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Let Your Yes Be Yes

Matthew 5:33

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your grace, for your goodness. We love you, Lord. You are our king, you are our sovereign. We thank you for the gift of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And once again, Father, this morning we thank you for the gift of your word which you've given to us. We pray that your Holy Spirit would guide us as we open up your book and we pray again you'd give us the ability to make it of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, once again we are back to following Jesus as he deconstructs the Pharisees' attempts to manage God. The Pharisees, as you probably know by now, excelled at the art of managing God or at least they thought so and what they truly excelled at was making up rules that served to reduce a relationship with God to a series of dos and don'ts. And if you did the dos and you didn't do the don'ts, you could be assured, so they taught, that you could somehow effectively manage God.

I've made the case many times that through -- though the Pharisees' rules were onerous, they were still the most powerful religious leaders of their day. And that may not make sense to a lot of us but I submit to you that there are whole denominations in our present day that operate basically on the very same principles, and they're wildly successful. Here's why. You see, every single living human being has within them the sense that they are more than simply the top of the evolutionary heap. *Ecclesiastes 3:11* says that: *(God) has also put eternity in their hearts.* *Romans 2* says: *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.* God says try as they might, most folks just can't dismiss God outright. God says they're conflicted, and that conflict is addressed in some denominations by an updated version of what the Pharisees were trying to do. Instead of a dynamic personal relationship with the living God, folks are given a list of things they must do to be right with God: get baptized, go to church, go to confession, get confirmed, go back to confession, go back to church. I mean, I know the drill because I lived it for many, many years and never once during that time that I was living it did I ever imagine that I was supposed to have a personal relationship with the living God. I mean, I just knew that there were certain things that I needed to do in order to keep God managed the way I wanted to manage him. I

was given a certain set of rote prayers to pray and I was told to repeat them over and over again, and I came to see God not as a person but as a force to be reckoned with that could actually turn ugly if I didn't do as he said. Well, that's exactly how the Pharisees attempted to manage God. Follow the rules, do what you are told and you will not have to worry about a personal relationship. You won't have to worry with what they seem to be saying as this very complex, very complicated and very scary God.

Well today we have whole denominations that seem to foster a relationship not so much with God but with the church itself. And God once again is painted as this big and complicated and scary thing, not so much a person that you would have a relationship with, but a force to be reckoned with. That's where church and religion steps in, and in a manner of speaking suggests that a relationship, some kind of personal relationship with the living God is not all that necessary. The church will take care of that. I mean, they'll be the middleman as it were between you and that scary God, they'll be the lawyer or a real estate agent involved in handling a difficult client. You don't even need to think about God because we'll do your thinking for you. You just take care to do what we say. Now I'm not saying that every single person within these denominations thinks that way and that there's not real people within those denominations who have a real relationship with

the living God, but more often than not, that happens in spite of, not because of the church. God is still going to find a way to connect with his people even when the shepherds refuse to shepherd properly.

And our text this morning once again goes back to where all of this started. It's again another classic attempt by the Pharisees to reduce God down to a series of dos and don'ts. And just like all of the other ones that Jesus is speaking of in the Sermon on the Mount, the Pharisees had managed to twist and torture the meaning of the law into something that looked great on the outside while managing to cloak and hide all kinds of internal rot. Once again this teaching of the Pharisees have all the characteristics that made Jesus say in *Matthew 23*: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every impurity.*" You see, on the surface, the teaching of the Pharisees looks pretty reasonable, particularly the one that we're looking at this morning. I mean, all they appear to be asking on the surface is that we keep our oaths to the Lord. Well, as we take up Jesus's response, we'll see that there was far more to it than simply that.

And our text starts out this morning in *Matthew 5:33* by saying:

"Again, you have heard that it was said to our ancestors" -- and by

now this should be a familiar pattern. What Jesus is doing is introducing us to the Pharisees' teaching by identifying it as the teaching that they'd all grown so familiar with. He says, *"Again, you have heard that it was said to our ancestors, You must not break your oath, but you must keep your oaths to the Lord."* Who's going to argue with that, I mean, who's going to argue with something as simple as suggesting that we keep our oaths to the Lord? Jesus gives his standard reply to the Pharisees' teaching suggesting that he has a brand new way of looking at this. He says: *"But I tell you."* Again this is Jesus's way of distinguishing his teaching from the traditions of old as taught by the Pharisees. Then Jesus proceeds to take that apart. He says in verse 34: *"But I tell you, don't take an oath at all: either by heaven, because it is God's throne; or by the earth, because it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. Neither should you swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. But let your word 'yes' be 'yes,' and your 'no' be 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one."*

Let me explain why Jesus said what it is he said, because I'm sure somebody could look at this scripture and just conclude that what Jesus is saying is that all oath taking is now forbidden. In fact there's certain denominations that forbid any oath taking

whatsoever including being inducted into the Armed Services or being in a court of law. I think we can prove that this was not Jesus's intent. And first we need to look at the commandment that forbids oath taking in the first place, and this is *Exodus 27*. It says: *"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."* The third commandment forbids the taking of the name of the Lord in vain, but it does not forbid taking an oath. And what God is forbidding when it comes to oath is -- oaths is swearing falsely or flippantly using his name to cloak your statements in some kind of authority. See, God does not forbid us from swearing. But the emphasis is on solemnity and truthfulness. God says this in *Leviticus 19*, he says: *You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.* See, the emphasis in the commandment is not on the idea of swearing but it's on the idea of swearing falsely. On numerous occasions in the scripture we have God stating that the key to taking a vow is not the actual taking of it but it's a commitment to do what you said you were going to do. Baker's New Testament Commentary points out that the Old Testament points to numerous instances of vows that are taken with God's warning, not about taking the vow in the first place but about doing what you said you would do when you took the vow. *Numbers 30:2* says: *If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He*

shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Deuteronomy 23 says: "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth."

So what is Jesus saying when he's saying what he's saying in our text this morning? Well, what he's saying is it's not the actual taking of a vow or swearing of an oath that is forbidden but the flippant, casual way that the Pharisees had evolved that actually turned swearing into a finely honed art form. Just like they had in every other area, the Pharisees studied this idea of oath taking in depth and they studied it from every single angle with a legal eye in mind. And wouldn't you know it, they came up with a very sophisticated system that would allow you all kinds of different oaths for different kinds of circumstances. You see, the way the Pharisees saw it, making a vow, making a vow before God meant promising that you really had to do what you were going to say, so they submitted what the law said, and that's what our text this morning says, *Matthew 5:33: "You must not break your oath, but you must keep your oaths to the Lord."* Well that part's well and good but the Pharisees knew and Jesus knew that there was a lot more to this business of oaths than meets the eye or ear. See, the

Pharisees had evolved a whole pantheon of vows suited to whatever circumstance you wanted. And the idea was to reserve the "God" stuff only for the stuff that you really knew you were going to do. That didn't mean you could make a host of vows for other occasions that you were far less committed to actually doing. If you were about to undertake something that required a lot of reinforcement, of course you're going to trot out the "God" thing. For less trying circumstances you would trot out your every day, garden-variety vows. And it became so commonplace that Jesus routinely took the Pharisees to task for it. And this is what he's doing in our text this morning. Again, he says: *"But I tell you, don't take an oath at all: either by heaven, because it is God's throne; or by the earth, because it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. Neither should you swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. But let your word 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one."*

What Jesus is doing here is he's going from the greater to the lesser and he identifies four of the substitutes for God that the Pharisees had allowed. He says there's heaven, there's earth, there's Jerusalem, and there's a person's own head. Jesus rejects them all. He says all of these junior varsity vows are all based on a false premise, and that is that you can separate and isolate

God's glory from his creation. To be sure, God and his creation are separate, I mean, we're not polytheists who believe that creation itself is God, instead we insist that creation is a manifestation of God's glory. And what Jesus is saying here is that to swear by any other aspect of God's creation as a means of avoiding swearing to God fundamentally misunderstands that all the glory of God's creation is a reflection of who God is in the first place. So what Jesus is saying is you can't look to God's creation without identifying God as the center and source of all of it. You want to avoid swearing to God by swearing instead to heaven, well you're swearing by the very throne of God. You think you can swear instead to the earth? You're swearing by his footstool. What about swearing by Jerusalem? That's his city ruled by his King. You want to shrink your vow down to something as small as your own head? Guess what? Even that doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the only one who alone can make your black hair (which virtually everyone at that place had) white, and that too was God. See, Jesus is taking apart the argument of the Pharisees by arguing from the greater to the lesser, from as high as the heavens down to the earth, even lower still to Jerusalem down to every single individual, he's saying swearing by these objects is still invoking the God who is responsible for them. To swear by them instead of the God who created them is really just an attempt to push God out of his own creation. Now, there's really two different arguments

that Jesus is making here. First he is saying when you refuse to acknowledge God in everything, you will begin to honor him in nothing, and this is no small thing because everything belongs to him. You know, Abraham Kuyper once said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

And over against those legitimate claims of Christ over his own creation are the false claims of God's enemy, the devil. You see, it is his battle plan to substitute anything and everything as worthy of the glory that belongs only to God. I mean, you only have to look around today to see how cleverly the enemy has co-opted what belongs only to God. I mean, it's something that is incredibly prevalent in our society today, something that God detests as much today as he did in the day of the Pharisees, and that's taking the creation of God and making it in some way equal to God. This is what the Pharisees were guilty of. They didn't want to call God in as a witness to something that they didn't intend to fulfill, so instead they just lowered God's status to that of his creation. The Pharisees were not about to cry out to God as a witness, instead they advocated crying out to the heavens or the planets or the creatures that inhabited the planets. And Jesus saw that precisely for what it was, the refusal to give God the glory he was due. And God says what he thinks of that in

Romans 1:18, he says this: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. See, God is saying here what Jesus is pointing out, what he's saying is every single thing in all of creation points not to itself but to God, and to swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or your own head is in fact to swear by God while refusing to even acknowledge him. And God says it gets worse. In verse 21 of Romans it says: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.**

Now Jesus starts out describing in descending order what happens when you swear not by God but by his creation. So he starts out, he goes from heaven to earth to Jerusalem to man. Romans picks up right there on man and his desire to give homage to something other than God and it continues that downward spiral. In Romans it goes

from man to birds to the animals to creeping things. See, when you take God out of the creation, you may start out giving homage to the heavens but you will quickly go on a downward spiral through earth, man, birds, to animals and creeping things. What God is saying is start out worshiping the sun, that sounds wonderful, you're going to end up eventually worshiping snakes and insects. Like I said, the Pharisees made an industry out of describing what you could swear by and why.

Now the religious compliance company once again succeeded in trying to define how to obey God with your lips while ignoring him with your heart and mind. Listen to how Jesus takes them apart. This is further down in the book of Matthew, this is *Matthew 23*, but you can tell this was an ongoing problem because in *Matthew 23* Jesus is at it again with this very same problem. He says this: "*Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.'* You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?" I mean, they couldn't even get their false oaths right. In verse 18 Jesus says: "*And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.'* You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?" Remember, Jesus is talking to the

Pharisees, these are Old Testament worshipers and in spite of their understanding of the temple, they place more value on gold and gifts than on the temple and its altar. They'd gone from the greater to the lesser. And once again as soon as you start the process of devaluing God down to the level of his creation, you are not going to stop. Jesus goes on once again to say that you can't separate the glory of God from the creation of God. This is what he says in verse 20. He says: *"Whoever swears by the altar swears by it and everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."* What he's saying is to swear by anything is to swear by God. It is so serious an undertaking that Jesus is saying in our text this morning it has no place whatsoever in casual conversation. Again, to go back to our text, what he's saying is: *"But I tell you, don't take an oath at all but let your word 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.' Anything more than this is from the evil one."* And yet it was so prevalent in Jesus's day that the Pharisees felt very comfortable trying to regulate it. You know, we look at this and we say, well, you know, that's primitive, this is something that unsophisticated, backwards people do, but we do the exact same thing. We just update it, modernize it and re-package it for the 21st century. I don't think that it is by accident that every good thing that God does today is attributed not to God but to some

mythical god that's named 'mother nature' and some manmade god named "evolution." And between those two names, every good single thing that should be attributed to God is attributed elsewhere. I mean, you see a glorious sunset with all of the colors of the rainbow and instead of thanking God, what do people thank now? Oh, look what mother nature did. Now that's a stunningly insulting form of idolatry. Since virtually everyone does it, it seldom even raises an eyebrow. I mean, you see the glory of a hummingbird's wings that flap 80 times a second and you realize they don't even flap, they go in figure eights so that a hummingbird can hover and go up and down and fly backwards, and these are maneuvers that no aircraft could ever even dare to hope to do, even though a hummingbird's brain is smaller than a grain of rice. And you look at a creature like that, and people look at a creature like that today and they say, "Hey, ain't evolution wonderful. Look what random chance and eons of time have produced!" We only say that because we, like God says, have become futile in our thinking and our foolish hearts have been darkened. So claiming to be wise we become the worst kind of fool, the kind who doesn't even know that he's a fool.

The second argument that Jesus is making here has to do with the nature of a person who feels compelled to embellish his speech with "add-ons." You know, most people know of add-ons as applications,

apps you download to enhance some kind of computer program. It's something you tack on to the original to make it better. As human beings, we are often tempted to use language as "add-ons," something we do to enhance our own images, either to bolster our claims to be telling the truth or to make us seem bigger, brighter, smarter and stronger than we actually are. And just like the Pharisees, we can become very comfortable with swearing.

You know, I can remember with horror back when I was a youngster that I very frequently used to embellish the silliest of claims by swearing and I remember playing sandlot football and being accused of not saying enough "Mississippi" before I rushed the quarterback and saying, you know, "I did not, and I swear on the Bible." And if that didn't work, we'd say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles," and if that didn't work, "I swear on a thousand stacks of Bibles." And Somebody'd say, "I swear on infinity stacks of Bibles." That's way it worked. It didn't enhance my truth claims a bit. And only now I begin to see how incredibly offensive to God that is. You see, it is amazing how easy these add-ons become part of our language. Jesus's solution is incredibly simple: *"But let your word 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'. Anything more than this is from the evil one."* And for some reason we find that next to impossible to do. And as we get older, we just get a little more sophisticated in the add-ons that we select. You know, when someone says, "This

is God's honest truth," I often ask, "Well, what did that mean you were saying before, what was that?" If someone says, "*I'm not lying,*" again I'm tempted to say, "Were you lying before?" And then there's the old favorite, "To tell you the truth." Of course it begs the question, "What were you telling me before that?" I don't want to suggest here that simply engaging in the conventions of modern English parlance is some kind of sin because I think it misses the bigger picture. And this is the bigger picture, without a doubt to swear or take a vow before God without viewing it with the utmost respect is to literally take the name of God in vain. That's what's forbidden. It's an altogether serious thing, but a vow is something that God allows.

Forty-four years ago I took a vow before God to love, honor and obey my wife. That vow is just as binding today as it was in 1971. I think most of us understand that already though. We do have a problem though is simply letting our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no." This is my second point and this is really the bottom line. See, the more secure we are in who we are, the less we have need of add-ons and embellishments, the more content we are to simply let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no." So the question becomes then, who are we? Well, if we're born again believers in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, then regardless of how we fit into the socioeconomic scheme of the world, whether we're paupers or

presidents, we are children of the King, chosen, bought and paid for by God himself. And to the extent that you buy into that truth will be the extent of your security in Christ. You see, Jesus expects that his disciples will be people with character that does not require add-ons or embellishments because we already possess the greatest embellishment there is, that is Jesus Christ. It is the gospel that makes that possible. And the bottom line is the more you understand the God of the gospel, the less you have need of any enhancements whatsoever. And the heart of the gospel is that the sovereign creator of the universe became one of us, that he was born in a manger, that he lived the life of a humble carpenter's son, living it to peasant parents and that he lived that life perfectly so that he could offer it up on a cross as payment for our imperfections. See, God had a plan and that plan was to ransom and rescue from every tribe, tongue and nation of a people who were absolutely alienated from him by sin, a people that he was going to call his own. And before the earth even formed its foundation, God had chosen the ones that he determined to fix his love on. And his criterion for choosing, it remains a mystery to this day. He simply said in *Romans 9:15*: "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*" So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. People say how unfair of God to choose some and not others. But understand that God chose from a pool of

people who rejected his rule, who denied him the glory that he was due and who uniformly hated him and wanted nothing to do with him. These are the very creatures whom God made himself vulnerable by becoming one of us and we responded to that outpouring of love by stripping God naked and crucifying him. You know, the question isn't why doesn't God love all of us equally, the question is why is God willing to love any of us? You know, I often say to those who object to God choosing some what Charles Spurgeon once said. He said: "Why do you care if God chooses to give me something that you have no desire to possess, something you despise?" Offer the same gospel to your friend, your neighbor, your co-worker, chances are he's going to deeply resent you as holier than thou or some kind of nut job for trying. You see, the world doesn't want the gift that God has given to us. That should never, never stop us from trying to share the gospel with everybody we know because we never know whom God has prepared in advance to hear it. That's why what we have to say should be nothing but the truth. Our "yes" should simply be "yes" and our "no" should simply be "no," because the God who chose us is the very same God who's going to give the simple truth of his gospel all the power that it needs without any add-ons or embellishments.

So knowing who we are is going to determine what we say and again that begs the question: Who are we? God says this in *Ephesians*

1:4, he says: *He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.* Well, this is kind of who we are. God says before the earth was even formed, he predestined us to be adopted as his children so that your life and my life could shine to the praise of his glorious grace. You know, God chose each of us. Before you start getting very cock sure of yourself in saying, "Ain't I something. Look what God did. Look, he picked me," before you see that as your own embellishment or accomplishment, understand God's view of those that he chose. It's in 1 Corinthians 1:26. It says: *For consider your calling, brothers: Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

Why did God choose me? God chose me not because I was worthy to be chosen but because according *Romans 9:18*: *He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.* God chose me like he chose the nation of Israel, for reasons known ultimately only to God. What does God love me? The only answer I can give you is he loves me 'cause he loves me, and I have no idea why. Author John Fisher once said this: "It's not that God got a good deal here. We are the ones who got the deal. We became valuable at the cross and not a second before. We were not worthy of this death. He made us worthy in his death. He put the value on us when he redeemed us by his blood. He didn't have to do this. No great law of the universe would have held God in court for permanently doing away with his own sinful scarred creation. He was a spotless lamb. We are the guilty sinners and in this incomprehensible transaction at the cross he gave us righteousness and took on our sin. In the cross alone, I am righteous. I am worthy to be called his because of what he did, not because of what I am. His death on the cross bestowed this value on me. The result of this gospel is that we are eternally caught by surprise, out of breath, flabbergasted that this would happen to us."

The more flabbergasted I am, the more I realize how eternally privileged I am, the less I need to add on or embellish anything I say. I can let my "yes" be "yes" and my "no" be "no" because I'm

loved by the King of the universe who died to set me free from the sin that had enslaved me. My value comes from him. And God says in *1 Peter 2:9*: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Well, this begs one very important question and that question is: How do I know if I've been chosen by God? Well, let me answer that question with a question. The question is: Why are you here this morning? *1 Corinthians 1:18* says: *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* See, the word of God doesn't begin to make sense at all until God starts doing a work in your heart and those who are chosen by God are first called by God. It was Jesus who said in *Matthew 22*: *"For many are called, but few are chosen."* And all of us here who are no longer seeing the cross as foolishness are either in two camps, we're either curious or we're committed, and being committed always starts out with being curious because even that is a gift of God. So are you committed to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Well, then recognize that the privilege that you've been given is greater than that of presidents

and princes and kings. In fact you are a future prince of the universe. You're going to rule the universe eternally alongside of Christ, and people so privileged have no need of embellishments, they have no need of add-ons. They can simply let their "yesses" be "yes" and their "nos" be "no."

Now if you've not made a commitment to Jesus Christ and you're here in some way because you're curious, as I said, even that curiosity is a gift of God. And so if you're curious, stay afterwards, come on up, there's going to be a number of us elders who are up here praying, come up and speak with us because we would love to have the privilege of turning by the grace of God alone your curiosity into commitment. We would love to help you say "yes" to the kingdom of God and "no" to this sin cursed kingdom of man. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for the profound gift that you have given to each of us who know you as Lord and Savior. We are children of the King. We will rule and reign with you eternally forever. What a privilege we have been given. And Lord, having received the highest honor that anybody who ever lives can ever receive, we don't need add-ons, we don't need embellishments, we alone have the ability to simply let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no", knowing that even when we share the truths of the gospel, you alone

have the power to make those words resonate, connect and change those who are curious into those who are committed. I thank you for that power. And I praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.