

INTEGRITY IN SPEECH

Matthew 5:33-37, 23:16-22 - "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.' [34] But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. [36] And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. [37] Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil....23:16...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.' [17] You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? [18] 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.' [19] You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? [20] So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. [21] And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. [22] And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."

Jesus gave all our words sacred significance. He said they were like the oil dip-stick on a car's engine. They show what is on the inside (**Matthew 12:35-37**). We usually think of our words as being smaller than our acts. Jesus teaches this is no where near the truth. Notice how Jesus places sins of speech right along side breaking marriage vows or taking a life.

- 1) **OATHS WERE FREQUENTLY USED IN THE BIBLE** - Specific examples abound - **Exodus 22:10-11** - "If a man gives to his neighbor a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away, without anyone seeing it, [11] an oath by the Lord shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution" (see also **Deuteronomy 6:13**).

Oaths were not needed before the fall. Just as rules about divorce and adultery became necessary due to the hardness of people's hearts, so oaths were introduced, **by command of God Himself**, to protect man from his neighbor's deception and dishonesty. There had to be some way to safeguard the truth and enforce honesty for the sake of the protection of society.

- 2) **THE PURPOSE OF THE OATH HAD BEEN TWISTED BY THE PHARISEES** - **Matthew 5:33-35** - "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.' [34] But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." Oaths were used in two ways, and those ways are reflected these words in Matthew - **First, an oath was used to show that you really would do what you said you would do (33). Second, an oath was used to show that the statement you just made was the whole truth (34-35)**. This is much like the way an oath is used in a court of law. In other words, oaths were used to show **faithfulness (33)** and **honesty (34-35)**. This would reflect the **intent of God's commands** regarding oaths in the OT passages cited earlier.

It's right at this point that we can see the **sin of the people and the teaching of Jesus regarding oaths**. As with the other commands, the Pharisees were actually using the **letter of the law** to **undo the intent of the law**. They were trying to set up **two levels of speech**.

The same kind of sin is seen in **matters of measurement** in **Deuteronomy 25:13-16** - "You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. [14] You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. [15] A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. [16] For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God."

Our words were to be as just as our measurements. There weren't to be words of different "weight" in terms of truthfulness. Yet this is how people were using oaths in Jesus' day. If a person took an oath in God's Name their words were binding. If they swore on a lower level (say, the temple or heaven) then their words were less binding. ***In other words, the only time one really had to be absolutely honest was when the Name of God was specifically used in the oath.*** All sorts of loopholes were created.

- 3) **THE IMPORTANCE OF HONESTY IN ALL OF OUR SPEECH - Matthew 5:37** - "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." Jesus fights fiercely for integrity in *all* speech - *sworn* or *unsworn*. Speech must all be honest, even when it doesn't include some special spiritual formulae. Jesus wants all disciples to know that all of our words are ***surrounded with sacredness***, even when an oath isn't used.

This is the point Jesus makes in **Matthew 23:16-22**. *All* statements are made in the presence of God. Not just those made with certain religious phrasing. Words are not made more or less holy by attaching certain symbols to them. The reason Jesus forbids the making of oaths (not the ***taking*** of oaths in court, etc.) is He is against the kind of hypocrisy to which oaths had led. That's why Jesus makes ***directness and simplicity the hallmarks of the way His followers would talk***. It's our ***ungarnished speech*** that shows our relationship with Jesus most clearly. It is by our ***idle*** words we will be judged - **Matthew 12:35-37** - "The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. [36] I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, [37] for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

- 4) **MAY A CHRISTIAN MAKE AN OATH?** - This question arises out of Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:33-37** - "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.' [34] But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. [36] And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. [37] Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." Yet there are many situations where Christians make oaths and take vows (this amounts to the same thing). What should a Christian do when called upon to take an oath in court, or to make vows at a wedding, or to sign any legal document requiring an official, certified declaration (oath) of truthfulness? This issue has troubled many Christians for a long time.

Several things must be kept in mind. ***First, Jesus forbids making oaths in an effort to set one level of speech above others.*** This has already been dealt with at length in these notes. ***Second, when Jesus Himself was asked to take an oath, He did so*** - **Matthew 22:62-64** - "Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" {63} But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." {64} "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

In other words, there seems to be a difference between a Christian ***making*** an oath to somehow set his words on a higher level than his ordinary speech and ***taking*** an oath from someone placed over us in proper, God instated authority. If ***others in authority require us to take an oath, the Christian may respond with simplicity and directness, recognizing that all of his speech is uttered before God every day.*** Jesus said the Christian may render to Caesar what is Caesar's. The proper distinction is found in remembering that the sermon on the mount deals with the ***personal life and conversation of the disciple*** while other passages of Scripture deal with the role of the believer in ***civic and government affairs.***