

TO TELL THE TRUTH

Matthew 5:33-37

Intro: In reading through the text that we have for today in preparation for my message, I was reminded of the title of Will Metzger's book on evangelism, *Tell the Truth*. While our text in Matthew 5 does not have to do with evangelism, except possibly in a secondary way, yet it does have to do with the truth, not just the truth of God's Word, but of our responsibility before God to always tell the truth. The Word of God is thoroughly dependable, and the words of those who know the Lord are to be absolutely dependable. As our text brings out, when we say, "Yes," for whatever reason, people need to know that we mean "yes." And the same is to be true when we say "no"; we mean "no," not *maybe*, or something else. I have told some of you what a Greek steelworker who worked for the same company of which my Dad was the Treasurer, said about my Dad. He said, "When you ask Bill Custis anything, he will tell you the truth. He never just puts you off, nor does he tell you something that isn't true."

For the first time as the Lord Jesus was giving His Sermon on the Mount, he pointed to truth outside beyond the ten commandments. And yet in some ways it did refer to a couple of the ten commandments. His primary reference was probably to Lev. 19:12 where we read,

12 And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.

Some expositors link Deut. 23:21 through 23 with these words of our Lord here in Matthew 5. The Deuteronomy passage speaks of a vow as just as binding as an oath. In fact, a vow is the same as an oath, just as binding. Listen to these words:

21 When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee.

22 But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

23 That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth (Deut. 23:21-23).

But I think also that at least two commandments in the twelve are also involved in what our Lord was saying. I hope to bring this out as we go

along. I am referring to the third commandments which says this:

7 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.

I think that most of you know that devout Jews hesitated even to say the Name Jehovah, or Yahweh, because they feared the possibility that they might be taking His Name in vain.

The other commandment that is involved in my text for today is the ninth commandment of the ten: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Ex. 20:16). This is a commandment in its larger sense against telling lies.

Now the interesting thing about all of these commandments is that they were violating all of them, and yet they would deny it. The Lord was not charging His disciples with doing this, but it is certain that they had done it before they knew the Lord. And I do not mean by this statement that believers are never guilty. They are. We are, or have been. And so it is important that we understand these verses in order that we would understand how to keep from what every person is inevitably inclined to do.

Now let us look, first of all, at:

I. THE OLD COMMANDMENT (Matt. 5:33).

Now in order to understand the old commandment, *i.e.*, the commandment as it was given in the Law, we need to note carefully the two verbs which the Lord used. I am speaking of the verb "forswear" and the verb "perform." These verbs express the intent of the commandment given in the Law. To "forswear" is *to perjure oneself*. From President Clinton on down we have had many examples of perjury, but it didn't start with them. History is full of incidents where people have committed perjury. What is perjury? It is willfully telling a lie when you are under oath. It is swearing that you have not done something that you really did, or failing to do something that you claim you have done. A person who takes an oath falsely has committed perjury.

Why is it perjury? Simply because he did not do what he had said that he would do. Or, because he had done what he had sworn that he did not do.

Do you remember our Lord's parable about the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the temple to pray? When the Pharisee prayed he claimed

that he was not an extortioner, had never been unjust, had never committed adultery, that he was in points better than the publican. He said he fasted twice every week and gave tithes of all that he possessed. In the light of our Lord scathing denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 it is very possible that all that the Pharisee had said about himself was a lie. The Lord's word for the Pharisees was that they were hypocrites. They lied. They pretended to be what they were not. They were like whitewashed tombs, clean on the outside, but full of dead men's bones.

Now this was the point of what the Lord was saying: Don't take an oath with no intention of doing as you have promised. The same would apply to making vows before the Lord. You don't have to make a vow. But if you do it, you need to make sure that you do what you have vowed that you would do.

But now the Jews had figured out a way in which they felt it was OK to make a vow even though you did not keep it, and probably never intended to keep it.

II. THE LOOPHOLES THAT THE JEWS HAD IN MAKING VOWS (Matt. 5:34-36).

People who are not really honest are always looking for a loophole to be able to do something which is not legal. Or it is a way of justifying some course of action which a person knows is not right. Our county commissioners were looking for a loophole in our laws regarding marriage, and they think that they found it.

Vows, or taking oaths, were usually made in the Name of the Lord. But somewhere back in Jewish history someone decided that if you would make an oath in something less than God, and yet something which had to do with God, you didn't need to keep it.

So what did they do? Well, they would make an oath in the name of heaven. Heaven is God's throne. But heaven is not God. So it sounds genuine to make an oath in the name of heaven without involving yourself with God. It would satisfy people, but people could not come back at you and call you a perjurer saying that you had made an oath to God. You didn't! You made it to heaven, and every Jew would agree that heaven is not God even though heaven is His throne. This was what the Lord was

talking about in verse 34.

But others had a different idea which was not as close to God as heaven is. They felt that they could make an oath in the name of the earth. What is the earth? The earth is God's footstool. But, again, the earth is not God even though it is His footstool and obviously belongs to God. So if you took an oath or made a vow to the earth, and didn't keep it, it would be all right because you hadn't made it to God. This is what the Lord was talking about in the first part of verse 35. This was slick, wasn't it? But it amounted to a desecration of the Name of the Lord.

But this was not all. There were those who took oaths in the name of the city of Jerusalem, "the city of the great King." This is mentioned in the latter part of verse 35. But again, Jerusalem, while it had been the place where God had manifested His presence among His people, yet the Lord was not Jerusalem, nor was Jerusalem the Lord. To take an oath in the name of heaven, or of earth, or of Jerusalem, when oaths were only to be taken in the Name of the Lord, was to lower God to the level of Jerusalem, or the earth, or even heaven. And so it was using the Name of the Lord in vain.

However there is still more. Now let us come down to man who was made in the image and likeness of God. This is getting even closer to God than with heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem. To take an oath in the Name of the Lord means that you are depending upon the Lord for the help you need to fulfill your vow and you are doing it to glorify the Lord. Now what if I swear, or make a vow, in my own name, isn't this doing what the Lord condemned in Rom. 1:23 where we read that man "changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man ..." The best that you can say about man is that some day redeemed man is going to be like God, *but he will never be God! And when you or I place ourselves in the place of God, we are lowering God to our level, and this means taking His Name in vain. And it is also bearing a false witness to God.*

We human beings think we are so great. We hear all of the time that we can do *anything* that we set our hearts to do. Well, the Lord showed in one short statement that we are not as great as we might think that we are. What did He say? He said that you and I can't make even one hair white if it is black, or black if it is white. "One hair"! Even our hair is so much under the control of Almighty God, that we cannot change the color of

even one hair. Oh, but you say, we can dye all of our hairs! Yes, you can, but it will grow back to be the same color that you tried to change.

Now what do all four of these things which our Lord mentioned, have in common. They are all a part of His creation. He is over them all, and infinitely greater than them all. None of them could exist apart from God. So to bring God down to the level of any of these, is to show that we know very little about the majesty and glory of the living God.

Finally, on this subject we have in verse 37:

III. THE LORD'S COMMAND TO ALL OF US (Matt. 5:37).

About a thousand years before the Lord came to earth, Solomon wrote,
19 In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise (Prov. 10:19).

One thing we know about the Pharisees, is that they were great talkers. They always had some comment to make, and usually it was wrong. We all think that we know more than we do. But what we all need to be careful about is that we live in such a way before God that people can be confident that when we respond with only a "yes" or a "no," people feel safe in accepting what we say is the truth.

What the Lord said here does not mean that it is wrong for us to take an oath in a court of law that we will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with the help of God. The Lord took an oath when the high priest questioned Him during His trial. In Matt 26:63-64 we read these words:

63 But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:63-64).

In the book of Romans there were at least two times when Paul called upon God to bear witness that he was telling the truth. The first was in Rom. 1:9:

9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers;

And he did it again in Rom. 9:1-3:

- 1 I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost,
- 2 That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.
- 3 For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

And then we have that wonderful passage at the end of Hebrews 6 in which God not only gave Abraham the promise of salvation, but that He also confirmed it with an oath. Cf. Heb. 6:17-20:

- 17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:
- 18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:
- 19 Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;
- 20 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

Making an oath or a vow to God is a very serious thing, and it should be done only after much prayer and meditation.

When Jacob had to leave his home because Esau had said that he was going to kill him, he got to a place which he named Bethel, meaning *house of God*. And there he made this vow with the Lord:

- 20 And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on,
- 21 So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God:
- 22 And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee (Gen. 28:20-22).

Twenty years later, when Jacob was returning home, the Lord still remembered that vow. And as Jacob was seeking guidance as to what he should do, the Lord, as the angel of God, spoke to him in a dream, and said,

- 13 I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from

this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred (Gen. 31:13). The Lord remembers our vows, promises we make to him, oaths we take when we are in trouble. He expected Jacob to keep his part of the vow, and the Lord was determined to keep His part.

Solomon, who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, said this about vows:

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay (Ecc. 5:4-5).

Did you make a promise to the Lord some time in the past when you were in trouble, but you never have fulfilled that promise, or kept that oath, or fulfilled that vow, however you want to express it. Remember that the Lord never forgets His promises to us, nor does He forget our promises to Him. Dr. Bach of TEAM used to advise us when he came to the Multnomah missionary conferences to “keep short accounts with the Lord.” (Repeat Ecc. 5:4-5.) Don’t make promises like the Pharisees did, keeping all of your options open. But when you tell the Lord, “Yes, I will do your will,” or “No, I will not insist on having my own way anymore,” stand by your word. He remembers what you said, and patiently waits for you, or for me, to remember, and to do what we told Him that we would do.