

**Title:** “Say It If You Mean It”

**Text:** Matthew 5:33-37 (NIV)

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ <sup>34</sup>But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

**Lead Sentence:** How many of you have ever been hurt by a broken promise?

**Sermonic Exp.:** I’m sure we’ve all heard people say “I promise I’ll do that” or “You can count on me, I swear” sometimes even using God’s name to do so. In court, the oath “so help me God” is sometimes used to affirm that the truth will be told. And yet we’ve all experienced times when such assurances went unfulfilled. In modern politics people virtually expect that promises made are not going to be kept. But is this how a Christ-follower is to act?

**Proposition:** One’s integrity is demonstrated not by the commitments one makes but by the commitments one keeps.

**Introduction:** What is the bigger picture of these verses in the larger passage? This teaching of Jesus is a continuation of the previous “it was said” statements.

1. This phrase served as an introduction to a series of teachings in this “Sermon on the Mount.”
  - a. The first appears in v.21 where Jesus addressed the subject of anger.
  - b. The second use is found in v.27 where Jesus addressed the matter of lust.
  - c. The third, although abbreviated introductory form, is found in v.31 which introduces the topic of divorce.
  - d. In the passage under consideration (vs.33-37), Jesus addressed the issue of truth telling and keeping one’s word.
  - e. Following the present passage, this introductory statement is utilized twice more to introduce the matter of revenge (v.38) and loving one’s neighbor and enemy in v.43.
2. The phrase “those of old” or “the people long ago” probably had in mind the original recipients of the Mosaic law (*Matthew*, WBC vol 1, Hagner, 115).
3. The purpose of each of these statements was to highlight the distinction between obedience to the requirements of the law and obedience to the spirit of the law.
  - a. In this sermon Jesus taught that His followers are meant to be salt in and a light to the world (5:13, 14).
    - 1) These metaphors illustrate how Christ’s followers are to season and light the world with their presence as a reflection of God’s (as demonstrated in 5:3-12).
    - 2) The specific result was that non-believers were to “*see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*” (5:16).
  - b. This series of “it has been said” statements offered a contrast.
    - 1) They addressed the contrast between the activities of those who were the spiritual leaders of the first century, the Pharisees and teachers of the law referred to in v.20, and those who walked as followers of Christ. See discussion by Hagner (*Matthew* vol 1, WBC, 111).

- 2) Jesus explained that simply adhering to the requirements of the Law is not enough if one misses the whole spirit of the Law.
  - 3) Jesus affirmed that He had not come to “abolish” the law (v.17), so the statements that He gave were not meant to have that effect. Instead, He came to “fulfill” the law (v.17) and to demonstrate what true commitment to God’s law looked like.
- c. Jesus warned, “*Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven*” (v.20).
- 1) In what way could this happen if the Pharisees and teachers of the law were so fastidious in keeping the Law’s requirements?
    - a) Doesn’t this seem like an impossible task? On the surface it does but in reality these religious leaders obeyed the commandments but in the truest sense missed their point.
    - b) I would suggest that the remainder of chapters 5 and 6 broadly address the contrasts between the outwardly “righteous” behavior of the fastidious Pharisees and teachers of the law and the types of behavior that should be the lifestyle of the followers of Christ who “fulfills” the Law.
      - i. Hagner agrees stating, “Jesus expects ... a new and higher kind of righteousness that rests upon the presence of the eschatological kingdom he brings” (*Matthew*, vol. 1, WBC, Hagner 109).
      - ii. Furthermore, Hagner adds, “Jesus clearly calls his disciples to a way of righteousness, but it is a new way that rests upon the truth meaning of the Torah now delivered by the Messiah. To follow that teaching is to follow the path that leads to perfection (5:48)” (*Matthew*, vol. 1, WBC, Hagner 109).
  - 2) Let’s take an exegetical look at the passage with v.20 in mind.
    - a) The Pharisees and teachers of the law didn’t murder according to the commandments in the law (v.21), but Jesus demonstrated that murder was more than an action – it is an internal feeling toward others (v.22).
    - b) The Pharisees and teachers of the law didn’t commit adultery according to the commandments of the law (v.27), but Jesus explained that adultery is more than a physical action; it is a mindset which degrades others (v.28).
    - c) The Pharisees and teachers of the law followed the letter of the law in giving a written certificate of divorce to their wives (v.31), but divorce was never God’s intent and in fact those men who divorced were culpable for their wives becoming adulteresses when they were forced to marry another man to survive (v.32).
    - d) The Pharisees and teachers of the law made oaths to demonstrate the seriousness of their commitments (v.33), but oath making actually revealed something about the unreliable character of the one who swore the oath. Just meaning what is said is the right thing to do (v.37).
    - e) The Pharisees and teachers of the law used Scripture to justify revenge (v.38), but revenge is not God’s desire but rather love and submission (v.39).
    - f) The Pharisees and teachers of the law may have loved their neighbors (v.43) but acting like God is more than loving those who love you back. Truly acting like God is loving those who hate you as well (v.44).

These contrasts don't end in chapter 5 and I would content continue this discussion into chapter 6.

- g) The Pharisees and teachers of the law acted righteously and did good deeds (6:1; see contrast in 5:16), but Jesus reminded His disciples that good works are to be felt not “telt” (6:2-4).
  - h) The Pharisees and teachers of the law (likely the ones referred to as “*hypocrites*” in 6:5) prayed publicly to demonstrate their religious fervor to others (6:5), but prayer was not meant to impress man but to touch God (6:6).
  - i) The Pharisees and teachers of the law (again likely the referent of the term “*hypocrites*” in v.16) fasted and made their suffering obvious to all (6:16), but Jesus affirmed that fasting is not meant to be a public show of one's pride but a private display of one's humility.
  - j) Though not as clearly linked to this group, it would also seem that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were storing up treasures on earth to impress others (6:19), but Jesus reminded His disciples that real treasure is that which is stored up in heaven (6:20).
- 3) So what did Jesus mean when He concluded the six contrasting statements of chapter 5 with the command, “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (v.48)?
- a) In light of this whole chapter, and especially as it relates to 5:20, this verse would seem to mean that the disciples are not to be “perfect” or righteous like the Pharisees and teachers of the law are perfect since their perfection in keeping the Law often missed the point.
  - b) Rather, they were commanded to be perfect like their heavenly Father in true perfection (in all the ways outlined in these examples). In other words, Jesus' disciples are to live by His interpretation of the Law which encompasses the spirit of the commands not merely by the “legalities” of the traditional interpretations.
  - c) Hagner confirms this understanding.
    - i. “This call does not differ from that in the OT: ‘Be holy for I, the Lord God, am holy’” (Lev 19:2) (*Matthew*, vol.1 WBC, 135).
    - ii. “The perfection here is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, but now according to its definitive interpretation by the Messiah who brings the kingdom” (*Matthew*, vol.1 WBC, 135).
    - iii. “Through the coming of the kingdom, the disciples are thus called to be ‘perfect’ as their Father is perfect. The righteousness of the kingdom can be satisfied by nothing less. And as the disciples live out this righteousness, they confirm their identity as ‘children of the heavenly Father.’ This is an ethic that will startle those who experience it; it is an ethic that will inevitably shine like light in a dark place and cause the Father to be glorified (v.16)” (*Matthew*, vol.1 WBC, 136).
  - d. To restate, in essence these teachings were meant to demonstrate that true spirituality is not demonstrated by adherence to outward rules and commands, but rather true spirituality is measured by the attitudes of the heart.

**Transition Sentence:** What do Jesus' comments about first-century oaths in Matthew 5 have to teach Christians today?

- I. Oath taking and promise-making assures others that one's word will be performed (vs.33-36).
- A. "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made'" (v.33). What was this statement Jesus referred to and what did it mean?
1. The verb *epiorkeo* in v.33 is used only once in the New Testament although it has close relations to other words in its family.
    - a. In its usage in non-biblical Greek (which is the only thing which can be compared to here), the word can either mean "to swear falsely" (as translated by the KJV, ESV, NASB, RSV) as in the sense of committing perjury or "to break a sworn oath" (as translated by the NIV, NLT, CSB) (*TDNT*, vol. 5, 467).
    - b. Because this word is only used once in the NT, it is difficult to determine which of the two meanings is the correct one in the context since both could apply.
    - c. While this verb is not used again, Matthew uses the related familial noun "oath" 3 other times, twice to refer to the promise Herod made to Herodias which resulted in the execution of John the Baptist and a third time in relation to the (false) oath by which Peter denied Jesus.
    - d. These are definitely two different issues – one is lying under oath or making a false statement while the other is breaking one's word.
      - 1) However, both issues relate to one underlying premise, namely, that one's word is not reliable. It is possible that Matthew's choice of wording here is meant to be unclear because it is applicable to both matters.
      - 2) In other words, "don't make a statement you don't mean" and "don't break your word when you give it."
  2. Although not a direct quotation of one particular Old Testament passage, this statement probably references and summarized passages such as Lev. 19:12, Ex.20:7, and Num.30:2.
    - a. Lev. 19:12 commanded, "*Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.*"
    - b. Ex.20:7 directed, "*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*"
    - c. Num.30:2 taught, "*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.*"
    - d. Even though not part of the law, Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 addressed this important issue as well. "<sup>4</sup>*When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. <sup>5</sup>It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. <sup>6</sup>Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, 'My vow was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?"*
  3. Oath taking and oath breaking was an issue that apparently was common among the religious in Jesus' time.

- a. Oath taking was a common action in this era.
  - 1) In Greek and Roman contexts oaths were taken to guarantee trustworthiness and reliability of one's statements.
    - a) These were often verified by swearing in the name of one or more gods.
    - b) There were even different degrees of oaths attested "as faith in the force of an oath declined" (TDNT, vol. 5, 459).
  - 2) In the ancient Hebrew contexts, one of the most common oath formulas uttered was "as surely as the Lord lives" (used about 41 times in the OT).
    - a) Those who broke their oaths would be cursed (Is 65:15, Jer 29:22, Nu 5:21, Job 31:8, 10, 22, 40).
    - b) And yet the prophets noted that such oaths could be used falsely and thus irreverently by taking God's name in vain (Jer 5:2; Jer 7:9; Zech 5:3-4; Mal 3:5).
  - 3) In a similar way to the Greeks and Romans, levels of oaths were apparently taken to demonstrate the commitment level of the individual swearing.
    - a) Matthew 23:16-22 records Jesus scolding rebuke to the Pharisees on this subject. *"<sup>16</sup>Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.' <sup>17</sup>You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? <sup>18</sup>You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' <sup>19</sup>You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? <sup>20</sup>Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. <sup>21</sup>And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. <sup>22</sup>And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."*
      - i. If one simply swore an oath by the temple, he could be let off (despite the fact that God dwelt in the temple! v.21). But if one swore an oath by the gold in the temple, then he was obligated to keep the oath.
      - ii. The same types of statements were uttered related to the altar and the gift that was on it. What an abuse of one's words!
    - b) This passage is not at all contradictory to Jesus' prior teaching in Matthew 5, but in fact is complimentary to it. As will be revealed from this passage, regardless of what oath is uttered, all promises and commitments are to be kept.
- b. There was at least one religious group in Palestine that apparently concurred with Jesus' teaching on oaths, the Essenes. According to Josephus' writings in the Wars of the Jews, among the Essenes "whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath; but swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury for they say that he who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God is already condemned." (Wars of the Jews. Book 2, Chapter 8, Section 6.)

4. As seen, the law and other biblical passages quite emphatically taught the importance of keeping vows made to God, but it appears that in Jesus' time the use of various oath formulas was "more often a means of avoiding what is promised than of performing it" (*Matthew*, WBC vol 1, Hagner 127). For this reason, Jesus' contrasting statement in verse 34 revealed the necessity of truthfulness in all of our communications.

B. Illustration:

In the movie *Mary Poppins*, the two children, Jane and Michael Banks, jumped into bed after their incredible first day with the amazing Mary Poppins. Jane asked, "Mary Poppins, you won't ever leave us, will you?" Michael, full of excitement, looked at his new nanny and added, "Will you stay if we promise to be good?" Mary looked at the two and as she tucked them in replied, "Look, that's a pie-crust promise. Easily made, easily broken!" (From *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* by Michael Green, pgs 392-393)

C. Application:

How many "pie-crust promises" have we made in our lives? While those in the first century Jewish world made promises by swearing by holy things like those mentioned in this text, today people often add "I promise" or "I swear" to statements to affirm that their words are believable. And yet some of these statements are said with nothing but the air to back them up. This is not the way God intends His followers to live as "lights" and "salt" in the world. There is a "more righteous" way to live.

**Transitional Sentence:** So just how can we be more righteous than the Pharisees and teachers of the law in relation to our speech?

II. Oath taking and promise-making are unnecessary for those who exemplify integrity of speech (v.37).

A. The phrase "*But I say to you*" (v.34) records Jesus' clarifications about obeying God's commands.

1. In addition to the present passage, these statements are also found in:

- a. v.22: "*But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister....*"
- b. v.28: "*But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully ....*"
- c. v.32: "*But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife....*"
- d. v.39: "*But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.*"
- e. v.44: "*But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....*"

2. As a reminder, Jesus' point is that keeping the commands of the law does not necessarily mean one is righteous (v.20).

3. Each of these statements demonstrates the interpretation of the Torah from an authoritative source (hence the amazement of the crowds in 7:29). As Hagner notes, these statements demonstrate that it is "the Messiah's interpretation of the Torah that is finally authoritative" (*Matthew* vol 1, WBC, Hagner, 111).

B. There is no need for a person of integrity to take oaths when making commitments.

1. Jesus didn't provide the "right" oath formula (magic words) which one should use to confirm a promise nor did He provide "five easy steps to keeping your promises." Rather, Jesus surprisingly negated the need for oaths at all!

- a. One should not swear by heaven because it is the residence of God (v.34).
  - b. One should not swear by earth because it is part of God's royal throne room (v.35).
  - c. One should not swear by Jerusalem because it is likewise the city in which the Lord chose to place His presence (v.35).
  - d. One should not even swear by himself (the hair of my chinny-chin-chin) because the ability to control even the smallest of human functions belongs to God alone (v.36).
2. Instead of taking oaths as assurances, the radical solution offered by Jesus in v.37 is simply say "yes" or "no" when asked to do something and then just do whatever you said.
- a. Because of this verse, I don't think that Jesus is prohibiting making commitments to God or others (in essence promises). What the context indicates is that Jesus instructs that there is no need to make assurances about promises by the use of oath formulas such as "I swear", "I promise," etc.
  - b. Simply saying yes or no and meaning it demonstrates that one is able to keep his word at all times.
    - 1) No formulas or magic words are needed to assure someone that we are going to do what we say.
    - 2) A person of integrity simply does what he/she says ALL THE TIME. PERIOD.
  - c. This instruction is not merely good advice that Jesus offered to His disciples. According to Jesus, being a person who makes empty promises endangers oneself spiritually.
    - 1) The last phrase of Jesus' instruction warns "*anything beyond this comes from the evil one*" (v.37).
    - 2) Most translations render this phrase "comes from evil" which could indicate that there is an evil intent when promises are made (not intending to keep them in the first place) or at minimum that making promises by oaths opens the door to evil because of the possibility of failing to keep them.
      - a) The NIV reading, however, is that this comes from the "evil one." This possibility is usually added as a footnote in other modern translations.
      - b) In this case, it would seem, the NIV has chosen the more accurate translation "the evil one."
        - i. This Greek word *ponerou* is an adjective standing all by itself without a noun to modify (technically called a substantive adjective).
        - ii. When this construction occurs, the word is meant to act as a noun and it is quite appropriate to add "one" to it in the English translation. It is like using the word "red" this way in English. Asking about whether you like the blue car, the white car, or the red car, one might simply reply "the red." The adjective in that way is used as a noun as in the "red one."
        - iii. So the passage is not simply saying that it is from an evil source or leads to evil, but this statement of Jesus suggested that the taking of oaths comes from the "evil one."

- iv. This usage of this adjective is found in other places in Matthew, too, and in each case is best translated as the “evil one” (6:13, 13:19, 13:38) who is clearly linked with the “devil” in Matthew 13:39.
  - v. Daniel Wallace affirms this understanding when he explains, “In the context of Matthew’s Gospel, such deliverance [referencing 6:13] from the devil seems to be linked to Jesus’ temptation in 4:1-10: Because the Spirit led him into temptation by the evil one, believers now participate in his victory” (233; see also 294).
  - c) What this passage is saying via this phrase is that anything more than just keeping one’s word (that is making oaths, promises, and assurances) is likely to lead a person into temptation from the evil one and could end in sin. So to avoid this possibility, “*all you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’*” (5:37, NIV).
  - d) Elevating one commitment above another leads one to live a life of double standards – some words can be trusted while others cannot. This is not the life of a Christian who is to be “salt” and “light.”
3. A person of integrity is one who is known to be truthful and who keeps his word.
- a. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* defines integrity based upon the Scriptural uses of the word. Integrity is the “simplicity of intention” and is “equivalent to being honest, sincere, genuine, and is fundamental to true character (ISBE, 1484).
  - b. This theme is affirmed in a variety of biblical passages.
    - 1) Prov 12:19 declares, “*Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.*”
    - 2) In 1 Chron 19:17 David stated, “*I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent.*”
    - 3) Psalm 15 records, “*LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? <sup>2</sup>The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; <sup>3</sup>whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others; <sup>4</sup>who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; <sup>5</sup>who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.*”
    - 4) Ps. 51:6 “*Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.*”
    - 5) Ps. 145:18 “*The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.*”
    - 6) Prov. 3:3 advises, “*Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.*”

- 7) Prov. 12:22 *“Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight.”*
- 8) The fruit of the spirit are exhibited *“in all goodness, righteousness, and truth”* (Eph. 5:9).
- 9) Truth is part of the Christian’s spiritual armor. *“Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness”* (Eph. 6:14). Truth and its outcome integrity hold our lives together just like a belt holds up one’s pants.

c. A person who is truthful and follows through on his commitments will become a person who can be trusted and will be effective in life and ministry.

C. Illustration:

“In ancient China, the people desired security from the barbaric hordes to the north. So they built the Great Wall of China. It was too high to climb over, too thick to break down, and too long to go around. Security achieved!

The only problem was that during the first hundred years of the wall’s existence, China was invaded three times. Was the wall a failure? Not really – for not once did the barbaric hordes climb over the wall, break it down, or go around it.

How then did they get into China? The answer lies in human nature. They simply bribed a gatekeeper and then marched right in through a gate. The fatal flaw in the Chinese defense was placing too much reliance on a wall and not putting enough effort into building character into the gatekeeper.”

(From *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* by Michael Green, pg 204)

D. Application:

Do we put too much security in our walls of good deeds or academic success or talent and think that the enemy cannot get to us? What is one of the “fatal flaws” by which the “evil one” can trap us into destroying our own character and witness as Christians? It is by failing to be a person of our word. We can be effective in so many ways and do so many things for God’s Kingdom, but if we cannot be trusted in what we say, the blemish on our reputation will reflect also upon God’s Kingdom.

**Transitional Sentence:** What does this portion of the Sermon on the Mount teach?

**Conclusion:**

The character of the Christ-follower matters. How one acts in public doesn’t matter nearly as much as how one acts in private. How one worships doesn’t measure one’s spirituality nearly as much as how one treats others. And how one keeps his commitments matters more than the commitments one makes.

Making commitments is important to God, but Jesus’ point is that swearing oaths should not be necessary because we are to be people who keep our word always.

How can we keep our commitments and become people and ministers of integrity?

- Here and now as students you can apply this truth by fulfilling obligations promptly, efficiently, and with your best efforts whether that is completing SPICE assignments, studying for exams, writing papers, keeping the rules that we agreed to keep when we signed that “covenant.” Doing these “small” things now will enable you to be men and women of your word when you are in ministry or parenting your children (when following through with on “yes-es” and “no’s” is especially important).
- Those of us already in ministry are likewise challenged to keep our word, fulfill our obligations, offer our best, and be truthful before others.

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