

S. N. Jan 10, 1951 P.M. - W&K

THE TAKING OF OATHS

Matthew 5:33-48

solomon appeal to God  
to attend to truth -

We continue our study tonight on the Sermon on the Mount.

And of course, we recognize that Jesus has been dealing with some of the commandments, and the background to this passage is very interesting. The Jewish practice of swearing did not permit or pertain to idle talk, cursing, or profanity.

There are those who would ask us: "Is this the problem in the modern world?" Here we have the consideration of this simple matter of our speech and how we should speak to one another. Everything that a Christian does is most important because of what he is. Our major problems would simply vanish out of sight, and there would be no need to fear war and such horrors.

The major area in which these words of Jesus seem to have applied was in the business dealings of the Jewish people. They were great traders. Nobody expected the asking price of anything to be the same as the real selling price. Their bargaining often became very heated, involving oaths and all kinds of practice.

Now this is still the way of commerce in certain parts of the world, and sometimes foreign visitors to America are surprised to find that they cannot bargain with the stores on Fifth Avenue in New York.

The Jews of Jesus time did not sign contracts as we do. In the course of business such as small items, one or two livestock did not require a written contract. The agreement was sealed by oaths, and here is where the matter of swearing came into play.

On the basis of the teachings of the Rabbi, it was commonly understood that if an oath was made by the name of God, it was binding.

But if it was made by anything else, though the thing within itself might be considered sacred, such as the temple, the altar, the Law of Moses, or heaven itself, it was not binding.

Now the way it worked was this: A man might say in a bargaining session, "By the Name of God, I will pay you the first day of next month." Then he was duty bound to pay.

But if the name said, "By Heaven, I will pay you the first of next month," and the party with whom he was bargaining agreed to it,

the individual had no moral obligation to pay whatsoever. He had simply put over a shrewd business deal.

Now with one sweep, Jesus wiped all this away. He did not prohibit the taking of sacred religious oaths, nor in fact of verifying testimony by the name of God, for there are numerous instances in the New Testament in which Paul did this very thing. Romans 1:9, 2 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 1:20 .

Jesus was saying to his disciples that they were to be honest, transparent, that oaths and swearing would be unnecessary.

He is dealing with this as he did with adultery, and divorce, and with retaliation.

Well after all, what difference differentiates a man from a beast? It is that a man can talk and a beast cannot communicate his ideas.

Speech - what is it? Is it the vibration of the air set in motion by the vocal cord or the tongue and the lips.

We know there are such things as the voice of nature, the murmur of the breeze, the dash of the breakers on the beach, the song of a bird.

Speech is the utterance of the soul, the emotions, the inspirations, the communications, with others. Speech gives a thought, reflects what we have in our minds.

The human voice is remarkable and different from all other voices.

It is most interesting however - for example, when a boy's voice changes. I was reading the account of a young boy entering a restaurant; the waitress was working on something on the counter, and the boy ordered a cup of coffee and two doughnuts. The clerk thought two people were ordering, and she said, "I will be with you both in just a moment."

Words are heard by a crowd, by a group, or by one person. You need only one other person, and they can hear your words.

Words may be evil, they may be used to criticize, they may be used to torment. Some people use words to hurt other people.

Joseph was tormented by the lying tongue of his brothers and of Potiphar's wife. Moses was tormented by the murmurings of the people more than he was by the plagues and the frogs.

Samson was tormented by the tongue of Delilah. David was tormented by the words of Goliath.

Jesus, by the accusing words of Satan.

~~So you see~~, the words of a man's mouth are like fire - James 3:5-6 says it's uncontrollable, it's set on fire of hell, and cruel words may wreck a life. They instill hate, and they are dangerous. They misrepresent a character and the conduct of people.

Words may backbite, and they may be used as a talebearer. In Leviticus 19:16.

But there are also words of righteousness, and how forceable are right words.

✓  
v 33  
Now (this is exactly) what Jesus was dealing with here when he was talking to these Pharisees. "Ye have heard that it has been said of them of old times" - Verse 33. Now this has to do with the (third commandment) "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Deuteronomy 6:13.

The Pharisees were familiar with this scripture, for out of them they had extracted the teaching, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shall perform under the Lord thine oaths." Now Jesus was going to correct a false teaching and replace it with a true teaching.

Now the Law of Moses was a matter of forswearing or taking of oaths. The main intent was to place a bridle upon man's proneness as a result of sin to fall into lying. One of the greatest problems which Moses had to deal with was the tendency of people to lie, and deliberately to say things that were not true. Life was becoming hectic. Men could not rely upon one another's words and statements, so one of the chief purposes of the law at that time was to control it.

2 ✓ Another thing that Moses' Law attempted to do was to restrict the oath for serious and important matters. At the slightest pretext, people were taking an oath in the name of God, and this should have been a solemn matter of exceptional gravity, especially of the relationship to God. They were God's people and were reminded that even in their talk and conversation, and especially in the taking of oaths, everything must be done in such a way as to realize that God was looking upon them.

The Lord desired to expose and correct what the Pharisees had been teaching. The Pharisees thought that as long they were not guilty of physical adultery, they were all right. Now the same thing Jesus applied

to divorce. And I think that when we come here to the legal forms,

Jesus is also speaking to this - to permit perjury was to them a very <sup>Pur' Jeri False Swearing - Omission to do what promised</sup>

serious and solemn matter. It was a terrible sin and they denounced it.

It is like people who take oaths today, and yet they forget these.

✓ Now this is true in ordinary speech today. There are many examples on record like for instance, Annanias and Sapphira, that God is not indifferent and is not careless of the interest of truth and righteousness, and it was to teach men that they were to avoid using the name of God as a careless expression.

✓ A Often today men will say, "By God" or "By the Life of God." Therefore, they have substituted the phrase.

~~B~~ Or to say, "May God strike me dead if I lie." Now that is a slight modification of their speech. "By my life" or "By my head", knowing perfectly well that life and death are ultimately only at the disposal of the Almighty God.

✓ In their own speech, for illustration -

✓ - "Zounds" is really a contradiction of this commandment.  
 "By the wounds of Christ".

B "My dear" or "Dear Me" is really an English form of the Italian "Dia mia" - "My goddess."

E "Goodness gracious" - or "My gracious" is an abbreviation of "My Gracious God."

F "By Jove" is of course a Latin name for Divinity.

G "Begad" is "By God."

Now many (similar expressions) will occur to the minds of those listening to me at this time, and they all make an attempt to express or to impress reliability of their statements, and they use these as associated with the name of God. And there are some who believe that if they do not actually use the name of the Divine Being, they have been excused.

Now our Lord shows the fallacy of this reasoning. He says that whatever emphasis that has any illusion to heaven, or Jerusalem, or the head, may give to our speech is derived from the association with God.

✓ Now do you catch the drift of this? As a disciple of Jesus we are to avoid in dress, in expenditure, in our household equipment, whatever is extravagant. And he says in our speech, there must be simplicity.

Now a Christian man is supposed to speak what? The truth.  
Absolutely truthful.

Oh, I know, they would declare that that is true. "I will swear on a stack of Bibles that high." What is the need for him to swear by the altar or by heaven, or the world, or a stack of Bibles, if he tells the truth?

There would not be any need of that, and no one knows the truth that never told the truth.

I have known people to get to be what we call "habitual liars." When there is no point in it at all, they tell a lie. Well, if you tell the truth then, for your word to be accepted, if your character is such as that, you don't have to say, "I will swear by the altar;" or this or that, or the other, or a stack of Bibles.

It means truthfulness, and I would like to say this to you: there are lots of times you don't have to say even in a court of law, you don't have to say certain things. What I am talking about is - certain people say, "Well, I have to tell the truth." Now, that is not the point with them.

The point is they want to (get that stuff off) against the other person. That is what is back in them. My dear brother, first be honest with yourself, and then you can talk.

Now, I have seen that work. I have seen it work in my life and that's why I know that it can work in other folks. And I'm not any worse off than you. But I said, "Well, I have to tell the truth." But when I looked at it and it was hidden way down, I just wanted to tell it to get it off on that person. The only difference between you and me is that I am honest with myself. I mean, if you don't agree with that.

But when you speak, you should speak the truth.

Now of course in the Old Testament men took oaths. When Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac, he first of all expected an oath from him. Abraham was a friend of God.

Now that holy man Jacob extracted an oath from Joseph. Joseph extracted an oath from his bretheren.

Jonathan extracted an oath from David. Now, you cannot read the Old Testament without seeing special occasions when holy men had to take an oath in a solemn and a serious manner.

The custom and practice by the apostles who had been taught these matters by our Lord - Romans 9:1 - "I say the truth in Christ; I lie not. My conscience also bear witness in the Holy Ghost," Paul said.

✓ Now I think the first thing that Jesus is talking about here is (idle talk, idle swearing.) Thoughtless talking and taking the name of the Lord in vain is a problem in our day. There are Christian people who have allowed themselves to drift into the very bad habit of using the sacred name of Jesus Christ and of God as by-words in daily conversation.

✓ In an editorial, September 7, 1966, in the issue of the Baptist Standard, Dr. E. S. James pointed out that "It is against the law to swear in Russia, even though the government seeks to downgrade religion and to promote aethiesm. If a man swears at another man, he is subject to ten days or more imprisonment." In America, a man can curse in private or public, on the screen or over television. He can insult fellow citizens by telephone, by mail, or by conversation and be heralded as a great citizen. He can use God's name blasphemously and remain a member of his church, be accepted in refutable social circles, get elected to public office, and be called a

fine citizen."

Now, the words of our text is a prohibition against swearing in the most elemental meaning of the word to us.

The first thing we discover here that our Lord wants to do is to forbid us of the use of sacred titles always in the matter of swearing or cursing. The name of God and of Christ must never be used this way.

You only have to walk the streets of our city or ride the buses and you hear this being constantly done.

Many years ago, I read this story. A lady traveling from Edinburgh to Glasgow was much annoyed by the young officer's conversation in the carriage being interspersed with oaths. She sat uneasy until she could not longer keep silent. "Sir," she said to the officer, "can you talk in the Gaelic tongue?" To this he replied in the affirmative, seeming with great pleasure, expecting to have some conversation with the lady in that dialect. She then politely requested that if he wished to swear any more it might be in that language, as the practice of swearing was very offensive to herself and the rest of the company. The officer was

*GAL'IK speech of Celts of Ireland, called also Irish.*

confounded by this reproof, and no more oaths were heard from him during the remainder of that journey.

34-6 Now, Jesus absolutely forbids swearing by any creature in verses 34 and 35 because all belong to God. We must not swear by heaven or earth, or by Jerasule[m]. We must not swear by our heads. What is Jerasule[m]? It is the city of the great King. What is the earth? It is nothing more than his foot stool. You cannot determine whether your hair be white or black. All of these things are under God. The temple is the seat of God's presence.

39 Verse 37 - He furthermore forbids all oaths in ordinary conversation. There is no need to take an oath about an argument, and and you must not do so. Indeed, we need to go as Jesus ~~said~~ did. He said no oaths or exaggerated avowels are ever necessary. It must mean either be "yea, yea" or "nay, nay". He calls for simplicity in our ordinary conversations and in our ordinary speech.

Profane swearing is always the evidence of a depraved heart. No man is believed any sooner in common conversation because he swears to a thing, and it is really not the mark of a gentleman.

This oath taking is not a precept against any oaths at all, which are necessary in civil society, but Christ condemns perjury - the customary swearing in common conversation. And one branch of this sin is cursing and swearing. And another branch of it is the familiar introduction of an oath into a common, ordinary conversation which we may have with somebody else.

Now, Jesus said swear not at all. This does not touch the court of law and the assumption of high office. But it deals with the ordinary speech that these people had gotten into. Jesus was interested that these people could push aside scripture and deal lightly with the things of God.

Now (keeping pledges) that have been made to God seems to be a problem today. Many Christian people take very lightly promises or pledges made to the church though by virtue of the fact that the church is the bride of Christ, and all such promises should be considered most sacred.

✓ When a person says "yes" to the church, he ought to mean it.

Church membership - a person should not join a church by

baptism or by letter until he is ready and willing to participate in its life. I believe in God's sight it is a sacred, binding obligation when a person walks the aisle of a church and asks to be admitted to its membership, though all do not seem to think so.

*ill* In a relatively short time, a pastor said that he had been in a certain church, a few people had joined who had not been back to a single worship service since the Sunday they joined. It seems to me that these people are in violation of the teaching of Christ which we are studying today.

Church responsibilities - there are people who would not think of failing to show up for a dinner party who seem to have no conscience whatsoever about failing to show up at worship or to teach a Sunday School Class or to attend a deacon's meeting, or to be present in the choir loft on Sunday morning.

When you say you will take a place of responsibility in the church mean it or do not say it.

This is a most solemn matter as we think of it as relative to our modern life. The troubles of life due to the fact that men and women are forgetting these things. The main trouble in the international sphere - is it not right here? We cannot believe what is being said - lying.

Now, in the final place, let me say to you that Jesus is talking about basic honesty here. Now let me proceed a step further with this international idea. This was Hitler's whole policy. It was a way of life with him. It was a way that he was going to succeed in the world. If you are going to be a great nation, then you must lie about it; and the more you lie about it, the more likely you are to succeed. Is this the situation today? One country cannot believe another country? The oaths, the solemn pledges, the contracts, the covenants, the <sup>Treaty</sup> papers that are signed by nations no longer matter - they no longer count.

This is true in our own country. Some of the most sacred associations of life. One of the great scandals in life today is the increase in divorce and infidelity. Now to what is it due? It is that men have forgotten the teachings to Christ with regard to vows and oaths and common truths and basic honesty in speech. How like these Pharisees we are.

✓ Men get on a political platform. They wax eloquent. But at the very time they are speaking, they are not loyal and they are not true. When Hitler lied, we all held up our hands <sup>Against</sup> ~~against~~ him. And we see these lies on the international level, lies between husbands and wives, lies between parents and children; it is the same old thing. The temple - it meant nothing. The gold in the temple that meant everything. The altar - that meant nothing.

Bretheren, we must not lie and we must not be given to it. What a terrible thing it is - we should never dream of it. Everything we do is of tremendous importance, and we must not exaggerate, because exaggeration becomes a lie. It gives those who hear a false impression. Let every man examine himself. God have mercy on us if we are like the Pharisees, trying to distinguish between big sins and little sins, big lies and little lies. We claim we are walking in fellowship with him.

✓ I think that Jesus touched on the basic area of loose talk - in the area of integrity. The Christian's word is to be his bond absolutely, and this is true in the matter of your social life, in the matter of the business dealings you have, and in the matter of your religion. There was

an interesting essay in Time magazine entitled "Larceny in Everyday Life". It pointed out the problem in dishonesty in America - cheating, stealing, moral problems, the dramatic issues of war, civil rights. But the problem is the erosion of every man's conscience about how he conducts his everyday life in the less spectacular areas.

It is surprising that most people pay their taxes, and yet there are many who do not, who fraud. But there is plenty of evidence in America that we are becoming small-time chislers. This is seen in some of the retail stores - people are embezzled. All sorts of claims are dishonest in respect to some of the give-away programs.

I recall the story of a boy who was called up to the teacher's desk for copying the test answers from the boy in front of him and was reprimanded. The boy finally said, "But how did you know I copied the answers?" The teacher said, "On the last question, the boy in front of you wrote, 'I don't know' and you answered 'Me neither'".

What explains this ~~x~~ national erosion of conscience of our society in its super markets and super universities and super corporations?

Charlie Harold speaking to his grandmother about something he did not like exclaimed, "By thunder." "Hush" said the old lady. "You must not swear my dear. Don't you know that Jesus said 'Swear not at all'?" ~~Did~~

"Did he? Well, I didn't know that it was swearing to say 'By thunder' or 'By golly'. Is it, grandma?"

"All such expressions, my dear, in which 'by' is used partake of the nature of swearing, and a boy who wishes to be good will never let them fall from his lips."

Charlie sat silent for several minutes in grave thought, and then said, "Grandma, what makes the newspapers swear every morning?"

"Does it?" said the old lady, looking over the top of her spectacles with curious eyes.

"Yes, it says 'By Telegraph'". The old lady could not help laughing, but she explained to Charlie the difference between an exclamation such as "by thunder" used to give emphasis to a remark, and an incomplete sentence such as "by telegram". The little boy determined that he would not offend in this way again.

And of course I've told this story hoping that you may make the same wise rule.

Let me ask you a question. Is honesty ~~the~~ really the best policy?

The question to be dishonest and never get caught. By dishonesty, a person can sometimes obtain wealth. By dishonesty, a person sometimes can become prominent, if that is what he wants.

If you want to be on good terms with God, and if you want to have a close walk with Jesus, then I think that honesty is not just the policy, but I think it is the only policy.

The story is told of a lad in Boston. He was a rather small boy for his years, and he worked in an office as an errand boy for four gentlemen who did business there. One day the gentlemen were teasing him a little about being so small, and said to him, "You never will amount to much. You never can do much business. You are too small." The little fellow looked at them. "Well," said he. "As small as I am, I can do something which none of you four men can do." "Ah, what is that?" said they. "I don't know as I ought to tell you," he replied, but they were anxious to know and urged him to tell what he could do that none of them were able to do.

"I can keep from swearing," said the little fellow. There were

blushes on four manly faces, and there seemed to be very little anxiety for further information on the point.

In conclusion, let me say that swearing is a mark of irreverance, for life is sacred.

Second, it is useless. Possibly no other sin is as unnecessary as swearing. To swear by one's head cannot make a hair black or white. Verse 36. Nor can it restore it where fallen. Profanity and swearing cling together.

It is the mark of inferiority. Plain cussing are not hallmarks of manhood. You hear the youth say, "Oh hell" and he thinks that he has said something big, when actually he has given expression to the boredom and the ~~xxx~~ emptiness of self. And swearing does not prove that a man is going to be trustworthy. It is not the oath that makes ~~the~~ us believe the man, but it is the man.

Jephthah made a foolish vow to God that if he would give him the battle, he would sacrifice the first living thing he saw on his return to home. He was a foolish man. On seeing his only child, he cried, "Alas! My daughter." Judges 11:35.

That was a rash oath, and people make rash oaths concerning their children in reference to their religious liberty and freedom, even unborn children are given over to certain types of religion.

In summary, the Pharisees taught that a man was not guilty of perjury or profanity unless the very name of God was actually used in connection with false testimony or light conversation. In other words, he was excused from his lie and Jesus now says "Do not swear by earth, heaven, Jerasulem, or you head." If your statement be (not) true, or if you have a (habit) in your remarks in ordinary conversation to add profane additions, this will not strengthen them, it only betrays your lack of truthfulness.