

“You Shall Not Swear Falsely” (Matt. 5:33–37)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Jesus began his teaching on the law with attention catching issues of murder and adultery; however, as we discovered, Jesus showed that the full breadth of the Sixth and Seventh Commandments extends all the way down to the depths of our souls. In Matthew 5:33–37, Jesus brings to our attention an often overlooked concern of God’s moral law: our honesty and truthfulness. Once again, Jesus surprises us with the full breadth of the law, showing us that the moral law about bearing false witness—particularly in swearing oaths and vows—has far more to teach us about God’s requirements for our speech than we might think. Moreover, we see once again Jesus’ redemptive role reflected from his teaching, since *Jesus came to fulfill God’s promises*.

God’s Commandment (Matt. 5:33–35)

Jesus continues his teaching on the moral law with the transitional word “again” (v. 33). This time, Jesus focuses on those who swear oaths and vows: “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’” (v. 33). Once again, it is important to see how Jesus quotes what the people “have heard.” In the first two sections on anger and lust, Jesus quoted the Sixth and Seventh Commandments verbatim in order to exhort the people to keep the full sense of those commandments (Matt. 5:21, 27). In his teaching on divorce, he quoted a misleading paraphrase of Deuteronomy 24:1 to show how the clear teaching of Scripture on marriage had been twisted (Matt. 5:31).

Violating the Ninth Commandment (v. 33)

Here, Jesus does not quote the Ninth Commandment, although his commandment certainly echoes the prohibition against bearing false witness, albeit not by the same words.¹ Here, Jesus is giving a summary that captures “the burden of Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; and Deuteronomy 5:11; 6:13; 23:21–23. The Mosaic law forbade irreverent oaths, light use of the Lord’s name, broken vows.”² R. T. France notes that “Two different but related subjects are at issue here. *Oaths*, invocations of God or of some sacred object to undergird a statement or promise, shade into *vows*, solemn promises to God of an action to be performed.”³ So, while Jesus does not quote a distortion of the law, Hendriksen shows the sense in which the teachers of Israel had distorted their teaching about the law:

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 214.

² Carson, “Matthew,” 187.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 213.

It is evident from the words of Jesus in Matt. 5:34–36 that the traditionalists had shifted the emphasis, so that the Pentateuch passages now began to read as follows:

“You shall not swear *by the name* falsely” (Lev. 19:12).

“When a man makes a vow *to Jehovah* or swears an oath...he shall not break his word” (Num. 30:2).

“When you shall make a vow *to Jehovah your God*, you shall not be slack to pay it” (Deut. 23:21).

Summary [of Jesus in Matt. 5:33]: “You shall not break your oath, but shall keep the oaths that you have sworn *to the Lord*.”⁴

When we studied Jesus’ teaching on marriage, we observed how legalism looks for loopholes. There, the focus had shifted on how to get out of a marriage instead of the permanency of marriage. Here, there is a similar principle at place, as Jesus is criticizing a legalistic search for a loophole to get out of an oath, rather than emphasizing the importance of keeping our word. To get out of oaths, then, the religious teachers employed a “sophisticated casuistry judged how binding an oath really was by examining how closely it was related to Yahweh’s name. Incredible distinctions proliferate under such an approach. Swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing by Jerusalem, though swearing *toward* Jerusalem was.”⁵

Jesus began his teaching on the moral law by condemning the legalism of the Pharisees that sought to relax the requirements of the law (Matt. 5:19–20). While Jesus’ definition of legalism as *relaxing* the law cuts somewhat against the common misunderstanding that the Pharisees were overly *strict*, we see here a perfect example of the kind of rules that the Pharisees piled up: “subtle, hair-splitting distinctions.”⁶ The Pharisees were not really trying to add new requirements; rather, they were added up rules that defined precisely what was permitted, and what forbidden. In doing so, they would key in *legalistically* on loopholes that ultimately relaxed the full weight of the law. In the case of marriage, they distorted Moses’ teaching about the process for divorcing one’s wife under very rare and exceptional circumstances to become a mechanism for divorcing any wife, for any reason. Here, the Pharisees argued that the text of Scripture only forbade breaking oaths where Yahweh’s name had been invoked. When Jesus said that he came to “fulfill the law” (Matt. 5:17), part of what he means is that he will restore the full sense of the law that had been relaxed by this hypocritical casuistry. Although they believed themselves justified, they were bearing false witness in their dealings with others.

Violating the Third Commandment (v. 34–35)

In addition to violating the Ninth Commandment, Jesus shows how the Pharisees’ reasoning on these points violated the Third Commandment. For the Pharisees, the critical boundary that separated sin from innocence was about whether Yahweh’s name was explicitly invoked in the oath.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 307.

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 187. Oxford Languages defines *casuistry* as “the use of clever but unsound reasoning, especially in relation to moral questions; sophistry.”

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 308.

So, sometimes people would sidestep invoking the Lord in their oaths by swearing by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem. In this way, they believed that they were making non-binding oaths that they were not entirely obligated to keep. Jesus cuts through the legalism of this logic by showing how heaven, earth, and Jerusalem belong in a special way to the Lord: heaven being God’s throne, earth his footstool, and Jerusalem as his royal city (v. 34–35).⁷ To swear by God’s creation, is to swear by something that God created to reflect the glory of his name. As Lenski writes, “For though God is not directly mentioned in each oath he is most certainly involved.”⁸ Accordingly, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* #55 rightly points to this section of Scripture as a proof-text for its teaching that “The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known.”

Ultimately, what Jesus is again exposing is the nature of the man’s sinful heart.⁹ The Pharisees thought themselves safe before God, so long as they rigorously adhered to the scrupulous rules that showed them precisely where the loopholes would be. Jesus, however, teaches that God is after the heart. Not only is physical murder sin, but even anger against a brother in the heart. Not only is physical adultery sin, but even lust for someone other than your spouse. Divorce is more than paperwork, but it violates the positive requirements contained in the Seventh Commandment’s prohibition against adultery. Now, here, we see that oath-breaking is not permissible, so long as the original oath was framed in a certain way. France writes that, in “each case the laws quoted may still have a trouble-shooting function, but they are being misused if they are made the basis of ethical thinking. The kingdom of heaven operates on a more radical level of essential righteousness.”¹⁰

Therefore, Jesus urges us, “Do not take an oath at all” (v. 34). Now, we must be clear that Jesus is not offering us here a new loophole that does permit us to lie, provided that we don’t frame our speech as an oath. On the contrary, Jesus is echoing the teaching of Deuteronomy 23:22: “But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.”¹¹ If you make an oath or a vow, you are obligated to keep it; however, if you make no such promises, then you are not guilty when you are unable to do it. So far from creating the right conditions for a permissible lie, Jesus is teaching us to be sincere and straightforward in our dealings with one another. Since swearing by anything created to glorify the name of the Lord would be to violate the Third Commandment by taking the name of the Lord in vain, we should refrain from making such promises.

God’s Control (Matt. 5:36)

Next, Jesus addresses another kind of oath from a different direction: “And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black” (v. 36). Clearly, Jesus could have extended the logic about violating the Third Commandment here, since to swear by our heads is to swear by the One in whose image we have been created.¹² Nevertheless, Jesus approaches this from a

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:294–95.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 236.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 235–36.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 213.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 214.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 215.

different angle to speak about the level of control that such an oath implies. If we swear by our head, we are claiming control not only over our power to keep the oath, but we are also claiming the kind of control over our hand that would allow us swear by it. Just as I cannot claim your property as collateral when I am applying for a loan, so Jesus observes that I do not have enough control over my head to invoke it in an oath.

To make this point, Jesus reminds us that we cannot change the color of a single hair on our head. This point remains true even though hair dyes existed at this time.¹³ So, Jesus may either be pointing to God’s providential control over every detail of our lives (like hair color), so that, as R. T. France points out, “some early patristic interpreters took this verse as a ruling against the use of hair dye!”¹⁴ Or, Jesus may be saying that we cannot create for ourselves the wisdom and honor that comes through the white hair of agedness (see Prov. 16:31; 20:29).¹⁵ Of these two options, I tend to think that the former is better, especially in the way that this connects with the prohibition against vain boasting in James: “...yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (Jas. 4:14–15). God alone is the creator and sustainer of our bodies; we are simply stewards. Even if we dye our hair, we do not possess the power of God over our bodies. Regardless of how we take this, the point is clear. As Lenski writes, “Only he who disregards God in his heart can swear by his head.”¹⁶

God’s Covenant (Matt. 5:37)

Against all this, Jesus concludes by insisting, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (v. 37). John Calvin explains the heart of Jesus’ statement well: “Christ now prescribes, in the second place, a remedy; which is, that men act towards each other sincerely and honestly: for then simplicity of speech will have quite as much weight as an oath has among those who are not sincere....Fairness and honesty in our words are, therefore, demanded by Christ, that there may be no longer any occasion for an oath.”¹⁷ It is only when our hearts are not set toward absolute truthfulness that we try to create or exploit loopholes regarding the things that we have promised. This search for loopholes, then, Jesus condemns as coming “from evil.”

Still, does this mean that absolutely all vows and oaths are condemned in this section? William Hendriksen notes that this would be contrary to Scripture, since we see an abundance of oaths

¹³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 252.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 215. This point perhaps bears more reflection than we might immediately realize. In our own culture, hair dye is often used to hide the signs of aging or to create an alternate “look” (i.e., an alternate visual personality). By this, are we resisting the goodness of God’s providential hand in where he has placed us in our lives? Is this telling the world something about us that is not true? The point is not to establish legalistic lines of what is and is not permissible, but to search out the motivations of the heart.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 252.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 237.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:296.

given as examples in the Bible, and since God himself swears oaths toward us.¹⁸ The *Westminster Confession of Faith* echoes this point: “Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken” (WCF 22.2). It is good and right to make oaths in the civil sphere when we offer testimony in legal cases, or enter into binding contracts—especially into the contract of marriage. Within the church, we rightly take oaths to enter into church membership, or when a man enters into a particular office in the church. The point is not that we may never make oaths, but only that Jesus is condemning “the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oath, used in order to make an impression and to spice daily conversation.”¹⁹

As God’s image-bearers, our speech should reflect God’s character. While Satan is the father of lies, Jesus is truth itself (John 8:44; 14:6). Furthermore, we must remember that Jesus came and the *yes* to all God’s promises (Rom. 16:25–27; 2 Cor. 1:20). When we deal dishonestly, we are reflecting Satan’s character, not our Lord’s character. In our daily speech, then, let us be sincere, truthful, and honest (2 Cor. 4:2). This is the full requirement of both the Ninth and the Third Commandment, and anything less than this comes from evil.

Discussion Questions

1. What do some of the Old Testament texts that Jesus is summarizing in v. 33 actually say (e.g., Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2; Deut. 5:11; 6:13; 23:21–23)? What did the Pharisees hope to gain by focusing on the statements about swearing by the Lord’s name in these passages? How do their “subtle, hair-splitting distinctions” both create a number of new laws and relax the overall weight of the law? How did they violate both the Third and the Ninth Commandments?
2. Why doesn’t Jesus apply Third Commandment concerns to man as the image of God in v. 36? What does Jesus identify instead as the problem with swearing by one’s head? What does swearing by our own bodies reflect about our control and sovereignty over our bodies? How much control do we really have over our bodies? How should our speech reflect our vulnerability and dependency in our lives?

¹⁸ “It was with an oath that Abraham confirmed his promises to the king of Sodom and to Abimelech (Gen. 14:22–24; 21:23, 24). Abraham also required an oath of his servant (24:3, 9). The oath is mentioned also in connection with Isaac (26:31), Jacob (31:53; cf. 28:20–22), Joseph (47:31, 50:5), ‘the princes of the congregation’ (Josh. 9:15), and the children of Israel (Judg. 21:5). See also Ruth 1:16–18; II Sam. 15:21; I Kings 18:10; and II Chron. 15:14, 15.

With respect to God’s own oaths, to the references already mentioned (p. 307) can be added Gen. 22:16; 26:3; Ps. 89:3, 49; 110:4; Jer. 11:5; and Luke 1:73. Finally, it was under oath that Jesus declared himself to be the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:63, 64). In this world of dishonesty and deception the oath is at times necessary to add solemnity and the guarantee of reliability to an important affirmation or promise.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 309.)

¹⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 309.

3. Why should our *yes* be yes, and our *no* be no? What does Jesus prohibit by this statement? What does he demand? Why do you think we are so prone to search for loopholes in our speech? Does Jesus mean that we may never make oaths? Where do we see oaths used in a positive sense throughout the Bible? In what contexts and settings would oaths be not only permissible, but necessary, today?

4. How does untruthfulness reflect the character of Satan (John 8:44)? How does truth reflect the character of Jesus (John 14:6)? What did God promise about Jesus in eternity past (Rom. 16:25–27)? How does Jesus fulfill those promises, and at what cost does that fulfillment come (2 Cor. 1:20)? How, then, should our own gospel ministry employ clear, straightforward, honest and open statement of the truth (2 Cor. 4:2)?