

# Redefining Oaths

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Date: 05 October 2022

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So far, we've made it through three of the six examples that Jesus uses to contrast his teaching! with the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. The examples follow Matthew 5.20, where Jesus said, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. In the previous lessons we've seen Jesus redefine anger, lust, and divorce. He's taught us that attitudes can be as sinful as actions.

Based upon that, all of us are guilty of murder, lust, and sexual sins, if only in thought. That knowledge alone should keep us from being judgmental toward those who've committed those sins in their actions. Tonight, we'll look at how Jesus redefines oaths. Once again, Jesus will point out the flaws in the religious leaders' traditional teaching. Then he will set the record straight about the true meaning of the scriptures. So let's read Matthew 5.33-37. Matthew 5.33-37.

Jesus said, The main idea for tonight's passage is simple. Jesus commands believers to tell the truth always.

Jesus commands believers to tell the truth always. This passage is perhaps less controversial than the verses we've studied in the past two lessons. However, you'll find that the verses are no less challenging. Before we get into the verses, we need to define what the Bible means by swearing or by what some translations refer to as taking an oath. You know, today, swearing carries the connotation of using inappropriate or vulgar language. The Bible's context is different.

Swearing or oath-taking in the Bible's context is when a person invokes the name of God to try to convince others that he's telling the truth. Hebrews 6.16 summarizes oath-taking. It says, For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes, an oath is final for confirmation. Any oath calling on God invites him to witness the truthfulness of what is said, or to avenge that statement if it turns out to be a lie. An oath was generally taken to be the absolute truth because it invited judgment on the person who violated God's word. We have a similar concept in our own society. Think about when a witness is sworn in a court proceeding. Typically, that witness is put under oath with these words, you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. Rarely do I use a non-Christian commentator, and this guy might be a Christian, but it's actually a quote from an Illinois lawyer, and he wrote, We've all seen in person or on TV the witness with his hand on the Bible or right hand raised, swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. By taking an oath or affirmation, the witness is implicitly inviting punishment from God if the statement is untrue. But even if the witness doesn't believe in God, the legal consequences of taking an oath is to subject the witness to penalties for perjury if the statement is false. Jesus' original audience also understood the seriousness of taking an oath. They would have been familiar with Old Testament passages like Nehemiah chapter 10 verses 28 and 29. In those verses, the Jews returning from exile took an oath to follow God's commands.

[ 4 : 3 3 ] So listen to Nehemiah chapter 10 verses 28 and 29. The rest of the people, the priest, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses, the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord, our God, and his rules and his statutes.

We'll look at more examples of biblical oaths as we cover the text, but for now, let's start looking at tonight's passage. And we'll break tonight's verses into three sections, starting with verse 33 by itself. And in verse 33, we see the custom. The custom is your first blank. And Jesus summarizes the customary teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Verse 33 is where Jesus said, 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.

To check whether this teaching is accurate, we need to look at a few places in the Old Testament. Jesus blended Leviticus 19.12, Numbers 30, verse 2, and Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 21.

So here are all three of those verses. In Leviticus 19.12, Jesus said, or actually, the Lord said, You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God, I am the Lord. And then for the Numbers passage, we'll actually back up to verse 1 of chapter 30, and Numbers 30, verses 1 and 2 say, Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, This is what the Lord has commanded. If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. And then Moses also is speaking in the Deuteronomy passage, and we'll look at Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 21 through 23. And he said, If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what is past your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

Compare those verses to how Jesus summarized the religious leaders' teaching in Matthew 5.33. Here's Matthew 5.33 once more.

[ 7 : 33 ] Jesus said, 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. On the surface, the religious leaders' teaching seems solid.

The words fit with what we just read in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The problem is how the scribes, the Pharisees, and even the ordinary people applied those words.

In Palestine, in the time of Jesus, there were two unsatisfactory things about taking oaths. And the first was what Willem Barclay calls frivolous swearing, and that is taking an oath when it was neither necessary nor proper. People who did this swore by their life or whatever they wanted to swear by for almost no reason at all. And the result was even the most solemn statements appeared to be on the same level as the frivolous statements. The second misuse of oaths by the people of Christ's time was worse, and that was evasive swearing.

Evasive swearing happens when people never intend to fulfill their oaths, or when they supposedly find legitimate reasons to break those oaths later. The scribes, the Pharisees, and the people were very resourceful about how, in their minds, they got around the Old Testament teachings that we read earlier.

Listen to Leviticus 19.12 again. That's where God said, You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

[ 9 : 12 ] Well, the scribes and Pharisees sometimes read verses very literally to suit their purposes. They said verses like Leviticus 19.12 prohibits swearing falsely by God's name, but they claim that the verses like that say nothing about swearing falsely by something else.

God's emphasis was to avoid swearing falsely. The religious leaders emphasize swearing by God's name. So, if you look at Leviticus 19.12 again, that's where it says, You shall not swear by my name falsely, and they put the emphasis on God's name rather than the falsely part.

So, the result was that people who were afraid to swear by the name of the Lord because they weren't telling the full truth began to swear by other things. And those mere things were not thought to be as significant as the name of God, and so this second class of oaths was not considered to be binding.

Some persons swore by their own life, their own health. Others swore by the king. Still others swore, as Jesus indicates, by their head, the earth, heaven, the temple, or Jerusalem.

And all such oaths were evasive. Also keep in mind that the Jews in Jesus' day often avoided speaking God's name at all, and that created another problem.

[ 10 : 36 ] How could you tell if someone was making a sincere oath if only oaths invoking God's name were the binding oaths, and then they never said God's name at all? Well, the scribes and Pharisees thought they solved that dilemma by creating regulations about what things were binding and what things were not.

We learn that from a later passage in Matthew. Turn to Matthew chapter 23, verses 16 through 22. Matthew chapter 23, verses 16 through 22.

You might recognize from the chapter reference that this passage is from the list of woes that Jesus pronounced on the scribes and Pharisees. So here are verses 16 through 22 of Matthew chapter 23.

Jesus said, 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. 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.

[ 11 : 49 ] 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. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

So you can tell by that passage that if someone made an oath that omitted the name of God, you needed a flow chart to see whether the oath was binding or not. You know, did he say the magic words that made it binding or did he have an escape hatch?

It's kind of like when we were kids and somebody said, Oh, I wasn't having to be bound by that because I had my fingers crossed behind my back. That's the same idea. So the Pharisees were guilty of distinguishing between one oath and another, saying that some were binding and some were not.

And the result was that solemn oaths were being taken commonly and lightly. Instead of an oath strengthening what a person said, the oath actually weakened what a person said.

[ 13 : 04 ] We see that in our society today. You know, someone may say, for example, that he swears on his mother's grave that something is true. Adding words like that typically makes the person less believable.

We wonder why the person is working so hard to convince us. For a past job, I had to take fraud investigation training. We were taught simply to ask a question and then sit quietly.

People who were innocent usually just would deny the allegation in one or two words, and then they were comfortable with the silence. But the people who are guilty often try to fill the silence because they think they need to convince the questioner that they are correct in telling the truth.

That's not always a telltale sign, but it often is. So we've seen the custom that Jesus was condemning. In the second section of the lesson, Jesus makes the correction.

So the correction is your second point. That correction comes from verses 34 through 36 of Matthew chapter 5.

[ 14 : 13 ] Here are those verses again. Jesus said, Before we dig into the verses, we have to consider a basic question.

And that question is whether Jesus is prohibiting all oath-taking here. Some people have thought that. The Quakers are one example. The Quakers, based upon this paragraph, have traditionally refused to take an oath even in a court of law.

Their interpretation is that these verses teach a complete and absolute ban on taking an oath. If we follow that approach, we're risking being legalistic just like the Pharisees and the scribes were.

As we must do with any question about what the Bible means, let's have Scripture interpret Scripture. Scripture presents clear guidelines for oath-taking.

We already have looked at verses in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy about taking oaths. If God intended oaths to be banned in every circumstance, those passages wouldn't be there.

[ 15 : 36 ] We also see oaths being taken in both the Old and New Testaments. So let's consider some Old Testament examples. When Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac, he first extracted an oath from that servant.

Jacob later obtained an oath from Joseph. Joseph requested an oath from his brethren. And Jonathan asked for an oath from David. On certain special occasions, even the holiest of men had to take an oath in a most solemn and serious manner.

God himself occasionally took oaths in the Old Testament. Listen to God's words to Abraham in Genesis chapter 22, verses 16 and 17.

In Genesis chapter 22, verses 16 and 17, God said, By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore, and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.

And that, of course, comes after Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac. John MacArthur wrote, And you see there in your handout more references to oaths that are in the Bible.

[17:15] In the New Testament, Jesus was put under oath during his trial before the council. Listen to this exchange between Jesus and the high priest in Matthew chapter 26, verses 62 through 64.

Matthew chapter 26, verses 62 through 64. And the high priest stood up and said, Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?

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. So there is where he put Jesus under oath.

And then Jesus responds, 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.

Only after the high priest put Jesus under oath did Jesus answer the question. The events in Matthew chapter 26 happened well after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

[18:23] If Jesus believed that all oath-taking was forbidden, he would have said so. Instead, he simply answered the question. The apostles later took oaths.

Listen to Romans 9, 1. Romans chapter 9, verse 1 is where Paul said, I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.

Then in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 23, Paul said this. He said, But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrain from coming again to Corinth.

The conclusion based upon Scripture is that while oath-taking must be restricted, there are certain solemn vital occasions when it is right, when it is legitimate, and when it adds a special solemnity and an authority which nothing else can give.

God provided for proper oath-taking in his name as an accommodation to sinful human nature which is so prone to deceit and to lying. God knows that man's inclination to lie causes them to distrust each other.

[19:35] So in serious situations, an oath is permissible to give greater motivation to tell the truth or to give greater motivation to keep a pledge. What Jesus emphasized in his teaching was that honest men do not need to resort to oaths, not that they should refuse to take an oath if required to by some external authority.

Here's a quote from Martin Luther. Martin Luther said, So in other words, in the normal course of our daily business, we have no need to take an oath.

We should just be truthful all the time. But if we are required to take an oath in certain circumstances, that is still permissible. Now that we've discussed how oath-taking can be appropriate at times, let's consider two more things about what Jesus is teaching in verses 34 and 35.

The first thing is that we should never violate the third commandment. The third commandment comes in Exodus chapter 20, verse 7, and that says, 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.

You notice Jesus never condemned the scribes and Pharisees for what they said about swearing falsely. He condemned them for how they applied their words. The second thing that Jesus forbids is swearing by any creature, any created thing, or any man-made thing.

[21:19] All of those things belong to God. We must not swear by heaven or earth or by Jerusalem. We must not swear by our heads or anything but by the name of God himself. So the distinctions drawn by the scribes and the Pharisees were utterly ridiculous.

When you think about it, what is Jerusalem? It's the city of the great king. And what's the earth? It's nothing but God's footstool. So all these things are under God.

And the temple is the seat of God's presence. So you can't differentiate between the temple and God in that way. His very presence is the glory of the temple. So making these distinctions is false because everything belongs to God anyway.

Look now at Matthew 5.36. Jesus said, And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

Some of you may be thinking, I can use Clairol or Grecian formula to change my hair color. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. You can use those things to make your hair appear to be a different color.

[22:26] But the underlying hair is still the same color it always was. When the color wears off or the hair grows out, a hair's real color is going to be visible again. And we can joke a little bit about hair color, but there's a serious point here.

And that is that we can only make things appear to be different, just like the scribes and Pharisees tried to make some oaths appear to be less significant than others. Ultimately, the facts are the facts.

And God is who sets the standard for what is real, right down to the color of our hair. We can try to deny that, but eventually the truth will become apparent. We really can't divide life into neat little compartments, some of which are exempt from God's presence and some of which are not.

God is everywhere. He's in every part of life. And the truth is as important in one situation and at one time as it is at any other time and situation.

So, so far we've seen the custom and the correction. In the last section, we'll see the command.

And Jesus states the command in Matthew 5, 37.

[ 23 : 37 ] He said, Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil. The New King James translates this verse more clearly.

And here's verse 37 from the New King James. It says, But let your guess be yes and your no, no. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

The first part of this verse is easy to understand. It just means say what you mean, mean what you say, and avoid shading the truth or embellishing the facts.

So we have no need to attach some oath to make our words stronger. We can converse intelligently and emphatically without sprinkling oaths liberally throughout what we say. We can get the point across with fervency that avoids dishonoring God's name.

Let's move now to the second half of the verse. The ESV says, Anything more than this comes from evil. And the New King James says, Whatever is more is from the evil one.

[ 24 : 45 ] We know that the evil one is a reference to Satan. And at first, Jesus' words may seem harsh, but let's look at those words objectively. Why would Jesus say that anything beyond straightforward statements is from Satan?

Well, the answer goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and the very first sin. Satan tempted Eve using words to attack the truthfulness of God. So listen to Genesis 3, verses 1-6.

It says, Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. But God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

[ 26 : 08 ] One lie plunged the entire creation, including every human yet to come, into sin. And that first lie came from Satan himself. That's why Jesus referred to Satan in John 8.44 as the father of lies.

Speaking to unbelieving Jews there, Jesus said these words in John 8.44. He said, You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

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.

Listen to the distinction that John makes between believers and unbelievers in 1 John 3.8-10. He wrote, Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.

[ 27 : 24 ] By this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

In James' letter to believers, James spends a significant amount of time talking about the dangers of sinning with our words.

Flip over to James chapter 3, and we'll look at verses 2-10. So James chapter 3, verses 2-10. Starting in verse 2, it says, For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. [ 28 : 43 ] The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast, and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind.

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. John MacArthur says, we can never be perfect in the sense that Jesus is perfect in speech or in any other way, but we can, in the Holy Spirit's power, have a spiritually mature and sanctified heart that is expressed through mature, sanctified, God-honoring speech and teaching. The idea is that only spiritually mature believers can control their tongues. To the degree that our holiness approaches that of Christ, to that degree, we are spiritually perfect or mature. Listen to how this quote from J.A. Motyer ties into what we've learned so far in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, If our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live.

[ 30 : 16 ] The master switch has deprived them of any power to switch on that side of our lives. The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity. It is the means to it.

Did you catch how he mentions that the tongue can formulate images of lustfulness and thoughts of anger and resentment? Does that sound familiar to the other examples that Jesus has used so far in the Sermon on the Mount?

Boasting is another dangerous item that can happen if we let ourselves go beyond having our yes be yes and our no be no. Whenever and however the tongue boasts, it leaves a wake of destruction.

It tears others down. It destroys churches, families, marriages, and of course personal relationships. It can even lead to murder and to war. So listen again to that last sentence of the Motyer quote we just heard.

He said, the control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity. It is the means to it. As we talked about in the introduction, tonight's passage perhaps is less controversial than the verses we've studied in the past two lessons.

[ 31 : 29 ] But now you're seeing why tonight's passage is no less challenging than those earlier verses. Martin Lloyd-Jones summarized tonight's passage like this.

He said, the message comes right home to each of us. We must not lie and we are all given to it if not always in a bare face form. As Christians, we should always speak as in the presence of God. We are his people and a lie which we may tell to a private individual may come between that individual soul and its salvation in Christ Jesus. Everything we do is of tremendous importance. We must not exaggerate or allow people to exaggerate for us because exaggeration becomes a lie. It gives those who hear it a false impression.

God have mercy upon us in that we are so like these Pharisees and scribes trying to distinguish between big sins and little sins, lies and little things which are not exactly lies.

[ 32 : 32 ] There is but one way to deal with all these things. We must realize that we are always in the presence of God. We claim we are walking through this world in fellowship with him and with his son and that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Very well, grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, says Paul. He sees and hears everything, every exaggeration, every suggested lie. Then Lloyd-Jones goes on to say he hears it all and it hurts and offends.

Why? Because he is the Spirit of truth and there is no lie anywhere near him. Let us then listen to the command of our heavenly King who is also our Lord and Savior.

Let us follow in his steps and desire to be like him in all things. Let us remember that everything in our lives and conversation is in his presence and may indeed be the thing which will determine what others think of him.

So you see several times in that quote Martin Lloyd-Jones reminded us that everything we say is in the presence of God and that should always give us something to think about.

[ 33 : 40 ] Remember the main idea and that is simply that Jesus commands believers to tell the truth always. We looked at Hebrews 6.16 during the introduction.

I want to go back and look at that verse again but add verses 17 through 20 with it. These verses about the character of God and Christ should encourage us as believers.

starting with Hebrews 6.16 it says 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 promise he guaranteed it with an oath so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul a hope that is set before us a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf having become a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

[ 34 : 55 ] and that hope set before us should help us strive to be more and more like Christ in how we live our lives. Jesus did more than tell us to control our tongues he also showed us how to do it even in the most extreme circumstances.

Listen to 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 21 through 23 Peter wrote Rather than sinning with his words Jesus entrusted himself to God God Perhaps you're thinking like I was when I was doing this lesson no matter how much I want to avoid sinning with my mouth and no matter how hard I try to avoid such sinning I know that I still will sin You're correct about that we all still will sin with our mouths but because Jesus led the sinless life and paid the penalty for the sins of everyone who believes in him believers get the benefit of his righteousness

We just read 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 21 through 23 Listen now to verses 24 and 25 of 1 Peter chapter 2 Speaking of Jesus Peter said He himself He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness by his wounds we have been healed for you who were straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls So listen to that last verse again for you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls Let's pray Father we thank you for this reminder of how seriously you take telling the truth Help us take this lesson to heart and help us follow your command to let our yes be yes and our no be no Help us be an example to others that we deal with and help us always model

Christ's behavior In Jesus name we pray Amen Thank you.