

You Said, But I Say – Part 6

“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.’ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil.” – Matthew 5:33-37

“Speech! . . . it is the utterance of the soul”, F.B. Meyer once said. “What a wonderful gift is human speech. To what heights it may rise, to what depths descend. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing” (Ja. 3:9-11).

Our Lord continues in this great gospel and manifesto of the King to demonstrate and illustrate the conditions of belonging to His Kingdom. He proceeds to define in a confrontive, bold and stark fashion, the righteousness that **MUST** “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” (v.20). He reveals the gross inadequacies of human religion and strips bare the phoniness and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and those that followed their lies. In this greatest sermon of the Bible, Jesus unmask the religion of human achievement and establishes the religion of Divine accomplishment. The Pharisees had become so enamored with their bogus piousness, it was as though they were looking for a vacancy in the Trinity. In Matthew 15:9, Jesus describes the essence of their smug, self-righteous attitude, “But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.”

In many instances Jesus recalls to the Jewish mind what they should have already known. The Jews had their own saying, “The world stands fast on three things: on justice, on truth, and on peace.” “Four persons are shut out from the presence of God — the hypocrite, the liar, and the retailer of slander.” “One who has given his word and who changes it is as bad as an idolater.” The issue and standard of telling the truth had degenerated to nothing more than the childhood game of King’s X. Do you remember making a promise to someone, and at the time having one of your fingers crossed behind your back? That’s the game of King’s X — which meant the promise didn’t have to be kept. In contrast, it was a Roman orator who once said, “Truth is the highest thing a man may experience.” Daniel Webster stated, “There is nothing as powerful as truth and often nothing as strange.”

The very words of Scripture should have provided the principle foundation in the issue of honesty, truth and promises. Numbers 30:2 states, “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.” Also, Deuteronomy 23 records the following words, “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” (v.21). One of the subjects that Jesus plainly deals with here in this passage is the issue of making a vow or promise, then breaking it.

The Jews had flawed the Old Testament teaching mainly in two ways. First, they had bypassed the seriousness and proper circumstance required for making oaths and had resorted to making oaths for any purpose. Oaths had become so insincere and indiscriminate that no one took them seriously. Secondly, perversion of God’s truth turned oath-taking into lie-making. As long as the oath was not made in the Lord’s name, it was not considered binding. The command in Leviticus 19:12 “And you shall not swear falsely by My name” was conveniently translated that swearing by any other name was allowed.

Jesus simply says here, “Make no oath at all.” Commentator William Hendrickson states, “What we have here in Matthew 5:33-37 (cf. James 5:12) is the condemnation of the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oath, used in order to make an impression or to spice daily conversation. Over against that evil Jesus commends simple truthfulness in thought, word and deed.” Jesus is not forbidding making oaths under any circumstance, for he stated previously in Matthew 5:17 that He did not come to destroy the Law which taught proper oath taking and the keeping of vows. Under the Mosaic Law making a vow or an oath consisted of making a statement and calling God to witness the truth of the statement, and invoking a curse from God if in fact you were not telling the truth. Oaths were reserved for special and solemn occasions, much like our society today during court proceedings and the reciting of marriage vows.

In many Old Testament instances God endorses the teaching of taking vows in His Name (Re: Deut. 6:13, Is. 65:16, Jer. 12:16).

The fallacy of the Jews was in swearing by things like heaven, earth, Jerusalem and even by the hairs of their own head. In their mind, these were things of great importance, but because they were of less importance, the oath was less binding — so they thought. Jesus counters this thinking in another passage: “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. You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it (Mat. 23:16-22).

The simple meaning is this: when the truth is profaned, God’s name is profaned. Quoting a prominent pastor, “To carelessly and dishonestly call any part of His creation as a witness to a false oath is to dishonor God Himself, whether or not His name is invoked.” To associate God’s name with anything dishonest, deceitful, insincere, or knowingly false, is wicked and sinful. It is a lie against God and every lie dishonors His name. William Barclay states, “Here is a great eternal truth. Life cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved and in others of which He is not involved; there cannot be one kind of language in the Church and another kind of language in the shipyard or the factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of conduct in the Church and another kind of conduct in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life, and kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life and in every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in His name; He hears all the words; and there cannot be any such thing as a form of words which evades bringing God into any transaction. We will regard all promises as sacred if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God.”

And finally, “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’” The word “statement” or “communication” (KJV) is the Greek word “logos” {log’-os}, which simply translated refers to our “simple, normal, daily discourse and speech.” Our words, message and speech should be our bond without any additional enhancement or adornment. In our conversations, let truth be our watchword. Much of our society today is based on a huge network of fabrication; shading the truth, exaggeration, failing to keep promises (are they needed if our word is our bond?), betraying confidences, making excuses, etc. Someone once said, “Oaths arise because men are so often liars.” We know who the father of lies is (Jn. 8:44). Scripture clearly warns, “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight.”

– Article submitted by Chuck Wetzel
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