

Half-baked Oaths

Matthew 5:33-37
Halifax: 14 March 2004

Two thousand years ago,

- The Son of God came into this world to establish His kingdom.
- Some two thousand years before that,
 - He had called out one of the families of the earth (the family of Abraham Isaac and Jacob) to prepare for His coming.
 - He gave them His Law—
 - This law showed them what God requires of sinful human beings...
 - Two things.
 - A substitutionary sacrifice to atone for their sins...
 - And a new heart to walk in obedience to God.
 - God promised that He would provide both of these in response to their faith.

When King Jesus came to fulfil the promise,

- He found His covenant people walking in great disorder.
 1. Their greatest error lay in the fact that they had become self-righteous so that,
 - although they offered sacrifices,
 - they had gradually suppressed the truth about God so that they no longer so their need for a Redeemer that would suffer God's curse for them.
 - This is why most of them were offended with the cross.
 - They were righteous without a suffering Saviour.
 2. Their second error was related to the first.
 - In suppressing the reality of their need for a suffering redeemer,
 - they had twisted God's commandments in such a way that they could claim to obey them.
 - They did not need to look to God for grace to obey...
 - they did not even think they needed the new heart that God had promised in His covenant.

In His teaching, the Lord Jesus confronted these errors head on in order that He might awaken His elect out of their spiritual slumber.

- The Sermon on the Mount is an example of the kind of teaching He did.
 - He begins the sermon with the Beatitudes.
 - In these He pronounces His blessing on those who hunger for righteousness,
 - not on those who consider themselves to be righteous...
 - And then, after the Beatitudes, He begins to expound the Law in Matt. 5:17
 - For several weeks now,
 - I have been showing you how He restores the true meaning of God's law.
 - By their crafty interpretations,
 - the Jewish leaders had in effect manufactured their own law and claimed that it was God's law.
 - Jesus is showing them otherwise.

My Christian brothers and sisters,

- We need to hear these words today just as much as the Jews did when it was first spoken!
- We have fallen into the same sort of error today...
 - Though we acknowledge the Jesus died on the cross,
 - we too often reduce the cross to the mere physical sufferings of Christ;
 - we deny that He was bearing the pains of Hell in our place.
 - And, like the Jews, we have so set aside His moral law that we have no idea what is really required of us.

In our study thus far, we have covered the first three corrections that Jesus makes...

- Concerning murder, He shows that hatred as well as bodily harm is included
 - concerning adultery, He shows that lust as well physical acts are included.
 - and concerning marriage; He shows that divorce is forbidden.
- Today we come to the forth point of God's law that Jesus restores...
 - Concerning unlawful oaths.

I. What is the problem that Jesus addresses here?

- Let me begin by saying that is a rather complex problem.
 - For the purpose of explaining this problem (which still thrives in the Church today), I want to begin with the root.

A. The root of the problem is an irreverence for God as the God of truth.

1. In the Bible God is presented as the true God and the true light.
 - a. Not only does this mean that He is not false...
 - But it also means that He is most absolute and eternal.
 - b. He is the source and foundation from which everything else is derived.
 - Without Him, nothing was made that has been made.
 - c. He is the eternally self-existing one who is absolutely self-consistent.
 - He is the true God and eternal life.
 - He cannot lie because He cannot deny Himself...
 - As James tells us,
 - there is not even a shadow of turning in Him.
 - He cannot turn in the least from what He is to something else.
 - He can never ever act inconsistently with Himself.
 - He cannot lie.
 - d. Jesus told Pilate that He had come to bear witness to the truth...
 - He came to testify about all that God is!
 - And that is exactly what He did...
 - He was (Heb 1:3)
 - “the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person.”
2. This is precisely where fallen man’s problem comes in.
 - a. We were created in the image of God—
 - Our lives are always communicating, always speaking, always declaring.
 - And the difficulty with us is that because of sin, they contradict God...
 - Our lives declare lies about the One who is true.
 - Everything we do that is not consistent with Him tells lies about who He is.
 - b. In John 8, Jesus calls the Devil a liar and father of lies.
 - 1) In the Garden of Eden, the Devil misrepresented God to Eve...
 - God said, “in the day you eat of this tree, you will surely die.”
 - The Devil said, “You will not surely die, but God knows that you will become like Him...”

- 2) Death occurred by falling out of step with God who alone is true.
 - Every lie, no matter what it has to do with, is a contradiction of God.
 - Our lives are continually communicating lies.

- 3) Everything that contradicts God will be shown to contradict Him in the Day of Judgement.
 - On that day,
 - everyone will see and everyone will understand that the contradiction of God is the contradiction of glory.
 - The contradiction of glory will be seen for what it really is!
 - It will be ugly and repulsive.
 - Those things in our human lives that now seem attractive to us but that contradict God will become utterly reprehensible and shameful.
 - The true light will shine...
 - The darkness will be chased away.
 - Only truth will remain.

- 4) This is why we must flee to Jesus to be saved.
 - When you embrace the cross, you declare that God is true and that you are lies.
 - God dealt with our lies at the cross...
 - At the cross, He visited our lies with His judgement and brought His wrath down upon us.
 - He revealed His glory in the suffering of His Son...
 - And now there is no contradiction for Him to receive those who have lied about Him into His favour.
 - He has punished the lie and now He can restore us to His truth.

TRANS> But let's back up again...

- c. Do you see how the fall produced irreverence for God as the God of truth?
 - 1) We don't hold the truth in high regard because we don't hold God who is truth in high regard.
 - 2) The lie that fallen man lives is the lie that contradicting God is not death...
 - It is the lie that to contradict truth is not reprehensible and shameful.

- That is why our world is so full of lies.
 - From children to parents, from salesmen to statesmen, from plumbers to pastors, from politicians to professors—
 - We live in a world that is full of lies because it does not regard the God of truth.
- B. The problem that Jesus addresses in Matthew 5:33-37 is a problem that grows up in the church when lying has become too commonplace.
1. The problem is the problem of frivolous oaths... half-baked oaths.
 - a. It works like this...
 - When we are accustomed to telling lies or are careless with the truth...
 - We need some way to say,
 - “This time I really mean it.”
 - b. This is why swearing and taking oaths becomes necessary in certain situations.
 - 1) Our society simply could not function (and we know it) without some standard of truth.
 - a) We would not even be able to have a semblance of justice if we did not require an oath to be taken when testifying at court—
 - and if there were not heavy penalties for perjury.
 - b) Even criminals who make their living by deception and lies have codes of conduct for honesty with each other.
 - They know that honest with each other is needed for survival.

TRANS> But how does swearing help?

- 2) When a person swears an oath (say in a court room)
 - a) He calls upon God to bear witness to what he is saying.
 - Children, you know what it is to call in someone to witness...
 - If you are telling about the fire that broke out in your house and your friends don't believe you—
 - and your Dad is near by,
 - you call him to come and back up the story...
 - He is your witness.
 - That is what people do when they swear...
 - Only, they call God to witness to the truth of what they say.

- Of course, God does not come and speak at that time.
 - But what they are saying, in effect, is
 - “God knows, God saw it, He knows I am telling the truth and I call Him as witness...
 - If I am not telling the truth, let him judge me!”
 - This is why sometimes people say,
 - “God do so to me and more also if I don’t...”
 - You actually put a curse on yourself if you are not telling the truth.
- b) It is a very solemn thing to do!
- Got takes this very seriously...
 - You are bringing His name into the matter to back up what you are saying!
 - And if your are lying, He will judge you for it!
- c) This kind of swearing is actually taken quite seriously in most societies...
- There are almost always stiff penalties for perjury.
 - (Perjury is when you lie under oath).
 - Almost everybody thinks perjury is unacceptable.
- 3) This kind of solemn oath is sanctioned in God’s word—in fact it is even commanded!
- De 10:20 "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.
 - I will have more to say about proper oaths later...

TRANS> But what about frivolous oaths?

2. Frivolous oaths arise because of a huge gap that exists...
 - a. A gap between the solemn swearing I just spoke about where the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is required...
 - And our everyday living that is full of lies and dishonesty.
 - This gap is very wide, so there is a need for some middle ground...
 - A way for us to say,
 - “This time I really mean it.”

- b. What does a person do to give more credence to his everyday speaking?
 - He makes a kind of a half-way oath... a half-baked oath...
 - If Bill Handyman told you he was going to come to do some work for you last week and he didn't show up,
 - What does he do when you call and he promises to come "first thing next week"?
 - He uses an oath...
 - "I'll be there this time, honest to God."
 - All sorts of expressions are used:
 - "By my word..."
 - "I swear"
 - "Cross my heart"
 - "In heaven's name."
- c. These words are added to lay stress on the fact that "this time, I mean it."
 - But nobody takes these words as seriously as a formal vow or oath that is taken in a courtroom.
 - Everybody recognises that this is a half-baked kind of oath—
 - a trivial oath that is not the same as swearing in court.

TRANS> This is the very issue that Jesus is addressing here.

- 3. Jesus is showing that even though **we** don't take these half-baked oaths seriously, God does!
 - a. The very difficulty with them is that we think it trivial to call heaven to witness to something, or to swear "by my life," or "by my word."
 - 1) The Pharisees had actually developed a theology about this kind of thing.
 - They actually taught that as long as a person does not use God's name, the oath is nothing.
 - As long as you only swear by heaven or by Jerusalem or by earth or by your own head,
 - you were not really swearing in a serious way, and were not bound.
 - They didn't mean that it was right to tell lies—
 - They were just recognising that people didn't really mean it to be a serious oath, so it wasn't....
 - It was not perjury.
 - 2) We don't care enough to make a theology out of it today,

- But for us it is just understood that oaths like this are not full-fledged oaths....
- That they don't really count.

TRANS> But whether we make a theology about it or just make assumptions...

b. This thinking is very pernicious!

- 1) Jesus points out that when you call to heaven to witness,
 - you **are** calling God to witness because Heaven is God's throne.
 - And when you call earth to witness,
 - you are dragging God into the thing because the earth is His footstool.
 - And when you call Jerusalem to witness,
 - it is God's city. He is identified with it forever.
 - And when you swear by your head (or your soul or your heart),
 - you are calling God who controls your life and your health to witness.
- 2) The offense lies in the fact that God is irreverently and carelessly dragged in to your trivial promises and affirmations!
 - This is a violation of the third commandment!
 - "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD Thy God in vain, for the LORD will not hold Him guiltless that taketh His name in vain!"
 - The very problem is that you have acted as if it is but a trivial thing to call God to witness, and therefore to judge you if you are not telling the truth!
 - It is not trivial!
 - It is a matter of utmost seriousness!
 - You have dragged His name into the thing, and He will not hold you guiltless for this!
 - You have associated His name with a lie, and He will avenge His name.
- 3) One of the great signs of the sickness of our society is that we have lost all reverence for God.

- When holy men of God in times past saw His glory manifested in visions,
 - They fell on the faces with dread and terror!
 - Triviality was the farthest thing from their minds!
- You are flippant about God because of unbelief...
 - You don't take Him seriously when He pronounces judgement...
 - You don't think He really means it when He speaks.
 - You are estranged from Him and walking in darkness.

TRANS> So you see that the problem Jesus addresses here begins and ends with irreverence for God.

- It begins with a general irreverence for God as the God of truth (we become liars)...
 - That leads to a society where lying is commonplace.
 - That leads to a need for oaths and vows to be taken in solemn occasions...
 - That leads to the introduction of half-baked oaths to strengthen our everyday words...
 - That displays our irreverence about carelessly bringing God's name into these half-baked oaths.

II. Jesus tells you what to do about this problem.

A. First of all, He says, "do no swear at all."

1. We need to begin with an explanation of what Jesus **does not** mean by this.
 - a. This statement is misunderstood by those who conclude that when you go to court, you are to refuse to take an oath.
 - It is misunderstood by those who would refuse to take vows of membership at church or vows of public office.
 - b. You can be sure that an absolute prohibition of oaths is not in view for many reasons.
 - 1) First, because Jesus is not abolishing, but rather establishing God's law in this section of his sermon,
 - and God's law commanded that oaths be taken in certain situations:
 - Deut 10:20 "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.

- 2) Secondly, Jesus is not prohibiting serious oaths because the Bible tells us that they are very useful and necessary.
- Heb 6:16 declares as a matter of fact:
 - For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation *is* for them an end of all dispute.
 - Vows and oaths are useful for making things clear and certain and promote peace when they are used properly.
- 3) Thirdly, Jesus is not prohibiting serious oaths because Jesus Himself spoke under oath in a court of law.
- At His trial, we are told:
 - Matt 26:62: And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What *is it* these men testify against You?" 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" 64 Jesus said to him, "*It is as* you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!"
 - This is particularly a forceful example because Jesus kept silent until He was solemnly charged under oath to testify.
 - Then He spoke.
 - He was not contradicting his own law!
- 4) Fourthly, Jesus is not prohibiting serious oaths because those who were converted were called upon to confess their faith before witnesses (and enter into covenant with God and His church)
- Romans 10 makes confessing Christ with the mouth co-ordinate with believing in your heart:
 - Romans 10:8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.
 - Timothy is said to have (1 Tim 6:12)
 - "confessed the good confession in the presense of many witnesses."
 - The language suggests that this was a one time action, and the "presense of many witnesses" show that it was a solemn testimony.

- The whole idea of entering into covenant with the Lord before witnesses goes back to the Old Testament.
 - Such covenanting was even done at the time of reformation in Neh 10:29:
 - Neh 10:29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes
- 5) Fifthly, Jesus is not prohibiting serious oaths because the apostle Paul frequently swore with an oath to confirm his words.
- and Paul would not have disobeyed Jesus command:
 - Rom 9:1: I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit,
 - 2 Cor 1:23: Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.
- c. I belabour this point because I do not want you to be confused in your conscience.
- It is good to take oaths and vows in the name of the Lord in serious occasions.
 - It is wrong to refuse to take them when you are called to do so by legitimate authority as long as the vow itself is not one that binds you to sin or to something that you don't have the power to keep.

TRANS> But now we need to consider,

2. Just what **does** Jesus mean when He says, "Swear not at all?"
 - a. Jesus explains what He means when He adds, "neither by heaven, for it is God's throne," and so on.
 - He is commanding you to refrain from all trivial oaths—
 - those half-baked oaths that don't use God's name in the letter, but still drag His name in all the same through created things.
 - I should add a word to us as well...
 - We are not as careful with God's name as even the Jews to whom Jesus is speaking were!
 - It is common to hear God's name brought in to our everyday conversation...

- We use His name to embellish and emphasise, “O my God” is heard even among Christians!
- “O Lord,” or “Jesus” are dragged in carelessly and irreverently.
 - This is just the kind of thing our Lord is condemning here.
- We also add shortened forms of God’s name—
 - “My gosh,” for “My God,”
 - or “Gee” which is a shortened form of Jesus.
 - If you are saying things like this,
 - Your language needs to change!
 - Your language is to display the deepest reverence for God.

TRANS> You are not to drag God’s name or references to Him into your ordinary conversation in the form of an oath or an explicative...

b. Jesus is saying, “Don’t do this at all...”

- I don’t care if you are saying “my heavens” or “my God” or “my soul”
 - It is all the same because the heavens and your soul are associated with God...
 - Heaven, because it is His throne...
 - Your soul, because He is the one who blesses or curses it.

TRANS> So Jesus is commanding you to take out that whole category of half-way oaths.

- There should be only two categories...
 - Either solemnly testify in God’s name and recognise what you are doing so...
 - Or else don’t swear at all.
 - Eliminate entirely half-baked oaths and vows.
- But this leaves us with a problem!
 - Are there not times when we need to embellish our ordinary speech so people will believe us?
 - The answer is **no**—
 - It should not be necessary.
 - Jesus tells you how to make it unnecessary.

B. He calls you to eliminate the need for “everyday oaths” by letting your ‘yes’ by ‘yes’ and you ‘no’, ‘no’.”

1. Who is it that feels the greatest necessity to add an oath to their everyday speech?
 - Is it not those who are the least trustworthy?
 - Who is it that is constrained to say, “I swear it”?
 - Is it not the chap who lied last time he promised something,
 - so now he is going to add “I swear it,” as if to say,
 - “this time, I really mean it”?
 - Of course it is!
 - If you have a reputation for honesty and integrity in your every day concourse,
 - you don’t have to back up what you say with cheap oaths.
 - Not only is it wrong for Christians to use such irreverent oaths...
 - It is wrong for them to **need** to use them!
 - It is wrong for you to have less than a reputation for honesty and integrity that would make you feel pressured to swear.
2. Brothers and sisters, you are a people of truth!
 - a. Your whole life is to be characterised by truth because you are disciples of Jesus Christ who is the God of truth.
 - When you speak, even your enemies (if they know you) should have no reason to question your word.
 - b. You must avoid all forms of lying!
 - 1) Do not lie to avoid duty (like church) “I’m sick, I’m busy”
 - Luke 14:15-24: The parable of the Great Supper
 - 2) Do not lie to avoid punishment
 - “I didn’t laugh,” says Sarah.
 - “I didn’t hear you,” says the child (or the adult).
 - 3) Do not lie to make a profit:
 - Prov. 20:14: “‘*It is good for nothing,*’ cries the buyer; But when he has gone his way, then he boasts.”
 - It’s okay to offer a low price, but you should not lie about the quality.
 - 4) Do not lie to make an impression:

- “I’ve got twenty years of experience,” the job applicant declares.
 - How foolish this is—he will bring trouble to himself when he disappoints those who have trusted him.
 - You build up people’s expectations and then they are disappointed.
 - Prov. 25:14: “Whoever falsely boasts of giving *Is like* clouds and wind without rain.”
- 5) Do not lie to avoid conflict or persecution
- Abraham: “Tell them you are my sister.”
 - Peter, “I don’t know the man,” when some time before he had said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”
- 6) Do not lie to avoid offense
- The young man is told, “you did a great job” when in fact he is not gifted.
 - He develops a faulty view of himself and ends up being disappointed.
 - “Your new dress is lovely” the woman tells her friend...
 - She is no friend to say that if it is not true!
- 7) Do not lie to make people think you are godly
- There is the whole area of false humility
 - People will try to act humble by fastings and denial:
 - Col 2:23: These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.
 - People will pretend to be humble by talking about how convicted they are about their sin:
 - “I felt so convicted...”
 - Those who are truly convicted are not impressed with their sorrow—their actions will show that they were convicted (2 Cor. 7)
 - People will pretend to be humble by hypocritical prayers
 - Matthew 6:5-6 “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father

who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

8) Do not lie to make an interesting story

- This is far too common today, both in newspapers as well as in ordinary conversation.
- We embellish our story with exaggeration to get people to listen.

9) Do not lie to gain pity

- Self-pity- excuse making...
 - Deuteronomy 1:26: “Nevertheless you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; and you complained in your tents, and said, ‘Because the LORD hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us.’”
- Exaggerating your trials to gain pity from others—
 - “Nobody loves me”
 - “The pain was unbearable.”
- Even worse, exaggerating the wrong that someone has done to you!
 - “Well its like this... first, he...”

TRANS> All these are ways we tell lies when we know we are telling lies...

c. But beware, you also tell lies when you pass on false information,

- even if you do it unwittingly.

1) As a people of the truth,

- you need to be careful about passing on false information as well.
- If you love the truth, you will not be careless about the truth...

2) I found myself recently trying to remember about something that happened last year.

- In trying to reconstruct the thing, I ended up distorting the truth.
- I had to ask forgiveness.

3) If you pass along information that is not true, even though you thought it was true, you prove yourself to be unreliable.

- Surely, we can all make mistakes in this way,
 - but the point is, we need to be careful.

- It is sinful for us to be careless and shows that we don't love the truth as we should or reverence the God of truth as we should.
- d. Finally, you must beware of making empty promises.
- 1) If you say you are going to do something, you ought to do it.
 - Keep your word if people are counting on you.
 - Be faithful, even it means you have to suffer—
 - Your word is more important than your comfort.
 - 2) What if Jesus had backed out after God promised to redeem us?
 - What if He had decided that bearing the cross was more than He had bargained for.
 - He has set the example for all time about swearing to our own hurt!
 - Certainly, we make commitments with the understanding that unless we are hindered by unforeseen circumstances...
 - If you invite someone to dinner and then get sick, you can back out...
 - Paul was hindered from going to see the Corinthians when he had promised and they tried to use that to discredit his apostleship...
 - but he defends himself from their charges.
 - 3) But far too often, we don't keep our commitments because we simply don't take them as seriously as we ought to.
 - A habitual pattern of that will make people ask you,
 - “do you really mean it this time?”
 - And it will put you in the place that no disciple should be...
 - It will put you in the place where you will feel pressured to affirm with an oath.

TRANS> As with all of God's commandments, you can see how far short you come!

- James 3 declares:
 - James 3:2: For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.
 - This is an area where we come up short.
- James goes on to say:

- James 3:7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

III. Learn from this how much you need Jesus.

A. Jesus is the truth who came down from Heaven to reveal the truth.

1. He shows you who God really is,
 - He restores God's true standard
 - He leads you back to the truth about God.
2. If you are of the truth, you will hear his voice and follow Him.
 - If not, you will continue to walk in the ways of your father the Devil.
 - You may even be honest on a certain level because it is the best policy...
 - But you are not being honest about the most important thing until you bow to Christ.
 - Until then, you are suppressing the truth and loving lies.

TRANS> You need Jesus to show us the truth.

B. You also need Jesus to secure your forgiveness for telling lies.

1. He did not die on the cross because you have no sin...
 - but in order that He might secure the pardon of your sins.
2. God declares that all liars will have their part in the Lake of fire...
 - That is true!
 - But it is also true that
 - "whoever believes on the Lord Jesus will be saved."
 - and that
 - 1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

TRANS> So you see then that you need Jesus to show you the problem, and then to provide forgiveness for you because of your lies...

- And there is yet another thing you need Him for.

C. You need Jesus to cleanse you from your lies through the Holy Spirit.

- to cleanse you so that you will stop telling lies.

1. He leads you and guides you into truth as you follow Him.
 - He makes you into a people of the truth.
 - More and more, the truth should be the thing that characterises you.

2. He is able to make you into the kind of person who won't have to use oaths in your every day living.
 - As I showed you last week, Jesus presents Himself to us as our nourishment.
 - Let us come to Him with enthusiasm that He might nourish us into lives of truthfulness, faithfulness, and integrity.
 - Do not just go along with the ways of the world around you.
 - You are called to be transformed by His grace.
 - He has promised, He is faithful, He will do it!