

*“Truth-speaking in the Presence of God”*

Matthew 5:33-37

May 27, 2018

**Illus:** You never know when someone may be watching you. How often are you aware that God is watching and listening to you?

I can't tell you how many times over the years I have been having a conversation with someone, when in mid-sentence, they interject something like, "I better be careful what I say, I'm in a church." Apparently, many people are more aware that God is listening when they are in a church. My question is, do conversations outside the church or non-religious conversations, carry less weight with God than those in a place of worship or discussions that particularly center around spiritual matters?

Perhaps the answer is yes and no. No, in the sense that we are no less accountable before God for what we say in the coffee shop than what we say in church. Yes, in the sense that what we say about God is much greater significance and weight than what we say about the weather—although, be careful here, God is charge of the weather.

What am I getting at? What we need to take hold of in Matt 5:33-37 is that everything we say matters. Every word you speak is weighed out before the God of heaven. In Matthew 12:36, Jesus said, **“Every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for in the day of judgment” (Mt 12:36)**. Take a moment, and just let that sink in—every word matters.

If you are going to have an authentic biblical world view, one thing you need to understand is that “God has no separate categories for sacred and secular.”<sup>1</sup> God does not have separate standards for what we consider to be either sacred or secular. Nothing is irrelevant to God's judgment because it is considered secular. God weights all things in relationship to Himself, as either holy and righteous or as sinful.

Now its still helpful to use the term secular, but we must be clear about what we mean by that term. Secular does not refer to an aspect of life that doesn't matter to God, as though some matters are spiritually irrelevance or spiritually neutral. Nothing is spiritually neutral or irrelevant to God. Everything matters to God.

From a theological perspective, secularism is the functional denial of the presence and relevance of God. More specifically, secular refers to the denial of God has all knowing (omniscient), the denial of God has everywhere -present (omnipresent) and the denial of God has holy (He positively favors purity and He is never casual toward sin but always purposefully opposes it).

That which is sacred is that which is devoted to God or associated with God. But what then is secular? Secular refers to living as though God is not there, not aware, and his holiness is irrelevant in matters of everyday life.

But in the Bible, God did not divide life into the sacred and secular for His people. All of life was sacred for God's people. That's why there were so many laws regarding food and even clothing. These laws were meant to be instructive, to teach people in every respect of life to live as unto the Lord ( “I am the Lord”—160 x's). The only other category of life in the OT was pagan (worldly in the NT). Paganism or worldliness is life lived in rejection of God, which was never an option for God's people. God has no secondary standards for what we see as secular. Nothing is neutral when it comes to His spiritual evaluation of things. There is no realm of life to which God is irrelevant.

God sees Himself as the ultimate point of reference for all things, so that all of life is to be regarded as sacred before Him. Even the pagan world that utterly rejects God stands in relationship to God as their judge. To put it simply, God is either your Judge for your Father. And as your Father, no aspect of life is spiritually neutral. Every aspect of life should be lived as sacred, as devoted to the Lord.

---

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 1-7*, pg 325.

When we truly take hold of a biblical worldview, when we see all of life as God sees it, it will change everything for us. Suddenly all of life is lived as in the presence of God, and we are aware that God judges all things according to His holiness. Regardless of where we are (sanctuary, coffee shop, locker room) it will change the way we speak, what we do, and how we treat people.

In fact, we might even find ourselves speaking less. Eccl 5:1 says, *“Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; **therefore let your words be few.**”*—what you need to know is that you are always in God’s presence! Prov 10:19 says, *“When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”* With a worldview where God is all-knowing, everywhere-present and holy, we will find ourselves living out the spirit of Matt 5:33-37, being careful to be truthful in all our speech.

Here’s what I want you to take home from today’s message:

***Believers must be so mindful of the presence and character of God as everywhere-present (omnipresent), all-knowing (omniscient), and holy that our daily speech and conduct is marked by unqualified truthfulness and integrity.***

In Mt 5:33-37, Jesus takes up the matter of oath-speaking as a way of demonstrating the faulty tradition of the scribes and Pharisees and as a means of calling us to a true righteousness marked by truth and integrity. **[Matt 5:33-36]**

In order to get at the heart of what Jesus is calling us to, we need to understand the background of the Jewish tradition that He was correcting.

In the OT we find commands like:

- Lev 19:12, “You shall not swear falsely by my name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.”
- 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.

- Deut 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. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you.

From these passages we can see that taking an oath or making a vow before God was not to be taken lightly. It was a way of marking the seriousness of a promise or the truthfulness of a statement by acknowledging that God Himself would meet out the punishment if the promise was broken or the statement was a lie. In other words, an oath says, “I have to answer to God for what I’m saying.”

However, the scribes and Pharisees began to distort the intent of these passages for self-serving purposes. They understood the command, “You shall not swear falsely by My name” (Lev 19:12) as absolutely binding, which is correct. If you swear to a promise by God’s name, you are bound to either fulfill it or to face God’s punishment. Where they erred, was saying that a promise was only binding when sworn to in God’s name. If was sworn to by any other name, like the hair on your head, then one was not bound to fulfill it.

Or they would take Num 30:2 which says, *“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 they would interpret it to mean that to renege on an oath made to anyone else but God, was not a serious matter.

This developed into a complex and ridiculous system of evaluating what oaths were more binding than others. This was determined by the object sworn by and how closely associated it was to the Lord. So the more closely they thought it was to the Divine, the more binding it was. If they thought it not closely associated to the divine, it was considered inconsequential.

For example, we know from Matthew 23 that the Pharisees considered an oath sworn by the temple as not binding, while an oath sworn by the gold of the temple was binding. Or they would say, “whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.” But Jesus denounced this foolishness in Matt 23 saying, “You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?...which is more important the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? (Matt 23:16-20).

Why would the Scribes and Pharisees play these kinds of games? Because the human heart is prone to falsehood on one hand, while seeking to maintain an impression of honesty on the other. What developed was a common practice of using oaths in everyday conversations about frivolous things in order to give an appearance of truth-speaking. Yet they were being deceptive because they didn't really intend to keep their promise. They did this by swearing oaths by something other than God Himself so as to not be ultimately bound to keep their word.

It is this twisted. They were making oaths, meant for verifying truthfulness, as a covering for deceitful lying and dishonesty.

But Jesus restores the intent of the OT commands by calling for straight-forward truth speaking. [vs. 34-37]

Jesus reminds us here that nothing is ultimately disassociated from God. Because all things are under His jurisdiction, every promise made is binding before God. Every promise is made in His presence.

So Jesus says, if you make an oath by heaven, it is God's throne. If you make an oath by earth, it is His footstool. If you make an oath by Jerusalem, it is His city. You make an oath by your head, but only God has the power to determine what hair color you are born with. Here's the life principle: ***You can never escape the presence of God as supreme over all things. He is everywhere-present, all-knowing, and He is holy. So speak always and only as though you are in the presence of God!***

So what difference does it make? It means that your "yes" will mean yes, and your "no" will mean no. You will speak the truth and keep your word because every word is weighted by God. Your life will be marked by integrity because you walk in the fear of the Lord who Himself is always true and always keeps His promises.

I don't think its difficult for us to see the underlying principle and the driving truth of this passage. In Paul's words, "*lay aside falsehood and speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor*" (Eph 4:25).

But what do we do with the matter of oaths? Based on Jesus' words, are we to absolutely abstain from all vows or oaths? Should we make wedding vows? Is it proper for a believer to speak under oath in a court of law? At first blush, it seems as though Jesus is outlawing any oath-speaking, and some zealous believers have taken it to mean that over the course of history.

However, I believe the right interpretation is that Jesus is denouncing a certain kind do oath-taking that swears by anything other than His name, with the intent of deception and dishonesty. In other words, stop taking oaths in the name of heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or by your own head because you think it makes you less liable to judgment if you don't keep your word.

Now I realize that the words, "make no oath at all" in vs. 34 are very strong, so that burden is on me to support my interpretation. First, note that the sentence goes on to qualify what kind of oaths we are to not make at all. Let me give you several other reasons as to why Jesus is denouncing dishonest and frivolous oath-speaking rather than all oath-speaking.

1. Oath-speaking itself is not sinful because it was commanded in Deut 6:13: "You shall fear *only* the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name."
2. Jesus prefaced His teaching on oaths back in vs. 17 by saying, "do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." So Jesus' purpose is not to undo Deut 6:13, but to recover is proper intent of ensuring truth in our speaking and integrity in keeping our promises.
3. The apostle Paul, later writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, verified the truthfulness of his life and ministry by speaking under oath in the name of the Lord. He did this at least 5 times in the NT.<sup>2</sup> For example, Gal 1:20—"Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God, that I am not lying."

---

<sup>2</sup> Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess 2:5; Gal 1:20

4. Jesus Himself did not object to testifying under oath when the high priest demanded, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God."
5. Hebrews 6:16 attests that the purpose of an oath is a confirmation to put an end to every dispute.
6. Finally, in Rev 10:4-6, God Himself commissions an angel to swear by God's name that the Creator stood behind His word.

So is it proper for believers to make oaths and vows? Absolutely, but only inasmuch as they are in the fear of God Himself for the sake of verifying truth. What Jesus is warning us against is:

- Oath-speaking that is meant to make an impression of truthfulness or promise-keeping without the intent of truthfulness or promise-keeping.
- Oath-speaking in any other name but the God of heaven. He only is the judge to reward faithfulness and punish unfaithfulness.
- Oath-speaking on trivial, frivolous matters. In the Bible oaths were reserved for matters of great importance. Vows made in the fear of the Lord, such as wedding vows, mark the significance of the commitment made.
- Oath-speaking that is rash and foolish like Jephthah in Judges 11:30-31 who vowed to sacrifice whoever came out of the door of his house next, and it was his daughter. Rather vows and oaths should be made thoughtfully, advisably, discreetly, and reverently in the fear of the Lord.

Yet the principle of Matt 5:33-37 extends beyond the matter of oaths. Believers' words must be thoroughly truthful. For example,

- No lies, half-truths, or misrepresentations
- Not being completely truthful about your thoughts or feelings because you don't want to disagree with someone out of a people-pleasing heart (MN-nice may seem polite, but may not be holy)
- Not given to Exaggeration
- No promises you don't intend to keep (I'll give you a call)

The attitude of the those in God's kingdom is captured in Psalm 15:1-4:

*"O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart. He does not slander with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor takes up a reproach against his friend; In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, But who honors those who fear the LORD; **He swears to his own hurt, and does not change...."***  
 In other words, his integrity is more important than his own welfare.

What would motivate us to live this way, to regard our word with such integrity that we would rather suffer loss than break our promise? A true biblical worldview, in which we live as though God is all-knowing, everywhere-present, and the one who Judges all things in reference to His holiness.

Prayer:

- God
- Heart
- Christ