

Matthew 5:33 – 37

^{5:33} Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. ³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.

Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Israel’s Exile:* The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- *The Kingdom of God:* The Old Testament expressed unflagging hope that God would rescue Israel and restore them to His reign. This was called ‘the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘kingdom of God’. Almost all Jews interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.
- *Jesus’ Transformation of the Human Heart:* Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 16 Jesus was describing how his process of transforming people will have a certain kind of influence in the world. In this section, called The Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:28), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart.
- *Vows:* Just before this, Jesus had addressed the issue of lust and easy divorce (Mt.5:27 – 32). Since marriage is a type of oath, there is a logical connection between the previous topic and this one.
- *Oaths:* At the time of Jesus, some Israelites believed that swearing by less holy objects like ‘heaven’ or ‘Jerusalem’ was not as binding as swearing by God’s name. In the Old Testament, Israelites made certain vows as a public commitment to God for some purpose or other (Lev.27; Num.30). It was usually of a specific duration, maybe involving a journey (Gen.24:1 – 4; 28:20) or a promise of faithful conduct (Num.21:2). People also made vows to other people to honor promises or agreements (Gen.21:22 – 24; 25:33; 47:29 – 31). Breaking oaths, vows, and sworn promises was considered sinful; it polluted the vow-breaker and required ceremonial cleansing (Lev.5:4 – 5). Swearing by the name of God was a holy bond (Gen.24:3; Dt.6:13; 10:20); breaking that promise was to ‘profane the name of God’ (Lev.19:12). Regarding vows, Jesus critiqued the scribes and Pharisees for separating holy things (Jerusalem, the Temple, the altar, etc.) from God Himself (Mt.23:16 – 22).

Questions

1. (optional) Tell me about a time when someone didn't live up to their word with you.
2. (optional) Why do people not live up to their word?
 - a. They were just being polite when they said, 'Sure.' But they didn't really mean it. Like hitting 'will attend' on a Facebook event invitation even though you don't really plan to go. So conflict avoidance, fear of disappointing people (people pleasing) that just pushes it off to the future.
 - b. Prone to get overcommitted, too optimistic about being able to accomplish everything; lack of self-knowledge about one's own limits.
 - c. Lack of love for people later; not taking their commitments seriously; carelessness.
 - d. Their short term desires become more important to them than the previous commitments they had made. Fear of closing their options because something better might come along later; fear of having to sacrifice and lose out
 - e. They harbored reservations that they felt afraid of bringing up.
3. Now I'd like us to look inward and ask ourselves about integrity. Illus: Let me give an example of when my word and my deed didn't live up to each other. When my wife Ming and I were dating, we had been dating for about 2 and a half months when we started talking seriously about marriage. I told her that I knew I want to marry her and move across the country from northern California to Boston. She asked me, 'Are you sure you're ready to say that?' I said, 'Yup.' But then I started to really feel the cost of moving from all my friends, my neighborhood ministry, my church, and the region that I had fallen in love with for the last eight years. That's because I can make decisions based on a combination of a feeling deep in my gut and clear thinking – and I did feel those things. But I hadn't yet emotionally processed the goodbyes, the leaving, and the losses. I had relational whiplash. I had a hard time sorting through what I was having a hard time with. Was it the idea of marrying Ming? Was it the idea of moving across the country? So, during one phone call when I was telling Ming this, I told her it was confusing for me and that I had to take back what I had promised, to sort through it all. Needless to say, she was mad! And rightfully so. I should have processed all my emotions and thoughts before making a verbal commitment. It's not that integrity means being all gung-ho about making any commitment. Jesus' call to integrity of word and deed means that you really have to be self-aware and emotionally ready to make commitments. Otherwise, it is perfectly fine and important that you say you're not ready to make a commitment.
4. STATE: People took/take oaths when they need to reassure other people that 'I really mean it this time.' Jesus is addressing not just the issue of how to speak, but the larger question of our integrity. Let's read the passage.
 - a. Entertain questions like, 'So should we not swear to tell the truth, in court?' 'Should a Christian President not make an oath on a Bible when elected?' Quakers and Mennonites do decline to make oaths, which can get them into trouble by governments that require oath taking. Leo Tolstoy also understood Jesus as banning all oaths; he went a little far and argued for the abolition of all courts.
 - b. However, the apostle Paul made a vow (Acts 18:18) and swore his truthfulness by the name of God (Gal.1:20; 2 Cor.1:23). So it seems like Jesus was using hyperbolic language. It is still appropriate to remember or invoke the name of God when we are giving promises, making vows, declaring our truthfulness, etc. Thus, most Christian interpreters recognize that Jesus is making an implicit point with his audience.
5. Ultimately, what kind of person is Jesus calling us to be? Trustworthy, yes. But Jesus' goal is to make us more like *God*. God is always true to His word (Hebrews 6:17). In fact, He is so closely identified with His word that this laid the groundwork for saying that God *is* His word, which is personalized as Word (John 1:1 – 4). So Jesus wants to make us people of our word.
 - a. Word and deed are related in witness. The truthfulness of our word about Jesus is directly dependent on our deeds. Why? Because if we are speaking to others about the one who can heal and transform them, then we must let him heal and transform us first. We have to give evidence of that.
 - b. For the earliest Christians, they did not point to the New Testament and attempt to prove that it was historically accurate, true, factual, etc. As important as that is to us, that wasn't an option available to them. They also had the Old Testament, but what was really important to the earliest Christians was the power of their lived experience of Jesus.
 - c. The counterexample of integrity of word and deed was Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5:1 – 11. They sold some land, and brought only a portion of it to the apostles to give to the needy, saying

that it was the whole amount he had gotten for the sale. Simon Peter didn't fault him for keeping some of the proceeds; he acknowledged that Ananias and Saphira had every right to dispose of the proceeds as they wished since it was theirs. Instead, Simon Peter rebuked them for lying about bringing the whole amount, as if they had made a more heroic and charitable act. Ananias and Saphira had destroyed their own credibility and integrity, in a day and age when the witness of Christians to the truth of Jesus rested on their own word-deed integrity. So God took their lives and took them home. Even though we don't expect God to do that today when we lie and damage our own integrity, nevertheless He could! And that story is a cautionary tale.

6. Does Jesus take our commitment to him as a vow? Is a conversion a vow or promise?
 - a. Yes, scary as that is!! We are committing ourselves to him, in every way and in public and private matters.
 - b. Not only that, we start to participate in the very life of this God who is absolute integrity between His word and His deed. Because He has spoken in Jesus to transform human nature, that is what He is doing, and what we are participating in.
 - c. What if we fail him? Are we profaning his name if we sin? Yes. But by our confession, we also ask for his cleansing and testify to the truth, that we are in process and that he is still at work in us. See 1 John 1:6 – 10: ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.'
 - d. Illus: When I graduated from college, our commencement speaker was Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter, an African-American Christian. He is one of the most brilliant thinkers on the First Amendment, the freedom of religion, and its scope and limits. His talk about was integrity and how important it is to have integrity in relationships and in public. He defined integrity as three things: (1) *knowing* what you believe; (2) *doing* what you believe; (3) *saying* when you are *doing* what you believe. Now that I've lived a few more years, and seen my own failures as a friend, husband, father, and follower of Jesus, I would add a fourth: (4) *saying* when you are *not doing* what you believe. That is confession. But that, too, is integrity.
7. Application: Ultimately, are you a person that God and others can count on?
 - a. It seems likely that Jesus is connecting the topic of marriage (5:31 – 32) to vows and expanding on the nature of vows. So marriage is the first application. If you get married, you will take a vow, '...for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish 'till death do us part.' That is crazy. That means sticking through it with your spouse through whatever they go through, be it Alzheimers, depression, unemployment, not wanting to have sex, and so on. A friend of mine once joked that wedding vows ought to read, 'Even though we're pretty young, and even though we've been on our best behavior throughout our courtship, and even though we have no idea how bad things can really get, I promise to love you, to be faithfully committed to you, and to put you at least as high as me if not higher, day after day, until one of us is dead.' That is a long journey. It is why many of us in this generation are afraid of marriage. Keeping your word can just be too intense.
 - b. Let's start now, long before you get married, if you do. How can you be a person of your word? Ask your friends whether they think you are a reliable person.
 - c. Don't say you'll come to events on Facebook or tell someone 'yes' just to be polite. That is people pleasing. Be more honest. Set expectations well. Communicate clearly.
 - d. If you change plans on someone, communicate well. Don't just text the person. Also, if you think it might be a bigger deal to the other person, then ask, 'Hey, I'm sorry I have to change my commitment. I want to know if this affects you in any way.' Hear their feelings about it. You may need to apologize or make it up some other way.
 - e. Look at the leadership standards agreement for the Christian fellowship you're at. It most likely says that the character standards for leadership are nothing more than what Jesus calls all his followers. Even if you were not to be a leader, would you agree to that portion?