

Main Idea: In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus presents two approaches to the truth.

- I. Jesus exposes a self-righteous person's approach to truth (33).
 - A. Don't swear falsely.
 - B. Keep your oath, and God will be pleased.
- II. Jesus explains His followers' approach to truth (34-37).
 - A. Don't swear at all (34-36).
 1. The Pharisees distinguished between oaths that mention God and oaths that don't.
 2. Jesus said oaths are unnecessary because everything is God's.
 - B. Speak the truth at all times (37).
 1. Always say what you mean and mean what you say.
 2. If more than your word is needed, it's evidence of evil.

Make It Personal: We have three decisions to make regarding the truth.

1. We must believe the truth, and reject lies.
2. We must speak the truth always, and reject any form of deception.
3. We must invite others to believe and speak the truth along with us.

Every time I stand before you, it is my calling and privilege to announce the good news! God has sent His Son on a mission to rescue hell-bound sinners. Jesus died in the place of sinners, and then conquered death, and the devil by rising from the dead. It's my joy to proclaim that no matter who you are or what you have done, God says He will forgive you and give you eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

But there's a problem, a serious problem. To receive this message, to receive this person who has come to save sinners, you must first recognize and then admit your need, that you are *lost*. And this is something that sinners instinctively will *not* do.

I'm not that bad. I'm okay. Surely God accepts me the way I am.

How do you help a person like that? How do you help a person see their need?

This morning, as we continue through the sermon on the mount, we're going to see how Jesus did it.

There's a battle today regarding the subject Jesus addresses in our text in the sermon on the mount. The subject is truth, and as we'll see, there are two approaches to truth, and the approach we take is a powerful indicator as to whether a person truly knows God or not.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:33-37

I want us to think of a scene as we come to the Word of God today. In this scene you are sitting in an examination room in your doctor's office. You're there because of a standard wellness check-up required by your employer.

You say to the doctor, "I don't really need to be here. I'm just fine. Look at me. I'm in good health." And he says to you, "Well, we'll see. Let's do a little diagnostic work to make sure." And he takes your vitals, orders some blood work, a couple of x-rays, and perhaps an ultrasound. Why would he do that? You told him you are fine, didn't you? Yes, but he knows you may be wrong. He wants to find out the truth of things on the inside.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the series preached at WBC in 1988.

This is, in part, what Jesus is doing in the sermon on the mount. He's the great physician, and He's talking to some people who are thinking, "I'm just fine. Look at me. I'm religious, and I live a good life, and I do good things to help people all the time."

But Jesus knows better than to settle for a sinner's self-assessment. He knows that looks can be deceiving, and does some x-ray work so we'll begin to see and think about what's happening on the inside.

The x-ray work begins with a stunning announcement He makes in Matthew 5:20, "But I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Say what?! The scribes and Pharisees were good people, most would have said very righteous people, the kind of people you respect, and even imitate. Do that, says Jesus, and you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is a serious matter! The "kingdom" refers to God's rule both in the present and future. In the present, the kingdom is something we are to seek ("seek first the kingdom of God" 6:33). In the future, the kingdom is what we'll enjoy.

But be careful. Jesus warns us not to assume that we'll participate in the benefits of the kingdom to come. His warning is stunning. He selected the most religious, the most reputable, the most revered people of His day (the scribes and Pharisees), and announced, "Unless your righteousness exceeds their righteousness, you'll have no part in God's kingdom." He's not saying that they weren't good, but that they weren't good enough. They lack what it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness.

That's a bold statement, one that a "good" person will inherently resist. So diagnostic work is needed. Jesus knows that. So He takes us into the x-ray lab beginning in verse 21.

Verses 21-48 are Jesus' exposition of verse 20. Do you want to see what righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees looks like? Jesus will show you. He uses six examples that reveal the deficiency of self-righteousness. He's contrasting external righteousness with the kind of righteousness that He requires of His subjects, which is a righteousness that He gives to them by His grace.

You'll notice a phrase that Jesus uses six times to highlight these six contrasts. "You have heard that it was said, in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43. Followed by, "But I say to you," in verses 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, and 44.

He starts with murder in verse 21. *You have heard that murder is bad, and that a murderer is liable to judgment.* That makes sense. That's what the Law says. So if I haven't killed anybody, I'm righteous, right?

Hold on, says Jesus. *But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother is liable and guilty of breaking God's law.* God sees the heart, and holds us accountable for what's happened in our hearts. So if you know your brother is stinging because the anger in your heart spilled out and turned into a verbal assault, don't wait for the end of this sermon. Leave now, go make it right.

Next example, adultery. *You have heard that adultery is bad.* And if you've never done that, so you may be feeling pretty good about yourself. You're a good, righteous person in God's sight.

But the Son of God loves you too much to allow you to remain self-deceived. So He holds up another x-ray. Look at this, He says. *But I say that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery in his heart.*

Once again, the Good Physician goes to the "heart of the matter". That's what righteousness is all about from God's perspective. He is concerned with the action, yes.

But the attitude is just as important to Him.

For His next example, Jesus uses divorce. *It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.* This is the focus of the Pharisee. He assumes there will be divorce. Just make sure, when it happens, that you do it properly by going to court and issuing a certificate of divorce.

But once again, Jesus goes deeper. *But I say to you.* And what He says reveals the ugly reality that results when this man divorces his wife without biblical grounds. He's causing his wife to commit adultery by putting her into the desperate situation of needing to marry someone else. And he's also causing the man who marries his ex-wife to commit adultery. So while he may pride himself in thinking, "I've never committed adultery, so I'm a good man," he's actually the cause of two adulteries, and in God's eyes not as righteous as he thinks.

This brings us to Jesus' fourth example. It's not so much an x-ray, as a throat swab. Jesus is going to look inside the mouth, and address what comes out of the mouth, *oaths*, or *truth-telling*. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus presents two approaches to the truth.

I. Jesus exposes a self-righteous person's approach to truth (33).

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.'"

This is such an important topic in our day, as it was in Jesus' day. I read a 2019 article that said an average person lies about 1.65 times a day. And then it talked about a day on the calendar that was new to me. "*National Honesty Day* is celebrated on April 30 to encourage honesty and straightforward communication in life. Although it is mainly observed in the USA, people all over the world should take note of this day and use it as an opportunity to reflect on how honest they are in life."²

Though nearly two thousand years old, Jesus' sermon on the mount addresses the contemporary issues facing us today. He deals with gut level issues, right where we live. And today, He confronts us concerning the matter of honesty, integrity, truth-telling.

Back in 1991, James Patterson and Peter Kim wrote a book entitled, *The Day America Told the Truth*. It was based on a survey of 1,800 questions given to 2,000 people in 50 locations. The book said that among Americans who are certain that they have AIDS, more than one in three would not tell their spouses or lovers. Seven percent of the respondents say they would kill a stranger for \$10 million.

And that was thirty years ago.

How do you make people tell the truth? Here's one way. *Use oaths*. This approach is as old as time. Jesus says in verse 33, "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old." Indeed, very old. He cites a couple of 1400 year old statements taken from the Mosaic Law.

KJV, "Thou shalt not perjure thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths."

NIV, "Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made."

Jesus is not quoting directly from the OT, but seems to be summarizing several passages, such as Leviticus 19:12, "And ye shall not swear by my name falsely." And Numbers 30:2, "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word: he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." Also, Exodus 20:7, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain"

What was God's intent in these commands? There was a negative intent, to

² <https://gulfnews.com/lifestyle/honesty-day-2019-how-often-do-you-lie-1.1556612151334>

prohibit "false swearing" or "perjury." Don't do that. But there was a positive expectation. God was revealing what He requires of His image-bearers. Honesty. Truth-telling. All the time.

But that's hard, isn't it? As sinners, we don't do that. We tell little white lies. We manipulate the truth.

So what are we going to do with God's law? It condemns us, doesn't it? Not if we twist it a little. This is what the Pharisees did. It's what self-righteous people always do. It's a subtle change. Jesus sums it up here.

A. Don't swear falsely. And that means, don't perjure yourself. God isn't talking about a conversation with your neighbor, only legal proceedings.

B. Keep your oath, and God will be pleased. It's the minimalist approach to righteousness. God knows we can't keep His commands all the time, but He understands. Just do your best. Make sure you don't lie in a courtroom.

When I was a child, we took this approach. If we really wanted to make a point we'd say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles, this is true!" Of course, by saying that, there was an unspoken implication. What I told you *before* I put my hand on that stack of Bibles may or may not have been true. And of course, if I had my fingers crossed, my oath was nullified anyway.

We learn pretty early to play games with the truth. But what's worse, and this is what Jesus is going after in our text, we learn early to convince ourselves that God is okay with the little games we play with the truth, as long as we keep the big commands.

Friends, if we believe that our acceptance with God depends upon our own ability to please Him and earn His favor, then we'll be inclined to develop a system of do's and don'ts that we can keep. And we would certainly not want any of the rules to be too difficult, or our relationship with God would be in jeopardy.

This was the Pharisee's problem. God gave His people His Law, so they would know what He expected. And then when they failed, He wanted them to admit it, and approach Him on the basis He provided, by grace, not merit. But the self-righteous thinks he knows better than God. He redefines God's standard to make it easier to obey.

He does this with murder, for even though God said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," he says, "Just don't kill anybody, and you're okay." He does it with adultery too, and divorce, and truth-telling. He's convinced himself that he's a good man, but according to Jesus, his goodness is keeping him out of heaven.

Do you know anyone like that? How do you help them? Here's one way. Encourage them to read the sermon on the mount. Jesus loves sinners, including self-righteous ones. How does He help them? By putting them on the x-ray table and exposing them to what's on the inside.

In point one, Jesus exposes a self-righteous person's approach to truth

II. Jesus explains His followers' approach to truth (34-37).

Verse 34, "But I say to you." Who would have the audacity to quote the Law of God and then say, "But I say to you"? C. S. Lewis captured the options, when he said, "Only a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord Himself." This is the Lord Himself speaking, the One who gave the Law to Moses fourteen centuries earlier.

And what does He say? In essence, two things. First, don't swear at all (34-36). And second, speak the truth at all times (37). This is King Jesus' standard for His people. It's not how we become His people, for that's by grace, but it's what happens once we do. Once He saves us, this is His standard for how we live, also by His grace.

A. Don't swear at all (34-36). “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.”

Jesus is very straight-forward. Do not take an oath at all (ESV). In the KJV, “Swear not at all.” In the NIV, “Do not swear at all.” Don't use God's name in a profane and empty way, not in a courtroom, not at *any* time.

“Swearing” here has little to do with the issue of bad language. The Bible has plenty to say elsewhere about the inappropriateness of filthy language in our speech. But here, Jesus is concerned with a heart problem. In their preoccupation with oaths, the Jews had neglected the central matter of honesty. They had sidestepped the purpose for which God established oaths for His people in the OT. God intended oaths to encourage truthfulness. But the people turned oaths into an occasion for clever lying and deceit.

Notice that Jesus forbids swearing “by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, by your head.” Why? There's a background to it. Turn to Matthew 23:16-24, and we'll see Jesus confronting this elaborate system of oaths created by the scribes and Pharisees:

“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.²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”

Here's what was happening...

1. *The Pharisees distinguished between oaths that mention God and oaths that don't.* So there were two categories of oaths, those that were binding, and those that were not. If God's name was used in a person's oath, it was binding. If God's name was not used in the oath, then it was not binding.

In other words, a person could break his promise if he used the right formula when he made the promise. If he said, "I swear by heaven and earth that I'll be at your house tomorrow", his oath was not binding. Or, if he said, "I swear by Jerusalem. . .", then the oath was not binding. But if he said, "I swear towards Jerusalem. . .", the oath was binding. Why? Because if a person made an oath associated with God's name, it could not be broken, and the God's temple was located in Jerusalem.

This was the accepted teaching in Jesus' day. The Jews had developed an entire Mishnaic tract to explain the proper formula to use if you wanted to take an oath.³

But Jesus says to His followers, “No. Don't do it. Don't take an oath at all.”

³ Life can't be divided up into compartments, in some of which God is involved, and others in which He is not. That's what the Pharisees attempted to do with their two classifications of oaths. But unfortunately, we're prone to do the same, to use one kind of language in the church, and another kind of language at the office, or in the hallway at school, or in our homes. No, says Jesus. Not for My followers.

2. *Jesus said oaths are unnecessary because everything is God's.* Don't swear by heaven, for it is God's throne. Nor by earth, for it is His footstool. Nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor by your head, because you can't make one hair white or black, but He can.

He says this whole distinction between oaths that mention God's name and those that don't is *artificial*. Why? Because the whole world is God's world. Whatever a man swears by is related to God in some way. Therefore, every oath is implicitly in God's name.

So, *don't swear*, says Jesus. *At all*. Is Jesus changing the Law? No. He said back in verse 17 that He has come to fulfil it, to uphold the full intent of it.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's exposing the fallacy of self-righteous people who create a system they can keep, and then boast that they're good people because they keep it.

Those who follow Me will not do that, says Jesus. What will they do?

B. Speak the truth at all times (37). "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

Yes or no. It doesn't get any simpler than that. Did you record all your income on your tax return? Yes, or no. Did you return the phone call like you said you would? Yes, or no. Did you pray for that person like you said you would? Yes, or no. This is God's standard in the kingdom.

1. *Always say what you mean and mean what you say.*

2. *If more than your word is needed, it's evidence of evil.*

So don't take oaths, says Jesus. He tells us that if we are His disciples, our speech should be characterized by simplicity and honesty. We don't need an oath, for our character should make an oath unnecessary.

But what if we're called upon to be a witness in a court of law? What if we're asked the question, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" There have been certain groups, such as Anabaptists, Quakers, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who have taken Jesus' words, "Swear not at all", to mean that we are not allowed to take an oath in a court of law. Are they correct? Is Jesus teaching us that court oaths are forbidden?

I don't think so, for a couple of reasons. First, the reason Jesus is talking about oaths in this section is to correct the Pharisee's misuse of them. They were hung up on words, like, "Do you swear by the gold on the altar...?" and missed the importance of honesty and truth-telling. To turn Jesus' teaching here into a prohibition against answering the question, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," is likewise to miss the point. Granted, a truly good man will never need to take an oath. But oaths are necessary in the courtroom because men are NOT good men in the world, and this is NOT a good world.

Secondly, we see oaths used elsewhere in the Bible. For instance, God Himself swears (see Gen 9:9-11; Luke 1:73; Hebrews 6:13-17, "For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself . . .").

Furthermore, early Christians essentially took oaths. Paul says in Romans 1:9, "For God is my witness that..." Again, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:23, "But I call God to witness against me..."

Jesus Himself testified under oath. We read in Matthew 26:63-64, "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.’⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks (question 101), "May we not swear oaths by the name of God in a devout manner?" The answer: "Yes, when the civil authorities require it of their subjects, or when it is otherwise needed to maintain and promote fidelity and truth, to the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor. Such oath-taking is grounded in God's Word. . ."

Again, if we reduce this passage to the issue of oaths in court, we are just like the Pharisees, who concentrated on the "mint, anise, and cummin", and missed the "weightier matters of the Law". The thrust of Jesus' teaching to us is that there's no need for oaths for Christians. But there is a need for honesty.

Verse 37 again (AV), "But let your communication (lit. "word") be Yea, Yea; Nay, Nay; for whatever is more than these cometh of evil."

The use of swearing (or oath taking) is really a confession of our own dishonesty. Oaths are needed only if our word is unreliable. Oaths are an admission that there is reason to doubt our honesty.

A devout group of religious Jews in Jesus' day known as the Essenes lived in seclusion near the Dead Sea. The Essenes would not use oaths. They taught, "He who can't be believed without swearing by God, is already condemned."

We're in trouble when our word is no good, when lying is acceptable if we use the right "formula". We have the same problem today. We see it all the time.

Adolph Hitler was a master of deceit and lying. He used the lie to advance his own cause. His philosophy was that if you want your nation to be great, you lie about it, and the people will believe you.

The scribes and Pharisees were hung up with their system of vows. Jesus says that His followers are to be "hung up" with their commitment to honesty. We must be people of our word. We must be people who keep our promises. Last week the issue was adultery--and adultery is due to human hard-heartedness. This week the issue is swearing--and swearing is due to human untruthfulness.

But it ought not to be so for us if we are followers of Christ. We ought to say what we mean, and mean what we say--"yea, yea; nay, nay". Why? Because "whatever is more than these cometh of evil". When we go beyond the truth, or avoid the truth, we are associating ourselves with "evil" (or "the evil one"). John 8:44, "Ye are of your father the devil. . . When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own, for he is a liar, and the father of it." There's no room for lying or deceit in our lives if we're living for God.

Make It Personal: We have three decisions to make regarding the truth.

1. *We must believe the truth, and reject lies.* Is the truth important to you? Do you believe in the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life"?

The greatest lie of all is the lie that the self-righteous believe. Think of it this way. Think carefully about the One who delivered this sermon we call the sermon on the mount. This is Jesus the Christ speaking. He came to earth to seek and to save the lost. Those are His words in Matthew 20:28.

He says we are lost, but He came to save us. And so He let cruel sinners nail Him to a cross, and on that cross He endured the punishment law-breakers deserve, suffering and dying in their place.

Here's where the greatest lie enters the story. "I don't need you, Jesus, nor what You did. I'm not lost. I'm a good person. I'm just fine without you."

That is a lie that was manufactured in the pit of hell, dressed up by religion, and believed by millions and millions of self-deceived, self-righteous people today.

But Jesus won't let us deceive ourselves with that lie. That's why He preached this message, to help all of us see how much we need Him. Who has fallen short of God's standard? We all have. We are all guilty of breaking the Law of God.

Please don't miss Jesus' offer by clinging to your self-righteous rags, dear friend. Receive Him, and God will "clothe you in garments of salvation and array you in a beautiful robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10)."

2. *We must speak the truth always, and reject any form of deception.*

Back in 1987, Rockdale High School, from Conyers, GA, won the Georgia state basketball championship. Their head coach was Cleveland Stroud. Later Stroud discovered he used an ineligible sophomore for 45 seconds in the first of five post-season games. Stroud turned himself in, forfeiting the state title.

"If a kid can't get anything out of a coach other than a win—that coach is a failure," Stroud says emphatically. "He doesn't deserve to be a coach, because coaching is so much more than that."⁴

Are we committed to honesty? Is truth-telling important enough to us that we're willing to lose state championships? How about losing a job rather than go along with dishonest practices at work? Or losing friends, rather than cheating like the rest of the class at school?

This applies to parenting. Parents (and grandparents), when we promise our children something, do we follow through? Do we ever make idle promises to "get the kids off our backs"?

This applies to church membership. When we become members of WBC, we agree to live in agreement with our church covenant. It's a promise, a commitment we make with God, and with one another. Do we take that promise seriously? I challenge you to read your church covenant today with the importance of honesty in mind.

3. *We must invite others to believe and speak the truth along with us.*

Closing Hymn: #441 "*Take Time to Be Holy*" (all four verses)

⁴ <https://www.covnews.com/news/coach-cleveland-stroud/>