

PP The King and His Kingdom-The Conduct of a Disciple of Christ
Part 17-Matthew 5:33-37 Truth Tellers! 6/10-11/2017

Illus The year is 1737 and William Penn, friend to the Indians, is long dead, but his sons John and Thomas were not as kind, or honest, and they were in financial troubles. The population of Pennsylvania was filling the land they owned, they needed more. But to avoid war, they needed documentation legalizing any land sale. They came to the leaders of the Delaware Indians, also known as the Lenni Lenape, and presented a copy of a deed they found, where supposedly the Indians agreed to sell land to the colonists beginning at the Forks, where the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers met (Easton), and as far west as a man could walk for a day. The deed originated in 1686 with William Penn, but he failed to send enough trade goods to complete the sale. Enough time passed that the Indians settled the desired land with their own people, and the ones who had signed the unratified deed had all died. The Secretary of Pennsylvania, James Logan, produced the deed which claimed that the amount of land would be measured by a day and a half walk from an agreed upon starting point. as well as an inaccurate map with a dotted line showing a reasonable amount of land that the Penn brothers wished to purchase...

We live in the age of fake news, scandalous oaths, information leaks, international deception
 And this is nothing new!

All the way back to the beginning of human history we see lies and deception in Satan, the
'father of lies' (John 8:44), the 'deceiver of the whole world' (Revelation 12:9)

And all of us have mimicked his ways, artfully dressing lies in half-truths

This is so pandemic, that Paul would say, *"All have turned aside; together they have become
 PP worthless; no one does good, not even one. 'Their throat is an open grave; they use
 their tongues to deceive.' The venom of asps is under their lips."* Romans 3:12-13

PP Yet David said of God: *"Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being"* Psalm 51:6

Our King, Jesus, wants truth-loving, and truth-living disciples, and His sermon shows us this
 Recall that we are in the section of His sermon where He is showing us the conduct He expects
 First, He taught us to look at our hearts and see that murder is committed by more than a
 smoking gun, but with ungodly anger, slander and contempt

The second is that adultery is committed by more than the physical act, but with a heart of lust
 Third, that His disciples must hold marriage in the highest regard, that divorce and remarriage
 are not to be lightly considered, but rather staying true, and staying strong together

But as we come to the fourth example of how His disciples are to conduct themselves, we may
 find it a snoozer

It will seem rather irrelevant and archaic and we may be tempted not to get too serious with it
 So let's look at this with the goal of learning and living by God's grace, what He teaches us

PP 1-What did the Old Testament teach regarding oaths and vows?

*"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.'" Matthew 5:33*

Oath-taking was common in the bible, and not condemned, but it was held with careful integrity

PP *"You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve Him and hold fast to Him, and by His
 name you shall swear."* Deuteronomy 10:20

To swear by God's name is to invoke His authority that is based on His worthiness and power

So Jesus does a kind of mashup of several Old Testament scriptures, two in particular:

PP *"You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."* **Leviticus 19:12**

PP *"If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."*
Numbers 30:2

It was common to swear an oath using the words, *'As the Lord lives'*

PP *"For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation."* **Hebrews 6:16**

When you swore by someone, you invoked that person as a witness to testify to your words, and as a judge against you if your promise was not kept

At the same time, you acknowledged your accountability to that person who was considered greater than yourself

PP Old Testament oaths invoked God's **presence**, engaged His **participation** as witness, and invited His **punishment** for disregarding it

Vows were allowed, encouraged, but never to be broken under any circumstance

God Himself took oaths, binding by Himself and this brings in an important point

The Law of God was given for two main purposes: to reveal the character of God and His will

The OT required an oath-taker to keep the promise, with integrity, in the same way God does

But we are about to read that Jesus said to take no oaths at all?

To understand that, we need to know what the Jewish leaders had done with oaths and vows

PP 2-How did the Scribes and Pharisees distort this?

In Matthew 15, Jesus explains clearly, what the Scribes and Pharisees did

PP *"for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"* **Matthew 15:6-9**

Let me explain briefly what the natural effect of sin is in the human heart

It moves humanity to reject and replace...reject God's authority, and replace it with our own

This is why gospel-preaching can be so difficult to sit under, why we can all tend to select what parts of scripture we read what we don't, what sermons to sit through and what we won't

The Sermon on the Mount revealed the futile traditions of Judaism, showing the scribes and Pharisees' unrighteousness and then what true righteousness looks like

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." **Matthew 5:20**

One of their doctrines of man was evident in their laws involving oaths and vows

PP Jewish teachers held truthfulness high: *'Four persons are shut out from the presence of God—the scoffer, the hypocrite, the liar, and the retailer of slander.'*

PP Another was, *'The world stands fast on three things, on justice, on truth, and on peace.'*

PP Still another, *'One who has given his word and who changes it is as bad as an idolater.'*

The conservative school of Shammai was so wedded to the truth that they forbade the ordinary courteous politenesses of society

While all would normally say a bride was beautiful on her wedding day, those in the school of Shammai wouldn't if they found her to be less than attractive, or they would be lying

But there was a hidden world of deception in Judaism and Jesus exposed it in His sermon. The scribes had created a whole system of rules in oath-taking, briefly shown in Matthew 23

PP *“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 is bound by his oath.’...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 is bound by his oath.’”* **Matthew 23:16, 18**

An oath was only binding, they taught, if it invoked the gold of the temple, or gift on the altar. Otherwise, there was no penalty enacted if you didn't keep it.

As interesting as that may or may not be, by the time of Jesus, what was taught was that oaths were only binding when they included or implied God's name or presence.

It was nonbinding oath if you swore by your own name, or a revered object.

“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.” **5:34-36**

But making matters worse, Jesus was pointing out that oath-taking had become a frivolous part of their common talk.

Empty oaths were mingled with everyday speech, ‘By my beard’ or ‘May I never see the comfort of Jerusalem again if...’

One rabbi taught that swearing an oath by Jerusalem was not binding, but swearing toward Jerusalem was.

What Jesus is condemning is equivalent to making a promise with your fingers crossed, for that was really what the rabbis were doing...making promises in a nonbinding way because they had little intentions of fulfilling them.

Let's go just a little deeper into this world of oath-taking.

The rabbis taught that vows can be nullified by a titled wise one...a rabbi of course.

The procedure was for the wise one to ask the oath-taker if he would have made that vow if he had known that circumstances would arise that would make it difficult to keep it.

If the rabbi determined that the man wouldn't have made that oath, then he would declare it null and void.

PP Psalm 15:4 tells us the one who fears the Lord, *‘keeps his oath, even when it hurts’* (NIV)

What emerged then was rampant breaking of their word, and religiously excusing it.

PP 3-What does Jesus mean for His disciples?

PP *“Whenever I utter the formula ‘I swear [to] God,’ I am really saying, ‘Now I’m going to mark off an area of absolute truth and put walls around it to cut it off from the muddy floods of untruthfulness and irresponsibility that ordinarily overruns my speech.’ In fact, I am saying even more than this. I am saying that people are expecting me to lie from the start. And just*

because they are counting on my lying I have to bring up these big guns of oaths and words of honor."¹ Helmut Thielicke, *German Protestant Theologian*

Whenever we feel we need to make an oath, we have left our reliance on our character of integrity

The Quakers have taken this teaching of Jesus and refused to take an oath in a court of law

Today in legal proceedings, people are allowed to make a solemn affirmation rather than put their hands on the bible and swear an oath

John Piper explains that the tradition of swearing an oath with the hand on a bible began at a time where the bible was a universally held treasure of sacred holiness, and that only the most hardened of heart would lie after doing that

It was investing in an object, the authority to bind you to tell the truth

But Jesus just said that no created thing- "*heaven...earth...Jerusalem...your head*" is endowed with this authority, only in God Himself

We should not need any created thing to bind us to truth, we should realize that we are already bound by God Himself, knowing what Jesus will later say:

PP "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*"

Matthew 12:36-37

Christians must know that God is a witness to every word we speak, accounting for them all And this takes us deeper into the command that Jesus gave to His disciples

"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." 5:37

God wants honesty from His people, all the way to the core of who they are, way beyond oaths, and vows and promises

Yes, we are to be promise keepers, which is why this section follows the one on divorce

But even deeper, do we laugh at a joke that we do not get, just because others are laughing?

When someone asks you in a conversation if you understand what they just told you, do you tell them you do even if you don't, for fear of embarrassment or lack of caring?

When we are confronted for a wrong, do we take ownership of all we are guilty of, or do we begin the familiar bob and weave and counterjab?

When we encounter people who are totally truthful, they stand out starkly, don't they?

Parents, when we see our children alter, or shade truth, even in tiny ways, do not let it pass

Samuel Johnson said of these times, "*you do not know where deviation from truth will end*"

Be radically truthful

Are we believable when we speak?

Is our integrity such that we do not need to resort to means and methods to convince others that what we say is true?

Is what we say truly, the whole truth, and not mostly

Do we shade and subtly change the facts just slightly enough to make us look better than we are?

Christian, we must keep truth, even when it hurts

Let me close with the rest of the story of the Penn brothers and the Lenape Indians...

¹ Life Can Begin Again, Helmut Thielicke