

Integrity in Our Word & Commitment (Matt 5:33-37, 23:16-22)



Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most comprehensive teaching on Christian discipleship. How we are to be the light of the world, starting from the inside out. Jesus first dealt with:

- i. the spirit of anger
- ii. the spirit of immorality
- iii. honouring our marriage covenant

Jesus now touches on the subject of 'integrity in our words.' So much damage is done by broken promises and promises made without any intention to honour them. Jesus exposes the 'false teaching of the Pharisees' on making vows and oaths passed down through the *oral tradition*. Jesus highlights the *true spirit of the law*, God's original intention.

1. Oral Tradition

'...you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' (Matt 5:33 c.f. Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 10:20; 23:21-24)

- a. 'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.' (Ex 20:7)

Context: The holiness of God's name from the Ten Commandments.

Idea 1: God's name is holy, therefore do not misuse God's holy name. It will invoke His judgment.

- b. 'If a man makes a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.' (Num 30:2)

Context: The serious responsibility in making a vow before God.

Idea 2: You are to make oaths using God's holy name (YHWH) only on special occasions, and sparingly.

- c. 'You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD (YHWH).' (Main verse, Lev 19:12)

Context: To promote truthfulness and honesty in all social interactions (v11).

- d. 'You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him, you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.' (Deut 10:20)

Context: Social justice for the weak (v17-19). God shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless, widows, and strangers.

- e. 'When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be a sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be a sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.' (Deut. 23:21-23)

Context: warning to the rich on oppressing the poor with interest based on greed (v19-20) & warning to those who are milking the social welfare system (v24-25).

Why did God make a provision in the law to make a vow in His name?

To restrict man's tendency to lie, to promote truth, and maintain social and financial justice in society. But it must be used sparingly in serious situations only because it carries legal and spiritual implications. (C.f. Num 6:1-21]

2. True Intention of the Law of Vow/Oath

- a. Two levels of commitment: The ancient world did not use paper contracts since theirs was an oral culture. All human transactions were based on 'trust'. But because of the human tendency to lie, when a serious legal transaction took place between two parties, something more concrete and binding than a verbal

agreement was required, usually in the form of oaths. E.g. Oaths weren't used for borrowing lunch money, but for serious matters such as purchasing land, leaving a will, or making a marriage vow.

THREE Main Components of a Legal Transaction

- i. Record of the content (oral, or written if possible)
 - ii. Reliable witnesses (Ruth 4:7-12)
 - iii. Oath – invoking God's judgment on the party who breaks it. Hence, the 'fear of God' was called into the transaction made by oath. God was called in as the Witness and the Judge.
- b. What was God trying to teach His people? God was teaching the Israelites to be truthful in their words and dealings as God's holy people who represent God. As such, in legal situations they were to invoke God's name (YHWH), not the name of profane pagan deities, and be true and faithful to their words as God Himself is true and faithful to His Word.

This law of vow and oath was never about 'how to lie legally and get away with it.' It was all about 'how to live truthfully and have integrity with our words' in all our interactions, and all our business dealings with one another.

- c. Summary verse of the Sermon on the Mt: 'Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.' (Matt 5:48)

How do we know God is perfect and trustworthy? He is faithful and true to His word. If God was not faithful and true to His word, we cannot trust Him. 'If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.' (James 3:2)

3. How Did the Pharisees Distort This Law?

The Pharisees focused on the technicalities of wording in the law to find loopholes and get away with trespassing the law. They achieved this by:

- i. Wrong Emphasis

'...(1) You (2) shall not swear (3) by My name (emphasis) (4) falsely...' (Lev 19:12).

We can swear by something OTHER THAN God's name FALSELY.

- ii. Arbitrary-Graded System

'If a man makes a vow to the Lord....by 'some agreement,' he shall not break his word...' (Num 30:2)

They created a system of categories, which enabled them to make an evasive vow and not keep it. It is like having a contract paper with tiny unreadable disclaimers at the bottom. This practice promoted a 'culture of dishonesty based on technicalities.'

(1) heaven → (2) earth → (3) Jerusalem → temple (gold in it?) → altar (gift on it?) Matt 23:16-22

I can claim, 'I swear by this altar that I didn't eat your chicken!' with fingers crossed behind my back because there is no gift on the altar right now, therefore my vow by the altar now is not binding and effective.

But Jesus stated that every oath is, in effect, an ultimate reference to God who is over all His creation. Therefore, we do not escape the seriousness of breaking an oath based on technicalities.

- iii. Petty Application

They used vows in a non-binding legal situation to settle petty disputes in THEIR favour. E.g. 'Yes! I returned your cow last week, I swear to God!' This is not what the law intended.

Jesus was not banning all necessary vows such as the marriage vow, bearing witness before the court, etc. Jesus acknowledged the power of being put under a vow before the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:63-64). God took oaths, not because He sometimes lies, but to give us the full assurance of His commitment behind His unchanging words (Heb 6:13-18).

But we are not to use oaths lightly to just create arbitrary credibility because we lack it when we need it. Jesus said using vows in petty situations to gain an advantageous edge comes from evil motivation.

How then should we gain the credibility we need? From the past track record of our truthfulness and faithfulness to our words. *'But I say to you, do not swear...But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* *For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.'* (Matt 5:34-37)

Do not try to get extra credibility by putting God's name when it suits you. A middle eastern proverb: 'A man is as good as his words.'

4. Truth in Our Inmost Parts and Integrity in Our Words

'Behold, you desire truth in the inward parts.' (Ps 51:6)

- a. Our words are an extension of our 'character. Our word is our bond. Our words are not just sound waves that vanish into the thin air. Jesus said, *'But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give an account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'* (Matt 12:36-37)

None of our words get lost. There is a 'permanent record' of every word we speak on earth. One day we will have to give an account for every idle word we have spoken before the Lord.

- b. Integrity in our words means, 'no manipulation', 'no false (half) statements', or 'false commitments'. We choose 'truthfulness' over 'tactics' of worldly wisdom. It also means when we break our word, even little promises, we need to acknowledge them and put them right as far as we can. Often the number one relationship spoiler is the continuous breaking of small promises and not acknowledging them.
- c. Why is having integrity with our words so important as Christians?
 - i. We must tell the world the most amazing story of God's love. *'Who has believed our report? And to whom as the arm of the LORD been revealed?'* (Is 53:1) People are free to believe or to reject. But the truthfulness and honesty of our testimony ought not to be questioned because of our past track record with our words.
 - ii. God seeks truth in our innermost part. It matters to God.

'Who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who... speaks the truth in his heart...He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.' (Ps 15:1-4)

'Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not...sworn deceitfully.' (Ps 24:3-4)