

Matthew 5:33-37

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[0:00] I must admit that I'm tempted to not preach this morning and just let Wes and Liz keep singing songs and Wes preaching homilies in between the songs.! Our text for today will be Matthew chapter 5 verses 33 through 37.

And this text falls within what is most often called the Sermon on the Mount. We've been in for quite some months now. And across our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we've considered two prominent themes.

So two large frameworks that I think are important for us to have on our minds as we venture into any smaller part of this great sermon. The first is human flourishing.

What does it look like to live well as a citizen of God's kingdom? What does it mean to be a good citizen of this good kingdom?

And we see that the human flourishing that Jesus teaches is not the same as the flourishing that the world would teach us. Jesus says at the very outset of the sermon, Blessed are those who are poor in spirit and who mourn and who are meek and who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, pure peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

[1:47] It's the ones that Jesus calls flourishing. He steps into a world turned upside down by all of the self-sitterness and self-promotion of His day and ours and turns it again right side up.

So that's the first theme. The second theme is the theme of whole person righteousness. And that would be to say that we are meant to be holy and blameless before God in all senses and that we are flourishing when we're doing this thing.

These themes don't, they interact quite often in the text. Jesus has taught us that citizens of His kingdom are keepers of the law.

Not that they gain their citizen by the keeping of the law, but that they have been granted citizenship by the mercy of God. And that this keeping of the law evidences their citizenship.

God's people, the citizens of His kingdom, should be zealous to please their king, to walk in His ways. And this law keeping, this righteousness, is not merely meant to be an outward working, but an inward one as well.

[3:08] Both the actions, but the intentions, the feelings, the emotions. What we hope to see accomplished by the actions. Every bit of our being is meant to be leveraged in service to God.

And this is what Jesus means when He says in Matthew 5 and verse 20, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The listeners of His day would have been shocked by this. The scribes and the Pharisees seemed to have it all figured out. They were the most outwardly righteous.

They seemed to be following God. But He then begins to press this point by using a series of phrases, beginning in Matthew 5, verses 21 and 22.

You'll note at the beginning of 21, You have heard that it was said to those of old. And then the beginning of verse 22, But I say to you.

[4:14] He's taking these common teachings, the rabbinical teachings of the day, these standards by which people would have looked at the scribes and the Pharisees and called them holy, and He's correcting them.

He's showing how they don't actually get to the point. This whole person righteousness that's required of us by God. And He does this six times to the end of chapter 5.

And what He's doing is bringing about this correction of common misinterpretations of the law in His day. And we are apt to these same errors.

We may not pick them up as rabbinical teachings, but we may pick them up in other forms in our day. This morning's text is the fourth in this series and concerns the making and keeping of promises.

Human societies depend upon truthfulness. It would suggest that they will both rise and fall based on the degree of truth that is contained within said society.

[5:23] We certainly live in a day that it is very difficult to know what the truth is and who is telling the truth. It is difficult to trust much of anything that you read or hear any longer.

And if you try to delve down and figure out what the truth is, I find I often get much more confused. The state that we find our society in should not be the case amongst followers of Jesus Christ. Citizens of the kingdom of heaven are to be characterized by truthfulness. Truth ushered us into the kingdom. And so we are to be lovers of the truth.

On your bulletin, you'll find a Richard Sibbes quote who was a 16th century Puritan. I love this. He said, when we come to be religious, and by that he means converted to God, not the way we think of outwardly religious.

When we come to be religious, we lose not our pleasure, but translate it. Before we fed on common notions, but now we live on holy truths.

[6:41] We should be lovers of the truth as God's people. And so this morning we will look at our text simply and briefly to that end.

Before I read the text, beloved, let me remind you that this is God's word to us. It was written for his glory and our good. And as such, we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

So Matthew chapter 5, and I begin reading in verse 33. 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.

[7:51] Anything more than this comes from evil. We must first look at the misrepresentation of the law that Jesus is correcting.

We need to understand the negative command found here in order to understand the positive. What is Jesus saying we ought not to do in order for us to understand what it is we are to do?

And so you see in verse 33, Jesus again with this phrasing, you have heard it said to those of old. This was their statement. You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

This rabbinical teaching was an amalgamation of a number of Old Testament texts. It's not a direct citation from any Old Testament text. They likely had in mind texts like Exodus 20, and verse 7, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

So you shouldn't make a promise on the name of God and then not keep the promise. This would be an infraction of Exodus 20, and verse 7. They also may have had in mind texts like Deuteronomy 6, it is the Lord your God you shall fear, Him you shall serve, and by His name you shall swear.

[9:17] Or Leviticus 19, 12, you shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

So now on the surface, this seems very satisfactory. This idea of you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But there were two very common and very unsatisfactory practices in the oath-taking of Jesus' day. And we have to do a little work to understand that.

If we simply come to the text, we're not his primary audience. We're the wonderful beneficiaries as a secondary audience, but he's speaking to a people.

He's speaking to a culture and practice of the day. So there's these two very common and two very unsatisfactory practices in the oath-taking of his day.

[10:16] Number one was frivolous swearing. Oath-making. I don't mean cursing. I mean oath-making when I say swearing.

Frivolous swearing. People would make an oath for almost anything at all. So insignificant statements were placed on the same level as very serious statements.

If you should ever be called to testify in a court of law, you will be asked to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This is a very serious matter.

You've been called as a witness and your testimony may free or imprison someone. This is a weighty matter. But at times, many people in our day will make a trivial statement and then follow it with something like, I swear, or I swear to God.

That's the kind of frivolous activity that was happening in his day. The application of oath-taking to things that didn't deserve the weight of oath-taking.

[11:27] This is this frivolous swearing that I'm referring to. James Montgomery Boyce, who was a 20th century Presbyterian minister, in his commentary on this text, said this, it was exactly as if a servant who lived in the household of an honorable state official should go around talking about the honorable house, the honorable chair, the honorable mop, the honorable dishpan, and so forth.

His speech would then have much less meaning when he called the Lord of the house, Your Honor. So this was a prevalent thing in the day, but the more serious abuse of oath-taking of the day, which Jesus more poignantly addresses in this text, was evasive swearing.

Evasive swearing. People were afraid to make an oath in the name of the Lord because they were either telling less than the truth, they were out and out lying, and they didn't want to take an oath in the name of the Lord, fearing judgment, or they were afraid that they would be unable to keep their promise, or had no intention of keeping their promise at all.

So, they developed the habit of swearing on something lesser, like heaven, the earth, Jerusalem, or their own heads.

They'd swear on their own life. And these oaths were not considered binding. So you could take an oath, but in a lesser thing than God Himself, and you could get out of it.

[13:09] It wasn't really an oath at all in that case. Jesus speaks to this in Matthew chapter 23. This is the chapter where all the woes to the scribes are contained within.

And He says, beginning in verse 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. So these are these laws they put in place. Jesus says, 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 is nothing. 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 or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

[14:16] And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. The Pharisees, in an effort to carefully keep the law, so often lost sight of the spirit of that law and became far too concerned about the letter of it.

People lived, as many do today, as if any part of their life could ever be separated from the presence of God. And this is simply not so.

So this was the misrepresentation of the law that Jesus is correcting. It appears on the surface to be so good. If you make an oath, keep it. But this was the practice that was going on in the day to try to avoid the biblical way in which oaths are meant to be made and kept.

So he's correcting them. This frivolous and this evasive swearing. One minimizing the truth and the other avoiding it altogether. And he does so with the following statement.

We've read already. Verse 34, Now there are many, even today, that believe that Jesus here is abolishing the practice of oath-taking completely.

[15:59] He is entirely doing away with it altogether. There are those who refuse to make promises with any degree of gravitas who do not hold that

one should take an oath in a court of law or that doctors, police officers, military personnel, judges, our elected officials, and so forth should be sworn in to their prospective offices.

They all take oaths when they do this to upkeep particular promises of that office. I am not one of those people and I will show you why from the two testaments.

So what I'm doing here is I'm debunking the idea, I hope, that we ought not ever take an oath that Jesus' word, but I say you do not take an oath at all, has to be placed in its proper context and in the larger context of Scripture to understand what it is he's combating specifically in the Sermon on the Mount.

So let me show you from the two testaments briefly. So first in the Old Testament, I read it to you already, but in Leviticus 19:12, God gives instruction for the taking of oaths.

He tells us in this particular case how not to take an oath. So there's a positive implication as well. He says, you shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God.

[17:22] I am the Lord. So the inverse of that would be to say, you should swear by my name truthfully. If you make an oath, you should keep said oath.

Many Old Testament saints made oaths. Abraham swore by God's name in Genesis chapter 14, verse 22, and verse 23 as he interacts with the king of Sodom.

He says, I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God most high, possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich.

He's saying, I have lifted my hand, I have made a promise in God's name, in His presence, with Him as the witness of the promise that I'm making to you.

And he affirms this to the king of Sodom by telling him this very thing. Another example, amongst many, David and Jonathan covenanted together in the name of the Lord in 1 Samuel chapter 20 and verse 16.

[18:30] And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, May the Lord take vengeance on David's enemies. Right? He calls God, right, to uphold the covenant that they make together in that case.

So those are just two of the many Old Testament examples I could provide. But more importantly, I want to look at the New Testament on the matter. Right? So those who would say that Jesus has come and He's put away the practice, right?

So there's a practice we've established. And I want to show you that the practice continues on in the New Testament as well and spend a bit more time there. So in the New Testament, and I think the highest example we may have here, earthly example, Jesus swore an oath when He was on trial before Caiaphas in Matthew chapter 26.

This is verse 63 and verse 64. It says, But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to Him, I adjure you by the living God.

Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. And here he's doing, he's appealing to God Himself, right? Before God, in the name of God, speak the truth.

[19:49] And what does Jesus say in response? You have said so. He doesn't say to Him, right? Well, I'll tell you, but I'm not going to do that.

I'm not going to swear on the name of God that I am in fact the Son of God. But when He says it, He says, You have said so. He affirms the very thing that Caiaphas is asking Him to do.

Further, Paul swore oaths. And we don't pick these up often, but this is what he's doing. Romans chapter 9 and verse 1. He says, I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying.

My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. He's appealing to God as the witness of His truthfulness.

And in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 23, I think more emphatically here, he says, But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.

[20:52] So again, appealing to making a promise. I'm speaking the truth and God will bear me witness for this truth that I am speaking.

Most importantly to the case I'm making, the writer of Hebrews tells us that God Himself swore an oath to His people. And this is Hebrews chapter 6.

And I'd like for you to turn and look at this with me. Beginning in verse 13. Verse 13. Verse 13. The writer of Hebrews is writing at this point to give his readers a confidence in the promises of God. A confidence that remains for us today. It was certainly active for them and is still active for us. And he bases that confidence in an oath made by God Himself.

If we think that oaths are no longer allowable, I would tend to think that oaths are broken in that case and we cannot have this kind of confidence. So he writes, beginning in verse 13, 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.

[22:28] 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. He made a promise.

He swore by Himself. God, who cannot change and cannot lie, swore an oath. And it is a blessed oath, right, that all the nations of the world will be blessed in Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham.

So Jesus is not telling us that we cannot make large, weighty promises. Jesus is warning against the type of promise making that was so prevalent in His day and in ours.

And He works through unraveling their logic of swearing on a lesser thing, doesn't He? He says the lesser thing really belongs to God anyway, right?

[23:44] Heaven is the throne of God, earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His city, and you can't even control your head.

I am also the God of your life. So swearing on anything lesser is to swear by God Himself. Jesus will not allow anyone to play games and cheat the rules.

He sees the motivations and purposes of our hearts, this whole person righteousness, right? All of our lives ought to be lived quorum Deo, that is, in the presence of God.

Jesus is saying don't make frivolous or evasive promises. When you make weighty promises, they should be made as a people who love and walk in the truth.

And we do make these sort of weighty promises. I would not want to do away with these kinds of promises that we make. As examples, we do so in our marriage vows.

[24:51] We agree that God is presiding over our marriage. We are making promises to each other, big promises to each other. We are making an oath as we covenant together in marriage.

And, we have done so as a covenant community. Those of you who are members of our church and those who aren't, come on, get on the process.

But, we have made weighty promises to one another and we've done so, we've taken this oath, we've sworn by God.

Listen to the conclusion of our membership covenant. Those of you who remember signed this. It reads, I enter into this covenant together with Christ Family Church under the common goal of obedience to glorification of and joyful satisfaction in Jesus Christ because I believe and assert with the rest of the body that we need one of those help to do so.

As believers and disciples of Jesus, we have entered into a covenant relationship with God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The blessings and promises of this covenant have been freely extended and given to us.

[26:08] Therefore, out of wonder, love, thanksgiving, and reverence, we hereby accept and take up these covenant responsibilities which accompany said privileges together as a covenant family.

This is our reasonable service and we should do nothing less. God help us all. We rely on his grace alone and hold fast to his promise that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

May his grace provide for all that he commands. We have made weighty promises. We have taken an oath to one another and I'll leave out the details of what that covenant says but to walk in truth together, to pursue Christ together, to take the gospel to the nations together is the summary of those promises that we made in the name of God.

Jesus is telling the listeners of his day and us this morning that when we take oaths, the people that we are making promises to should be able to believe what we have said because our lives are

characterized by the truth.

To make this point further, Jesus goes on to say, let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.

[27:37] I believe here that Jesus is speaking to our everyday interactions with one another, with our spouses, our employers, our employees, your pastor.

If you say that you will do something, your life should back the answer of yes. You should be trustworthy, a person that can be trusted as honest.

If you are asked a question, you should give no reason for anyone to doubt your answer. Our lives would be characterized in this way. In the original language, Jesus actually says, let what you say be simply yes, yes, or no, no.

Your translation may in fact render it this way. It's a little more faithful if it does on this particular verse. This redundancy in Jesus' speech is much like his teaching that begins with truly, truly, I say to you.

It places emphasis on the weightiness of what was said. This was common practice. You repeat a word. We really are supposed to pay attention to this word that has repetition with it.

[28:52] It adds a weightiness to it. Our yeses and our nos should hold value in the minds of our listeners. We as American English speakers don't need to go around saying yes, yes, and no, no.

The point being, I think why the ESV translators just said yes and no, is because we're supposed to say yes and it carries that weight. It carries the truly, truly weight behind it.

People would hear us and believe us as followers of Jesus Christ. As lovers of the truth, those who have been redeemed by our faith in it, we should be speakers of the truth.

We are children of God and God cannot lie. Titus chapter 1 verse 2, we are not children of Satan.

In John chapter 8 verse 44, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of his day by saying, you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

[30:02] He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

This should not be us. And in Matthew 12 verse 34, he says again this indictment, you brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil?

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Good trees produce good fruit.

Apples don't grow on pear trees. Apples don't grow on, right? I have now been recorded singing and that's frightening. No nana's come, it only grows plums.

Your heart is where the words of your mouth grow. Your mouth is where the words of your heart go. Jesus change our hearts to bear good fruit.

[31:11] Citizens of his kingdom, that was entirely unplanned by the way, citizens of God's kingdom will be truth speakers.

This qualifies us. And again, we are not citizens because we speak truth, but because we are citizens. We're desirous for this. We hunger and thirst for this.

We long for God's spirit to work in us this righteousness that seeks truth at all cost. May we be a people set apart for the praise of God in all that we do.

May we be characterized as followers of the truth by being speakers of the truth in all things to all peoples for the glory of God.

I want to leave you with one last reading. This is from 1 John chapter 1 and this is verses 5 through 10. John writes, this is the message we have heard from him and proclaimed to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

[32:22] If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us. Let's pray together.