

To Tell the Truth

Thomas Robinson, *Seeing Life Through Jesus' Eyes* 7, February 26, 2012

Matthew 5:33-37

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old,
 ‘**You shall not swear falsely,**
 but shall **perform (give) to the Lord what you have sworn.**’

³⁴ But I say to you, **Do not swear an 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 And do not swear an oath by **your head**,
 for you cannot make **one hair** white or black.

³⁷ Let your word ‘**Yes**’ be **yes**, let ‘**No**,’ be **no**;
 anything more than this comes from evil.”

Exodus 20: 7, 16 (The Ten Commandments: no. 3 and no. 9)

⁷ “You shall not take the name of the LORD (*Yahweh*) your God in vain, for the LORD (*Yahweh*) will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” ...

¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Leviticus 19:12

¹² **You shall not swear by my name falsely**, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

Psalms 50:14

¹⁴ Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and **perform (give/fulfill) your vows to the Most High.**

Psalms 76:11

¹¹ Make your vows to the LORD your God and perform (give/fulfill) them.

Deuteronomy 23:21-23

²¹ “**If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling (giving) it**, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. ²² But if you **refrain from vowing**, you will not be guilty of sin. ²³ You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for **you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.**

Matthew 23:16-22 (Jesus speaking to Pharisees)

¹⁶ “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.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”

James 5:12

¹² But above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Colossians 3:9-10

⁹ **Do not lie to one another**, seeing that you have **put off the old self** (*anthropos*) with its practices ¹⁰ and have **put on the new self**, which is being **renewed** in knowledge after **the image of its creator**.

Ephesians 4:15, 25

¹⁵ Speaking **the truth** in love, we are to **grow up** in every way into him who is the head, **into Christ**. ...

²⁵ Therefore, having **put away falsehood**, let each one of you **speak the truth with his neighbor**, for we are members one of another.

Swearing an Oath, Making a Vow

In following Jesus' "antitheses" in his sermon, it is easy to see the importance of issues of killing, rage, adultery, lust, etc. It's harder for us to sense what is at stake in this text: Don't swear falsely. Fulfill what you swear to do. Why would Jesus bring this up?

The text (v.33) refers to two related kinds of promises: An oath between people in which God's name (Yahweh or substitute) is used to guarantee the truth of a statement (2Sam 14:11).

A vow is a person's promise to God that if God gives some blessing, the person will bring some sacrifice or gift to God (Gen 28:20-22; 1Sam 1:11). Both are very common in the OT.

Both oaths and vows were language that had to be taken seriously. The 10 commandments lie behind them. They were a basic part of the legal and religious structure of society.

Why is Jesus so Concerned with Oaths and Vows?

It's important to remember that in the antitheses Jesus uses hyper-rigorous legal language to show that God's will cannot be reached by legal means, not to establish harsher law.

The law deals with sin management. The very structure makes room for lying as the default position of life. People lie in a great variety of ways more or less all the time. We deceive ourselves and others. An oath imposes legal responsibility but does not guarantee truth.

Vows add the factor of bargaining with God. Worship becomes payment for goods received.

Both open themselves to legal nitpicking. What wording is legally binding and enforceable.

Jesus especially saw this in the expansion of traditions about precise wording of oaths.

Jesus says the righteousness of God's rule in life emphasizes truthfulness in the ordinary, everyday talk of life, not just in special weighted language. The disciple learns to trust God and thus to trust truthfulness. Often our lies are defensive substitutes for trusting God.

We seek to overcome self-deception. Part of that is to realize that most oaths (by heaven or earth) are self-conceit. God's will is simple honesty – Yes or no. It clarifies and simplifies life. (No work to keep our deceptions straight.) Jesus says, Don't be satisfied with less.

Truth-telling and Growth into Christ

In the early Christian communities, honesty was basic to the creation of a new, revolutionary kind of relationship among people with Jesus at the center. In Colossians, Paul describes this honesty as putting on a new self that renews the image of God in us – a new creation.

In Ephesians, Paul describes growing up into Christ by "speaking the truth in love" – not using "truth" as a hurtful bludgeon against others. Because we share a common life, we can take off self-protective, self-deceived masks to be ourselves before God and others.