**Dangerous Wordplay**

Matthew 5:33 “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.’ **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. (ESV)

So far in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has said “You have heard it said” about adultery, divorce and anger. Now he says the same about oaths. False teaching had arisen amongst religious people concerning all these matters and oaths was yet another subject victim to false interpretations and distortions.

Let’s take it back to the beginning: Humans are prone to lying. Lying is yet another expression of that sick, sinful nature within us and it is possibly one of the most common sins committed by mankind. The world has turned many times in diverse directions because of anything from white lies to black lies. Your life has possible been rocked by a lie, or things would be different if not for a lie and so on. Even the little ones have their bearing on how things go forward and that is often why we lie: to protect the things we want to keep (reputation, job, money, etc.)

To protect against lying oaths were established. Oaths were established in the Old Testament and in pretty much every nation of the world at that point in history. A person could invoke the name of their god as a witness to what they were saying. It was essentially a declaration that they were surely not lying in what they were saying. They believed if an oath was broken their god would punish them with a curse. Nobody wants to be cursed right, so make an oath in your god’s name and people will believe you. Oaths are used many times in the Old Testament, even by very godly people. Oaths in God’s name were not and are not necessarily an evil

But all good or decent things can and will be twisted by ungodly people with selfish intentions. Twisted people decided to start taking oaths in the name of things like the Temple or the earth, calling upon these things as a witness to them because they were certain the earth won’t curse them like God might if His name is used in vain. Your mama isn’t going to curse you from the ground if you “swear on my mama” and still don’t hold your word. By this way people could lie even under oath and get around it. And likely religious leaders were the ones doing the brunt of the lying. Oaths, which were originally meant to be sacred and binding to the truth, had now become a means by which to lie—the very things they were meant to stop.

It is difficult to take what Jesus says here as an absolute prohibition of oaths altogether as many godly people took oaths in the Bible, even in the New Testament, following these words of Jesus. In other places in the Bible oaths are looked upon in favorable light. Oaths are binding—they pin you to a task. God made oaths with His people. God’s people made oaths with each other. They were a good thing, but when treated wrongly, they are simply a misuse of God’s name—using God’s name in vain.

When you “Swear to God” you’re basically saying God is your witness that you will do what you say. It’s a gross use of God’s name to bring credit to your own name—to appear truthful. Using God’s name to make our name seem better is treating God as a means of profit. God is not a tool to get what we want, but a Lord to believe in.

But Jesus takes the issue much deeper than simply oaths. When He denounces oaths, it is not so much oaths He has an issue with, but rather the motivation behind them. If a person is honest all the time, there is no reason to take an oath in the name of a god, God Himself, or any other thing. How often we swear desperate for people to believe us, but why don’t they believe us in the first place? For some they may just be a distrustful person; for others they have likely seen you back out on your word before and you know that. Regardless of the reason they don’t believe you (that is not the matter) we should live in such a way that you don’t have to swear to get people to believe you.

Jesus is calling His people to be honest—to be people of integrity—to be people of truth. It all goes back to the motivation. Every week during this series it has been brought up that God is concerned first with our being, then with our doing, because our being determines our doing. You can do right but not be right. You may tell the truth but not be truthful. God wants us to be truthful people—people of integrity.

See, for most of us swears are crutches to get people to believe us. But if we live as true Christians in this world two things are certain: people either will believe us because they will see the truth in our lives, or if they don’t they will soon believe us when they see we stick to our word. No reason to swear to prove your word; prove your word with actions.

I believe if you could sum up the Old Testament into one overarching theme it is that God is faithful to keep His Word. In the Pentateuch (first five books in the Bible) we see God lay down certain laws and promises. He will do certain things if the people are faithful to His Word, and He will do certain things if they aren’t. If people disobey a certain command God will send certain consequences upon them for it. If they obey certain commands certain rewards will come. And the rest of the Old Testament is the story of God doing exactly that with His people. God swears these things—He promises them—but the Bible is clear that one can only swear by something greater than oneself and there is no one greater than God so He does not invoke some other name: He simply keeps His Word. And if God is faithful to His Word why would He not expect us to be? It is His nature. It is who He is. And He wants to make it our nature that we be truthful. A faithful God expects us to be faithful people

We are at all times standing in the presence of God. Our words matter. Our integrity matters. The way we live matters. One of the things that ties all the great pastors, missionaries and people of God together throughout history is that no matter what differences they held in beliefs, each of them demonstrated with their life that they believed what they say. They lived what they preached because they preached what they lived. They kept their word. They meant what they said, and they said what they meant. They lived out every word they spoke, and we are called to do the same. When we say we are going to do something we do it, and we don’t shuck if off. If we say no, we stand on that no and don’t change our mind. Don’t forget that the person who lacks faith is the one who wavers back and forth and changes their mind, living unstable in everything they do(James 1:5-8) Christians are stable people, unwavering, committed and truthful