truth speaking in such a high regard that along with other Anabaptists, they would never take an oath and they ended up being very ostracized socially for that.

Found himself in a situation a lot like the ones we just described. Now, some have thought this story might be apocryphal but it's pretty widespread amongst Anabaptist historians and culture and it goes like this.

It was illegal to be an Anabaptist in the Netherlands and the authorities had put a price on Menno's head. Menno was an itinerant pastor and networker among hidden groups and he was very influential so he was a prime target.

And one day Menno was traveling from one church to another riding on a stagecoach and instead of getting into the coach he decided to ride up front up high with the driver. Suddenly, the policeman dashed up on her horses.

[27 : 47] They were hunting for Menno and one of the policemen shouted, is Menno Simons in that coach? So Menno leaned down and asked, is Menno in there? Someone from the inside replied, nope, he's not in here.

So Menno told the policemen, they say Menno's not in the coach. So foiled and frustrated, the horseman rode away. What a great story that is. In fact, I've been told that in the Dutch a white lie is actually called a Mennonite lie because of that story.

But you know, if we're honest, those situations are not what we face day in and day out. What we're confronted with day in and day out, most of us, are not unjust authorities but the idols of our own hearts.

How do we live a life of integrity in our speech or truthfulness with our words when our hearts are so conflicted did? What will dethrone the idols of our hearts and calm the many fears that make us so prone to bend the truth?

Well, friends, the answer to our yes and no is found in a greater yes and a greater no. There is a yes and a no that was spoken to you and over you that if you hear it and internalize it, it will calm your fears and it will topple your idols and it will empower you to live in truthfulness and in transparency and in integrity.

[29 : 29] but where do we find this yes and this no? In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way on this passage.

He says, only the cross as God's truth about us makes us truthful. Only the cross as God's truth about us makes us truthful.

because you see at the cross God says both yes and no and he means it. At the cross God says no to our sin.

The truth of our sinfulness is revealed at the cross because Christ had to die for our sins. But at the cross God also says yes to us even though we are sinners.

sinners. The truth of forgiveness is revealed at the cross for Christ willingly dies for us in love. And this no and this yes is spoken by the triune God over you.

[30 : 45] This is the total truth about you. You are a sinner more sinful than you can imagine and you are completely and utterly loved more loved than you can fathom.

And that truth revealed in full only at the cross will make us truthful. Why? Why? Because perfect love drives out fear.

You see friends there is no mistake there is no fault there is no shortcoming there is no failure that you need to hide. God has seen all that and more.

He has already revealed it at the cross and it is forgiven. And at the same time there is no love there is no acceptance there is no fellowship that you need to fear losing.

Because God has reconciled you to himself. you have his eternal fellowship his unbroken love. All his promises to you are yes in Christ Jesus.

[31 : 56] A yes that will resound for eternity and a yes that he continues to speak even now in every page of his written word bearing witness to his incarnate word Jesus in whose flesh was the unveiling of grace and truth.

You see brothers and sisters because Jesus lived a life of utter truthfulness even unto death for you you need never fear speaking the truth.

You can let your yes simply be yes and your no simply be no. You don't need to add anything to it. If you are in Christ you live your whole life before a God who loved you and gave himself for you.

Only the cross as God's truth about us makes us truthful. Do you know that truth? It's here for the taking.

The resurrected Jesus says to everyone everyone who comes to me I will never cast him out. Let your life rest in him in his no and in his yes and then you'll be able to let what you say be simply yes and simply no.

[33 : 30] Let's pray. Amen. Father we ask that by your Holy Spirit you would grant to us the one thing that is most needful for us and that is to see again and to receive again the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To flee to him and to know that in him we have what the author of Hebrews spoke about. That very thing that you confirmed in two ways by your word and by your oath that we have in Christ a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls.

Spirit would you anchor us in the sun again as we go forth this week to be those who live lives always aware of your presence and in the freedom of truthfulness.
We pray this in Christ's mighty name Father Amen.