

Jesus on the Law

PART 5: FALSE VOWS • MATTHEW 5:33-37

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We'd like to welcome you to the Four Lakes congregation this morning! I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then Noah/Chris will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss [for class].

As we begin today, we are putting God's plan on the wall up here, to give the references in a way you can look these up on your own. We've summarized it briefly, but in response to the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we obey that good news by turning to God in faith, and by calling out to him for a good conscience in the act of baptism (according to 1 Peter 3:21).

And we do have some good news this morning! This first one comes to us from the congregation in Honolulu, Hawaii. Just recently, they posted and said, "Rejoice church! Another soul was baptized this morning for the forgiveness of her sins. Lisa was baptized into Christ. Praise the Lord!" I share this, 1.) Because some of us have been to this congregation, and 2.) Because it fits in so well with the character of their congregation – as usual, they have the children gathered around at the top of the stairs (which is awesome)! So, we are thankful for Lisa's decision to obey the gospel.

And then we are also sharing some good news from India a week or so ago. Jason Hilburn posted last week and says, "We are rejoicing that two more denominational preachers attending our weekly online class have confessed that they have been in error and that they were not baptized the way the Bible says! We welcome them into the family of God as they leave man-made religious groups. They are hoping their families and others will also obey soon. Also, one known as a brother in Christ realized that his baptism was not Scriptural, so we praise God for the good news that all can be saved who are willing to follow the truth of the gospel of Christ. Glory to God and special thanks to brother Vandan Kumar for his critical role in all of this." So, more good news this week, and we certainly pray for more good news as people unite behind the gospel message. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, we invite you to get in touch with me or one of the other shepherds of the congregation. Our contact information is always on the front of the bulletin each week.

As most of you know, we are in a series of lessons where we are looking at what Jesus has to say about the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. We learned from Jesus that he came not to abolish the

Law, but to fulfill it. And we also learned that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees. They were abusing the Law, so Jesus has some words of correction here.

We then started looking at a series of statements, ***“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.”*** And the first example Jesus gives is God’s command against murder. Yes, murder is wrong, but Jesus raises the bar and explains that anger and name calling are both wrong as well. In fact, they are wrong enough to get us sent into a fiery hell.

We then looked at the fact that adultery is also a sin, but once again, Jesus raises the bar as he explains that it is also a sin to look at a woman with lust in our hearts.

And two weeks ago, we looked at divorce. Many of the religious leaders back then saw divorce as simply a matter of getting the paperwork right. Jesus, though, corrects that misunderstanding and explains that God only allows divorce for the reason of ***“fornication.”*** And to divorce and remarry for any reason other than this makes a person guilty of ***“adultery”*** on an ongoing basis, and the same goes for anyone who marries someone who is divorced for some other reason. And so, they might have been proud that they were getting the paperwork right, but Jesus basically accuses them of multiplying adultery.

This morning, we continue with the next example, and the passage we’ll be looking at today is Matthew 5:33-37. And this time, Jesus addresses what the Law of Moses says about making false vows. We know that lying has always been a problem, and it goes all the way back to the beginning. The very first sin, in fact, seems to be Satan lying about what God had said. And ironically, Satan’s lie was accusing God of lying! So, the first lie was a lie about a lie that wasn’t a lie (I hope you’re still with me on this)! But we understand, then, why Jesus describes Satan as the ***“father of lies”*** (in John 8:44). And from the beginning, we seem to have almost always struggled with honesty, in all cultures, at all points in history, and at all points of human development – from pre-school to grad school, from homeroom to the boardroom, all of us know what it means to be tempted to either straight up lie or to perhaps promise to do or not do something that we later do not do or do. We are tempted to lie to make ourselves look better, we might be tempted to impress somebody, we might lie to avoid some negative consequence, or we might lie or exaggerate to get something we want. Not telling the truth is a real temptation. This is why we need contracts today. This is why doing something as simple as getting a cell phone or buying a car is so complicated these days – pages and pages of fine print, all because we as human beings are pretty good at lying!

This morning, then, we go back to what Jesus says as he raises the bar from the Old to the New. As we challenge ourselves to be more like him, let’s look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37,

33 “Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.’ 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.

As we learn from what the Lord says here, I want us to look at what Jesus says these people had HEARD, and then I want us to pay special attention to what JESUS has to say.

I. We start, then, with what these people had HEARD.

And in this case the Lord seems to combine two quotes that do, in fact, appear to be accurate representations of what the Law of Moses actually says. I can't find these exact words in the Law of Moses, and so in that sense, what Jesus says is not a direct quote, but the concepts are definitely there, ***"You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord."*** If you have a Bible with some cross references, you might notice a reference to Leviticus 19:12, ***"You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD."*** You might notice another reference to Numbers 30:2, ***"If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."*** And, you might have a reference to Deuteronomy 23:21-23, ***"When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised."*** So, what Jesus says here is an accurate representation of the Law, but I do hope we notice how he really boils it down, ***"You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord."*** This is what they had ***"heard that the ancients were told."*** This may or may not be too significant, but there's a tiny bit of "telephone" going on here. Remember: They haven't read this themselves, but they had ***"heard"*** that others were ***"told"*** these things. And it might be significant, because of how the Law was being abused.

I say this, because what they ***"heard"*** was heard while apparently looking for a loophole: You shall fulfill your vows to the Lord. Do you see it? When I make a vow ***"to the Lord,"*** I must fulfill it. But what about the vows I make that are NOT ***"to the Lord"***? I'm thinking of something some of us might remember from childhood – the crossing of fingers! I can make a promise, but if I cross my fingers, it doesn't count, does it? They heard that if you make a vow ***"to the Lord"*** you need to keep it, but if the Lord's not involved, you are off the hook.

And as if that's not bad enough, the religious leaders had apparently developed an elaborate system of deceit. They refined this. And they refined it so well that they could intentionally lie without lying (in their minds). Jesus doesn't get into it here, but he elaborates extensively a bit later, in Matthew 23. We have more information over in Matthew 23:16-22, where Jesus says this,

¹⁶ "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' ¹⁷ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? ¹⁸ And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' ¹⁹ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? ²⁰ Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

So I hope we notice this: Liars had boiled God's law on lying down to ***"Keep your vows to the Lord,"*** and they used that as a loophole, "If I make a vow by calling on God somehow, then I need to keep it, but if I leave God out of it, then I'm off the hook." Well, then it escalated. People started expecting a vow for every little thing, and they were listening for the "God" part of it, to see whether the person was serious. So, whenever they would promise something, they wanted people to believe them, but they also wanted an "out." Therefore, to prove they were serious (without really being obligated), they would call on the ***"temple"*** or the ***"altar."*** Those

things sounded pretty “God-like,” but they weren’t actually “God,” so they could break their word. They developed a hierarchy of oaths, where some were binding, and others were not. Some of those oaths were the equivalent of crossing your fingers behind your back.

And back here in Matthew 5, they were swearing by heaven, or by the earth, or by Jerusalem, or by their own heads. We certainly think of what we might have heard as kids, “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” Do we remember that? If somebody doubts that we are telling the truth, we tend to escalate the situation with an oath of some kind, “I swear to God,” “I swear on my mother’s grave,” and so on. This is what the people are doing, based on what they had **“heard that the ancients were told.”** But they ancients really weren’t told that, were they? A command first given to encourage telling the truth was now being used to disguise and defend lying! And this leads us to what the Lord has to say...

II. ...because in the next few verses, the Lord raises the bar as he demands that we ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH.

This is my summary of what the Lord is saying here, but notice how he starts by saying, **“Make no oath at all.”** Obviously, it’s easy to take this out of context and to be pretty concerned about this. Is Jesus saying that it’s now a sin to ever make a promise? What about when we’re called to testify in a courtroom? As an election official, dozens of times I have taken the oath “...that I will support the constitution of the United States and the constitution of the State of Wisconsin, and will faithfully discharge the duties of [this office] to the best of my ability.” Some of you have taken an oath to join the military. Years ago, it was our great privilege to drive over to Milwaukee to witness brother Michael becoming a citizen of the United States. And I will admit, I was a bit surprised by the oath.

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

That’s pretty impressive! I have never promised to “bear arms on behalf of the United States.” Michael has! So, is it wrong to ever take an oath? Some have taken it this way, and if you do, I will leave that between you and the Lord. It would be nice if this passage was this simple, but I do think something else is going on here.

And I say this, because when Jesus says, **“Make no oath at all,”** he takes it back to what some of those religious leaders were doing. He takes it back to their system of deceit. As in Matthew 23, they were apparently swearing by various things, trying to sound like they were telling the truth, when they were actually allowing themselves a way out. They were swearing by heaven, and by the earth, and by Jerusalem, and by their own heads. And with this as context, the Lord says, **“Make no oath at all.”** And he continues by neutralizing several of these fancy-sounding examples. You want to swear by heaven, instead of by God, thinking you can get away with it? Heaven is the throne of God! You want to swear by the earth, thinking you can break your word because you aren’t technically swearing on the Lord? The earth is his footstool! You think you can swear by Jerusalem,

because it sounds religious, but it's not technically God's name, so you can lie? Jerusalem is the city of the Great King! You think you can swear by your head? Who cares? God controls your hair color! And so, if I could paraphrase, Jesus seems to be saying, "If this is how you are making oaths, then make no oaths at all." If you think you can swear without involving God in the equation, you can't! God is everywhere! God is a witness to your oath, regardless of whether you actually call on his name.

Besides, we have a number of examples of people in the Bible making oaths, seemingly with God's approval. Jesus seems to testify under oath in Mathew 23:63-64. Paul calls God as his **"witness"** in Romans 1:9 and 2 Corinthians 1:23. In Hebrews 6:17, we read about God himself making an oath. The real issue, then, is not in swearing an oath, but the issue was with the Pharisees who were trying to "manage the truth" with this complex system of oaths, some of which were binding, and some of which were not. If that's why we are making oaths, stop it!

And the Lord's conclusion is, **"But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil."** In other words: Tell the truth! As citizens of God's kingdom, we of all people need to be known as those who always tell the truth. As followers of Jesus, if we say we will do something, we do it. As followers of Jesus, we are to speak the truth.

You guys know that I love cartoons, and we do have a good one on the front of today's bulletin. But one of my favorite cartoons is of a preacher standing at the front door after church, and he says to himself, "Oh great! Here comes Bob. I told him I'd pray for him! Dear God, help Bob. Amen." He then reaches out his hand to Bob and very enthusiastically says, "Hey, Bob, been prayin' for you!" But that's not how it should be, is it? If we say we will do something, we need to do it. As followers of Jesus, our **"yes"** must be **"yes,"** and our **"no"** must truly be **"no."** If we promise to stick with somebody "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health," we keep that promise. If we tell a child that we will go to the park tomorrow, we go to the park tomorrow. And if we promise to pray for somebody, we write it down, we put it on the calendar, we set an alarm. As God's people, we tell the truth. We say what we mean, and we mean what we say.

Conclusion:

We will leave it here for this morning, but here at the end, let's just be thankful that God always keeps his word. God never fails to follow through. God keeps his promises.

In Hebrews 6, the author is encouraging his readers to stay faithful, and he refers back to the oath (the promise) God made to Abraham, and reminds us that **"it is impossible for God to lie,"** and he applies that by also reminding us that, **"we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us."** And then he says, **"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil."** This morning, we are thankful that God is faithful, that God does not lie, that God keeps his promises. And we, as his people, are to always tell the truth, we are to keep our promises as well.

With this, before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God of truth, the God who keeps his word from generation to generation. You are the true One, you are the just One, you have the words of life. We live in a world of dishonesty and deceit. As we honor you, we pray that as your children we would always be honest, and that we would be known as people who do what we say we will do, as people who always tell the truth.

This morning, we pray once again, for our first responders and especially for those who work in healthcare. We live in challenging times, where nearly everything we do is more difficult than it was previously. But this is especially true for those who are caring for the sick. We pray that you would bless them in the work they do. Keep them safe. We are also thinking of those who are getting ready to start a new school year. Thank you for giving us an opportunity to help. We ask a special blessing on our teachers and on those who serve in other ways. We pray that you would allow them to "be Jesus" to the children who need your love the most.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com