

*A guy sees a sign in front of a house: “Talking Dog for Sale.” He rings the door bell and the owner tells him the dog is in the backyard. The guy goes into the backyard and sees a black dog just sitting there.*

*“So, you talk?” he asks.*

*“Yep,” the dog replies.*

*“Wow, that’s unbelievable! What’s your story?”*

*The dog looks up and says, “Well, I discovered my gift of talking pretty young and I wanted to help the government, so I told the CIA about my gift, and in no time they had me jetting from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders, because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. I was one of their most valuable spies eight years running. The jetting around really tired me out, and I knew I wasn’t getting any younger and I wanted to settle down. So, I signed up for a job at the airport to do some undercover security work, mostly wandering near suspicious characters and listening in. I uncovered some incredible dealings there and was awarded a batch of medals. Had a wife, a mess of puppies, and now I’m just retired.”*

*The guy was flabbergasted, and so he goes back into the house and asks the owner what he wants for the dog. The owner says, “Ten dollars.” The guy replied, “That’s crazy! This dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?”*

*The owner answered, “He’s a big liar. He didn’t do any of that stuff. None of it’s true. You can’t trust a single word he says.”*

**Trust** is hard to come by these days for there seems to be a shortage of **truth**. It seems that for many – *they just can’t handle the truth* as Jack Nicholson once said in a movie – the truth makes them look bad – or maybe people just don’t want to be held accountable and responsible for what the truth reveals in their lives.

Speaking of truth and trust, it has been said, at least in times past, that “*a man was only as good as his word*” and that was said because a man’s word was directly tied to his honor – to his credibility and his integrity.

More so before my time, major business deals, sometimes involving millions of dollars were made with a word and confirmed with a handshake. That’s all it took. A man’s word was his bond, but now days, words don’t seem to mean as much, they don’t carry the same weight – and the result is a huge pile of written contracts

and agreements and documents, often times notarized, sometimes taken to a courthouse to guarantee the truth – but even that is no guarantee.

These days, we are bombarded with untested and untrue words spewed through popular social media platforms which have an influence in our culture. Biased words are routinely force fed to us by news media giants who seek to polarize us and sway us in one direction or another. We are given spinned words that are carefully framed by politicians who will say just about anything to satisfy their power base, and then as common everyday people – speaking about us, we routinely shade the truth so it's tolerable and comfortable, we exaggerate the truth to impress, we bend the truth to get our way, we make excuses as a cover, we tell *half-truths* which are really *full lies*, we tell “*white lies*” that are supposed to be harmless and trivial – and my all-time favorite these days – there is *my* truth and there is *your* truth which can be completely different truths, meaning truth can be whatever you want it to be, and therefore it really isn't the truth at all. And unfortunately, in all of this twisting and distorting of the truth – people are damaged, relationships are destroyed, and trust completely disintegrates.

Well, Jesus has something to say about truth and trust. We're in the middle of the *Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus has been focused on matters of the heart, and in His sermon, Jesus addressed a few important heart issues.

If you recall, Jesus brought up the subject of *murder*, and at first, He reminded the people of what they had heard – what they had been taught as Scripture by the Jewish religious leaders that murder was solely a physical act. Those in the crowd who were listening, were likely thinking they're okay – they hadn't killed anybody, but then Jesus explained murder from God's point of view – dropping the bombshell that God not only looks at the *fruit* of murder resulting in the loss of life, but also the *root* of murder which is *anger* hidden in the heart. God looks at both the *attitude* and the *act* and He judges them the same.

So, after that stunning bit of truth, Jesus brings up a second subject – this one concerning *adultery* and once again the crowd was likely thinking they had this one in the bag – that was until Jesus dropped another bombshell and explained that adultery from God's point of view also included the *lust* in their hearts. The principle was the same – God looks at the *fruit* and the *root*. He looks at the *attitude* and the *act*, and if that wasn't bad enough, Jesus then pointed out that their casual practice of victimizing innocent women through their trivial divorces – treating their wives as *disposable property*, had as a consequence, produced a culture of adultery. Adultery was all around them – because of them.

Now, in our passage this morning, we will see Jesus at it once again with another touchy subject – addressing the crowd who think they are trustworthy people who tell the truth, when in reality, through common practice, they were liars.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 5**, and we will begin with **verse 33**, where Jesus says,

**“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’”**

Now, before we look at this verse, let me give you some background so we know what Jesus is saying here. In His day, the Jewish religious leaders taught that swearing an oath or making a vow using God’s name was absolutely binding, and they referenced numerous Old Testament passages to support this teaching. For example, Moses says in **Leviticus 19:12**,

***You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.***

Later in **Numbers 30:2**, Moses says,

***If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.***

And then in **Deuteronomy 23:23**, Moses said,

***You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, what you have promised.***

There are many passages in the Old Testament related to oaths and vows to God, and in essence they all share the same principle:

***“When you invite God into your circumstance with an oath or a vow in His name, you are calling Him to judge, so if you make an oath or a vow – then you better mean it, and you better keep it.”***

It’s simple, it’s straight-forward – the people in that day knew that if they swore an oath or made a vow in the *name of God*, they had to do it – but surprise, surprise,

as was often the case, the religious leaders concocted a foolish system to work around God's Word.

As was their practice, when these religious leaders read something challenging in God's Word, they reduced it to something more manageable, and in this case, they taught the people – who didn't know any better, that one may swear by something else other than God without being accountable to God.

They could swear by heaven or the earth, or by the temple, or by the city, or by dozens of other ways, and that way they would not be held accountable for what comes out of their mouths. They could say one thing and do another without any guilt because they did not swear by the name of the Lord. They twisted God's Word – they created a loophole – a technicality, and as a result, their oaths and their vows and their promises were suspect, and their reputations and their integrity were at least questionable.

So, people in the first century, in their everyday conversations, could swear on all sorts of things to make their words sound believable, and as you know in the twenty-first century, we do the exact same thing today.

*“Cross my heart and hope to die if I'm lying.” I'll swear on a stack of Bibles – just stack 'em up and I will swear on them.” “I swear on my mother's grave that I'm telling you the truth.”*

These words sound serious, they sound believable, they sound credible – but how can a person really be held accountable? Is my mom coming out of her grave to chastise me if I'm lying? No, she's not and I know it.

So, that's what's happening. People thought that any oath or vow or promise which did not specifically include the name of God was not really binding, and therefore, they could technically keep the rules and say what they wanted, so they could get what they wanted and do what they wanted.

They were claiming all sorts of things – casually swearing oaths and making vows and promises that were completely unnecessary, often times deceitful, and in the end their words really meant nothing at all.

*When Fred Phillips, a retired public-safety director and police chief of Johnson City, Tenn., was a regular police officer, he and his partner pulled over an unlicensed motorist. They told the man to follow them to the police station and the*

*man gave his word that he would, but while enroute to the station, the officers spotted a North Carolina vehicle whose license plate and driver matched the description in an all-points bulletin for a wanted felon. The officers took off in a high-speed pursuit, and finally stopped the wanted man's car.*

*Minutes later, as the felon was being arrested on the side of the road, the unlicensed motorist drove up, and he said to the officers, "If you all will just tell me how to get to the police station, I'll wait for you there. I'm having a heck of a time keeping up with you."*

This was a man who kept his word – his word was his bond, and that's what Jesus wants for His kingdom people as He tackles this technicality related to truth and trust.

Beginning with **verse 34**, Jesus says,

**<sup>34</sup> But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.**

Jesus knows what His listeners have been taught, He knows what they are doing, and then He begins to explain, that from God's point of view, one's character should carry enough weight – all by itself – to confirm one's words.

He says, "**make no oath at all**" and I want to clarify this statement because some have taken this to suggest that Jesus is condemning all the oaths, all the vows, and all the promises that we make. Now, I don't think that Jesus is doing that, because there are *special* circumstances where oaths and vows and promises seem very appropriate.

We swear an oath in court that we will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We take an oath in the military to defend the nation. When being installed in a civic position, we take an oath to fulfill the requirements of that office. We routinely sign legal contracts and agreements where we promise to do something or to pay something, and of course we share vows in our wedding ceremonies.

So, I don't think that Jesus is condemning all forms of oaths and vows and promises – instead what He prohibits is this everyday careless use of words – words that are misused and abused – words that are often used to deceive, where people say one thing and yet do another without any accountability.

Jesus says, in so many words, *“You are swearing by all sorts of things – by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, by the hair on your own head. You are swearing by all these lesser things to bolster your credibility and to make your case without invoking the name of God. That's what you have been taught, but guess what – you can't do that and here's why:*

*Whatever one swears by, ultimately swears by God. In heaven, that's where God's throne is. The earth – that's His footstool. Jerusalem is His holy city – it's the city of the King. If someone swears by the hair on his head, before the days of Grecian Formula, God rules over that – He can change its color or He just remove it altogether.*

*Essentially, there is nothing in heaven above or on the world below which does not belong to God – and whatever you swear upon with your words in the form of oaths, and vows, and promises – in the end, you swear upon God; and therefore, if you say something – whether it's in God's name or not – it really does not matter, it had better be true, and you had better mean it and keep it.”*

So, instead of casually swearing oaths and making vows and promises to all sorts of things which are completely unnecessary – instead of calling God into your circumstances – on your terms – to give credibility to your commitments – how about try something simple: let your “yes” be “yes” and let your “no” be “no” – meaning your word should be enough. When you say “yes” it should mean exactly that: “yes” and when you say “no” – guess what, it means “no.”

God wants His people to be a people of truth – a people of their word – a people who can be trusted based on their character alone. Jesus taught that our words should be so true, and our character should be so trustworthy, that in our normal conversations, we would not need the “crutches” of oaths and vows and promises to get people to believe us. Words are tied to our character, and as such, our words should be so solid that a simple “yes” or “no” should be sufficient, and the moment you have to say, “I swear!” – time out.

If you think about it, somebody who has to swear all the time – probably shouldn't be trusted anyway. J Vernon McGee once said, *“When a man says to me, ‘I'd*

*swear on a stack of Bibles a mile high, ' that is the fellow I do not believe, because I think, the lie he's telling is a mile high. ” McGee makes a point. Somebody who casually and flippantly swears to be telling the truth probably isn't – at least not all of it.*

From God's point of view, when it comes to a person of a righteous character – their simple word should be enough. For those who follow Jesus, He insists that they be *truth-tellers* who do not play with words and manipulate their meanings for their own selfish and evil ends.

*For Coach Cleveland Stroud and the Bulldogs of Rockdale County High School, it was their 1987 championship season: 21 wins and 5 losses on the way to the Georgia boys' basketball tournament last March, then a dramatic come-from-behind victory in the state finals.*

*But now the new glass trophy case outside the high school gymnasium is bare. Earlier this month the Georgia High School Association deprived Rockdale County of the championship after school officials said that a player who was scholastically ineligible had played 45 seconds in the first of the school's five post-season games. School officials said, “We didn't know he was ineligible at the time; we didn't know it until a few weeks ago.”*

*Coach Stroud said, “Some people have said we should have just kept quiet about it, that it was just 45 seconds and the player wasn't an impact player, but you've got to do what's honest and right and what the rules say. I told my team that people forget the scores of basketball games; they don't ever forget what you're made of.”*

In many respects, Coach Stroud practiced the principle given to us by Jesus – ultimately, it's about your character, and your character should carry enough weight – all by itself – to confirm your words.

If we look back at the Lord's *Sermon on the Mount* from what we have covered thus far, whether it be about murder and anger, adultery and lust, or formal oaths and vows in contrast to a simple truthful word by a trustworthy person, everything circles back to the fact that God looks at your heart – He sees what's in your heart. God sees the anger in your heart towards a brother or sister. He sees the lust in your heart as you gaze upon another to feed your fantasy, and He knows a lie when He hears it. As I have said before, the heart of the problem is a problem with the heart – **so how is yours?**

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