

Apprenticed to Jesus: Radical Truthfulness*Matthew 5:33-37*

Today, we continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount. In this part of the Sermon Jesus is talking about kind of righteousness that his disciples must have - a righteousness that must surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). In the passages that we've looked at the past several weeks, He is giving examples of what this deeper righteousness looks like related to anger or lust or divorce and remarriage. In the passage that we are considering today, he is talking about vows and oaths. At first glance it might seem like this has very little to do with our everyday lives, but the reality is that it has everything to do with our everyday lives.

Let's begin by reading verse 33:

³³ *"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.'*

As it did back in verse 21, *the ancients*, refers to the original recipients of the Mosaic Law. What Jesus says that *the ancients* were told is not a specific quotation from an Old Testament passage, but rather a summation of Old Testament teaching. The first part - *you shall not make false vows* - comes from passages like Leviticus 19:12 which says:

'And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:12 is probably fleshing out what obedience to the third commandment looks like. The third commandment says that a person must not take the name of God in vain (Ex. 20:7). To take God's name in vain doesn't just refer to using God's name as a curse word; it also refers to invoking God's name to support an oath that is not going to be kept - that is *swearing falsely by My name*. And so, when Matthew 5:33 says, *you shall not make false vows*, it is in part talking about obeying the third commandment. It's talking about breaking one's oath. It is talking about perjury. The Old Testament prohibited such speech.

The second part of this - *but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord* - reflects a number of Old Testament passages. For instance Deuteronomy 23:21-23:

²¹ *"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. ²² "However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. ²³ "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.*

This passage says that a person doesn't have to make a vow, but if a person does make a vow it must be fulfilled. Failure to fulfill a vow is sin. The emphasis on passages like Deuteronomy 23 is to warn against recklessly making of vows.

And so Matthew 5:33 as a summation of Old Testament teaching about vows essentially is saying, first, do not make vows that you know you will not keep; and, secondly, if you do make a vow, make sure you fulfill it.

But Jesus says in verse 34:

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.

Jesus says *make no oath at all*. How are we to understand this prohibition in light of the Old Testament, which permits oath-making? Is he completely overturning all that the Old Testament said about oath making or is something else going on here?

To answer this question I think it is important to understand how oaths were being used in Jesus' day. Making vows and oaths was a big deal in Jesus' day. Oath-making was a big part of Greek culture. It was part of Roman culture. And as we've seen, it was certainly something practiced in Old Testament history. And it still was in Jesus' day. In fact there are various Rabbinical writings completely dedicated to addressing oaths and what constitutes valid oaths (*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 577).

But in Jesus' day, the practice of oath-making had become so convoluted. Oath-making had become a fine art of finding ways to not actually have to keep one's word. The thinking was that if an oath was sworn to the Lord or in His name that it absolutely had to be kept. But if an oath did not expressly invoke the name of God it was considered of lesser importance and therefore the person making such an oath did not necessarily need to fulfill it. In other words, some oaths mattered and others didn't. It was all based on what a person swore by.

We get a picture into this kind of thinking when Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:16-22. I'm just going to read verse 16, but you will get the picture of what they were doing. Jesus says:

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, he is obligated.'

Do you remember what it meant when you were a kid and you said something to your younger brother like, "I will give you some of my candy if you will let me pick the next cartoon." But little did your brother know, that you had your fingers crossed behind your back. What did that mean? It meant you didn't have to keep your word. That is the

kind of thing that had crept into the oath-making of Jesus' day. They would say that making an oath by one thing doesn't matter, but making an oath by something more closely connected to God does matter. So, make an oath by the temple? Doesn't really matter. You don't have to keep that oath. But make an oath by the gold of the temple? Now that means something and you are bound to keep that oath.

And so in this context, Jesus says, make no oath at all. And he clarifies for them. Don't make an oath *by heaven*, or *by earth*, or by *Jerusalem*, or by *your head*. These were some of the things they swore by believing that in doing so they were not bound to keep their word since they were not actually invoking God's name. But Jesus says, wrong! All of these things ultimately point back to God. Heaven is God's throne. Earth is God's footstool. Jerusalem is the city of the king. And God is the one who is sovereign over your head. Jesus is saying that if you think you can make a vow based on heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by the hair of your head and not have to keep it because you were not invoking the name of God - you are wrong. All such things ultimately point back to God. So don't do it.

Instead, Jesus says,

³⁷ "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil.

Instead of using oaths to prove the genuineness of your words, just let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no." In other words, have the kind of character that you can simply say "yes" or "no" and people will know that your "yes" means "yes" and your "no" means "no."

Anything beyond this, Jesus says, in the sense of saying something and binding it with an oath, is *evil* (or from the evil one, as the NIV puts it). Again, in the context in which Jesus was speaking, the oath was something that so often was not an expression of commitment, but of loopholes and deception. This is evil or from the evil one. And it is the evil one who is associated with deception. John 8:44 says this of the devil:

... He . . . does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.

And so Jesus, in explaining the true righteousness to which the Old Testament points says that oaths essentially should not be necessary because we should be truthful in all of our speech. We should simply be people of our word who have no need of oaths.

Now, back to the point of whether Jesus is making an absolute prohibition against all oaths. When we consider the Old Testament teaching as well as the fact that there are examples in the New Testament of vows and oaths, Jesus is probably not making an absolute prohibition on oath-making. Paul, for instance, knowing Jesus' teaching on this matter, sometimes used vows (Acts 18:18; Phil 1:8). And so in light of this, I don't think

Jesus is making an absolute prohibition against vows. Rather he is addressing the issue of deception and lying in our everyday speech. And so there are certain contexts where oaths are appropriate. For instance, Jesus is probably not prohibiting you from taking an oath of office or an oath to tell the truth in a court of law.

The principle here is that **Jesus is calling us to live lives of radical truthfulness.** Speak the truth. Be people who are free of deception.

Are you a person who speaks truth? Does your "yes" mean "yes" and does your "no" mean "no"? Do the people that you interact with day-to-day -- your family, your friends, your work associates -- do they know that you are a person of your word? Do you practice radical truthfulness? That is what Jesus says this deeper righteousness looks like. That is what he is calling us to. Live lives of radical truthfulness.

For the remainder of our time, I want to simply make some observations or comments about this radical truthfulness to which Jesus calls us. The first comment is this: **If you have a truth-telling problem, you have a heart problem.** Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 that ". . . *the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.*" The only way you will be a person who lives out radical truthfulness is if you are fundamentally truthful in your character. And so one place to start if you really struggle with this issue is not to just try to grit your teeth and avoid deception, but rather to talk to God about the heart issue. Confess your desire to deceive and lie. Ask Him to help you be a person who is fundamentally truthful in the deepest part of your character.

Here's the second comment: **Radical truthfulness is extra hard if there are things in your life that shouldn't be there.** Radical truthfulness is hard for all of us, but if you are living a life that is not consistent with the life Jesus wants you to live; if you are doing things you shouldn't then it is going to be extra hard to live a truthful life. You are going to want to hide your sin. It is so much easier to be an honest person if you don't have anything to hide. And so a question for you is, "Is there anything in your life that you feel a need to lie about; to be deceptive about?" If so, you need to deal with that. And you know what? Often the best way to deal with that area of your life is by becoming radically truthful to a trusted friend about your sin. James 5:16 says that we are to confess our sins to one another. That confession can break the power of the lie and help us start living in truth.

Third comment: **Radical truthfulness applies to things big and small.** The fact of the matter is that I'm not smart enough to know what a big matter is or a small matter. Truthfulness matters in all things. It matters on your taxes. Do you claim as income when you were paid in cash? It matters in business dealings. It matters when you embellish the truth to make yourself look better whether that's on a job application or in general conversation. It matters when you write that paper and need to give credit to someone else's idea that you use. It matters when you get stopped by the police for speeding. "Officer, I didn't know it was a 40 mile/hour zone." But you did. That matters. It matters when you say, "I'll pray for you," but never do. Radical truthfulness matters in all things big and small.

Fourth comment: **Radical truthfulness does not mean meanness.** We are told in Ephesians 4:15 "*to speak the truth in love.*" And so to be radically truthful doesn't mean you have to say everything that passes through your mind about other people. What you say and how you say it, must be informed by the command to *speak the truth in love.*

Finally, the last comment I'll make is this: **Radical truthfulness is a better way to live.** Let me illustrate with an example from my own life. When I was in fifth grade or so, I poked a classmate, Robert, with the sharp end of a compass. It actually caused him to bleed. The next day the principle called me in to his office and asked me if I had poked Robert with a compass and I said, "No." I flat out lied. And he believed me and I didn't get in trouble. But you know what I did get? Guilt. For years, I felt guilty about lying. Especially as I started growing as a Christian, this lie haunted me. I might be at a church service or some Christian conference and I would be reminded of this lie. I would sense God saying to me that I should confess this sin to Mr. Koehler. But I kept thinking, "Oh, it so many years ago. It doesn't matter." But God did not relent. And so eventually, many years later - probably when I was in my 20s - I decided to track down Mr. Koehler and confess my lie to him. I called him up and told him what I did and I asked for his forgiveness. He didn't remember a thing about it. But it didn't matter for me. I was finally free of the guilt and that felt great.

Here's the deal, radical truthfulness is a way to feel good. It is a way to live guilt free. It is a way to walk in integrity. It is a way to keep relationships strong. Because any kind of deception or lying damages relationships whether it is a human relationship or your relationship with God. Lying and deception leads to guilt and broken trust and separation in relationships. Radical truthfulness is simply a better way to live.

If we want to live as Jesus' apprentices, our words matter. The deeper righteousness that Jesus is calling us to is a life lived with a radical truthfulness.

I'll close with this story. Donald Miller tells of the time when he lived with a friend and mentor named John. He says that John's first rule was to always tell the truth. One evening Donald and John were sitting in the family room when John asked about Donald's new cell phone.

"I got it free," Donald told him. "How did you get it for free?" John asked.

"Well, my other one broke, so I took it in to see if they could replace it. They had this new computer system at the store and they didn't have their records. They didn't know whether mine was still under warranty. It wasn't, I knew, because it was more than a year old. The guy asked me about it, and I told him I didn't know, but it was right around a year. Just a white lie, you know. Anyway, the phone was so messed up they replaced it with a newer model. So, I got a free phone."

In response, John asked, "Did you ever see that movie *The Family Man* with Nicolas

Cage? "There's this scene where Nicolas Cage walks into a store to get a cup of coffee. And Don Cheadle plays the guy working at the counter. There's a girl in line before Nicolas Cage, and she's buying something for 99 cents, and she hands Cheadle a dollar. Cheadle takes nine dollars out of the till and counts it out, giving her way too much change. She sees that he is handing her way too much money, yet she picks it up and puts it in her pocket without saying a word. As she is walking out the door, Cheadle stops her to give her another chance. He asks her if there is anything else she needs. She shakes her head no and walks out. So Cheadle looks over at Nicolas Cage, and he says, 'Did you see that? She was willing to sell her character for nine dollars. Nine dollars!'"

After a little while, I spoke up. "Do you think that is what I am doing with the phone? Do you think I am selling my character?"

"I do," John said. "The Bible talks about having a calloused heart. That's when sin, after a period of time, has so deceived us we no longer care whether our thoughts and actions are right or wrong. Our hearts will go there easily, and often over what looks like little things—little white lies. All I am saying to you, as your friend, is, watch for this kind of thing."

I went back to the store the next day. It cost me more than nine dollars, but I got my character back. (From *Catalyst GroupZine* Volume 2: The Culture Issue. Originally adapted from *To Own a Dragon* © 2006 by Donald Miller and John MacMurray.)

Radical truthfulness. It's really about our character. It is what Jesus is calling us to.

Amen.