

Let Your “Yes” Be “Yes”

Matthew 5:33-37

Once again Jesus brings up something that is problematic for these Jews. Not because they sought to be dishonest, but because they had been led to believe that it was OK to be dishonest by the religious leaders of their time. That is why Jesus once again says, *“You have heard...”*. Jesus was not saying that what they had heard was truth, quite the contrary. Jesus goes on to say in His usual manner, *“but I say to you...”*.

Some have taught that this passage forbids oaths. But once again I call your attention to Jesus’ words, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* Under OT law Jews could take oaths but it was very specific in how they were done. If Jesus was here forbidding oaths, then He would have been changing the Law (abolishing) which He said He had not come to do. Numbers 30:2 is one verse being referenced by Jesus – *“When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.”* Also, Deuteronomy 23:21 – *“If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”* So, within the ancient nation of Israel there had to be laws that dealt with those who would swear to something and then have it turn out to be not true. That’s what Jesus is referencing here.

Jesus is talking about “radical reliability” as we deal with one another. In His world the Jews had come to be somewhat untrustworthy. It had gotten so bad that laws were passed where Jews lived to give local some semblance of peace within transactions. You see, it was quite common for a Jew of this time to take an oath to do something with no intent of following through. This was due to the teachings of the Pharisees which gave them cover if anything in the world “came up” to keep them from keeping their word.

In the Mishnah – a collection of Jewish rabbinic interpretations and traditions – there’s an entire section called Shebuoth that’s about which oaths are binding, and which are not depending on what you swore by. Other rabbis of Jesus’ day were teaching things like, “Well if you swore by the temple, that’s not that big of a deal, but if you swore by the gold on the temple, now that’s a hard one to get out of”

We come up with ways to assure people that we are telling the truth and mean it. “I’m serious.” “I’m really serious.” “No, this time I’m completely and totally and utterly serious. “I promise.” “I promise with all my heart.” “Cross my heart and hope to die.” Etc... The people of Jesus’ day had taken the idea of oaths, which were regulated in the OT, and built an elaborate system for exonerating themselves for not speaking truthfully or not keeping their word if circumstances changed. They thought they could avoid the penalties of not being completely true to their word by getting off on a technicality.

Jesus isn’t jumping into that debate with his own distinction about which oaths really count. He does away with all the discussion about what oaths are binding and what are not and just says, ***“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one”*** (v. 37). The devil is ***“the father of lies”*** (Jn. 8:44), after all – adept at manipulating and tampering with truth. As one person has summarized, “A simple Yes or No should be all that is needed. As soon as it is necessary to bolster it with an oath to persuade others to believe what is said, the ideal of transparent truthfulness [radical reliability] has been compromised.

Jesus’ brother James repeats the teaching – ***“Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No,’ no”*** (James 5:12). So, it must have been something that came to be taken very seriously in the Jesus community. Christians are to be people of radical reliability. Their word is as good as gold. Jesus is simply teaching us to be honest and reliable at all times.

What Does It Mean for Us today?

First, are you the kind of person that nobody doubts when you affirm something? Do you know folks that you take what they say with a grain of salt? Why? Because they are people that are prone to exaggeration? You don't really take them seriously. This includes people who are insecure – they talk about themselves a lot or they need to be the authority on every subject, so they can be the center of the conversation. You may not be a pathological liar, but there may be subtle ways that you find to justify in your mind spinning the truth to make you look good or make things easier for yourself. Jesus is teaching his followers that this is unacceptable.

Second, and probably more to the point, are you known as a man or woman of your word? Oaths were primarily used not to back up an attestation to the facts – “I swear, I only weigh 120 lbs!” – but to back up a promise of future actions (not past or present realities but future intentions). And so, Christians should be people who when they say they're going to do something, they do it! When we sign all those papers at the title office and say we're going to pay our mortgage, we do it, even if it means beans and rice for every meal for the next 30 years! We gave our word. The same with student loans, even if there may be ways around it, loopholes, to default, we don't do that. This applies across the board.

We're talking about being a thoroughly dependable person, radically reliable, in the real stuff of everyday life without being overly heroic. I mean the kind of person who says, “Let's do this on this date,” and no matter what comes up you try your absolute best to be there. Better yet, you say, “I'll see you at 7:00,” and you show up at 7:00. You know the people, I'm sure, that when they say they'll do something you don't really expect it anymore. You kind of plan on there being some story. You just eventually end up forgetting about it. We should all be the kind of people that if there's something we said we'd do, and it's not done people are instinctually thinking, “Oh my, this is not like him.”

We can say things so flippantly and break our word so easily. Even if taking out the trash at the end of the day is inconvenient, you do it because you said you would. Even if being there for a friend whose situation has turned out to be far needier and more complicated than you ever imagined and other more appealing options have come your way so that to stick to your word would mean not just inconvenience but severe hurt (financial, emotional, time, comfort), you do it and say good bye to other dreams. We're talking about radical reliability here. People of their word.

So, don't miss the point in trying to apply this and just focus on external matters like this, rather examine your heart to see what you're trying to do with your words. You can even keep your word to your friend impeccably and be by their side dutifully living up to the letter of your promise but not do it out of love for him or her, but rather love for yourself... because you love to be thought of as the man of his word. **That's not the point.** It's about how we use our words to represent reality. Is it to impress people? Is it to get people off your back? Is it to protect yourself? Are you someone that people find trustworthy? When speak out, it's true. When you say you'll do something, you do it.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul explains his character of radical reliability considering his plans for visiting the Corinthians. He says: ***“Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”***

All of God's promises, from Genesis 3:15 and destroying the work of the devil to 2 Samuel 7 and a Davidic king to rule righteously forever to the prophet Zechariah and removing sin in a single day. God is true.

God's proven commitment to keep his word is our only hope and a firm anchor for the soul in a world filled with uncertainty, lies, and deception, where we don't really know who we can trust. God is a personal God who calls us into a relationship with him. He promises to be our God and that we shall be His people (i.e. Jer. 31:33). And in this relationship, built on His promises and not our virtue, we begin to look more and more like Him.

Remember how Jesus said that evasiveness comes from the evil one? Well then, the counter-assertion must be that radical reliability comes from the Lord. In Christ, I become a person of truth from the inside out. It is possible to "watch our mouth" for short periods of time in certain circumstances, but when there is desperation or pressure, the true inner man will surface. We will be able to see this in what people say during these times.

God promises, and God fulfills. So, it's not like we just have a bunch of promises and we're banking on God to be true to his word and come through. No, God has a proven track record of follow-through. From the opening pages of Genesis through the events of the NT you see that God is making good on his promises time and time again, most notably in the person of Jesus.

So, let each of us be the kind of person that says what we mean and mean what we say. If we do that, we honor God and show respect to our fellow man.