

## **The Believer's Integrity – An Expression of True Worship**

*<sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

Jesus declared to the religious elite of the day that He alone comes as the truth that can set a person free from sin. They scoffed and proclaimed Abraham as their spiritual father and were insulted that Jesus implied that they lacked acceptance by God. Jesus minces no words as he declares Himself true and the devil as a liar and the father of lies.

There is an appalling lack of integrity in the world today. I dare not go into the current political season. It is sad and disturbing. But it is clear why this is the case. It is because this world is filled with fallen sinners currently under the domination of the father of lies, the devil. Although deception, lies, and lack of integrity pervade the culture around us, that is not my primary concern this evening. My concern this evening is that this same lack of integrity in the world is often the practice of the professing people of God. Being called as Jesus disciples, we must exemplify the glory and true nature of our Lord by putting off all forms of lying and displaying integrity in all our action and speech. Those who truly know Christ have been set free from the father of lies and have a new master, the One who is truth personified, the Lord Jesus Christ.

My prayer this evening is that the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to uncover any lack of integrity in our lives and teach us how to walk openly and honestly as a testimony to others and expression of worship to our God and Savior. We are called children of light, and it is the Lord's desire for us to turn away from our sin and hypocrisy and be transformed into a people of integrity in this world.

There are many places in the Scripture we could go for admonition and instruction in this subject of honesty and integrity. This evening, I want to consider Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount concerning oaths. Let the sanctifying process begin!

Matthew 5:33-37

<sup>33</sup>“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

It is noteworthy that James reiterates this command in his letter:

*James 5: <sup>12</sup> But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.*

Both passages are rooted in the third commandment of the Decalogue which is:

*Exodus 20: <sup>7</sup> “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.*

Jesus is going to teach us how to obey this most important commandment.

### **The Context: Sermon on the Mount**

We now look at Matthew’s account of what some have called the kingdom of God manifesto. In this sermon, Jesus addresses his disciples and others were listening, including the religious leaders of the day. He exposed religious error and declared the true standard of righteousness from God. His words both confronted the corrupt religion of His day and provided practical instruction for kingdom living.

Jesus begins His message in Mt 5 by laying down the foundational principles of His kingdom by expounding the nature of true happiness and blessedness. He provides a series of kingdom culture attitudes, call the beatitudes. In the kingdom economy, it is the poor in spirit who are blessed and receive the kingdom inheritance, the mourning who receive God’s comfort, the meek that rule and inherit the earth. It is the ones that lack and hunger for true righteousness that are filled, and the merciful that receive God’s mercy. The pure in heart see God, and those that are peacemakers and are hated and despised because of Him that have the most extreme joy. A true disciple makes a transformational difference in the world as salt and light.

Then, in verses 17 through 20, Jesus states His purpose and relationship to the Law. He made it clear that He had not come to cancel the Law, but to fulfill it. The Judaism of the day had perverted and twisted the true meaning of the Scriptures through their tradition and selfish ambition, and Jesus was now going to correct the improper use and understanding of the law and give the true meaning and intent. He made it clear that He had not come to do away with the Law, but to fulfill it.

He then begins to lay out a picture of the true righteousness that a person must possess to enter the kingdom, a much greater righteousness than that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

He addresses several issues of righteousness, one at a time. He doesn't just talk about behavior but addresses the issues of the heart. Not just the act of murder, but anger, not just adultery and divorce, but illicit sexual desire, not just the misuse of oaths, but the lack of integrity, not just controlling vengeful retaliation, but the requirement to love even enemies. He deals with the motives related to religious practices like giving to the needy, prayer and fasting. He speaks of the issue of values, money, fear and worry. He exposes the sin of the quick judgment of others and the need for self-examination, and then expounds the amazing truth about the Fatherhood and benevolence of God, inviting the hearers to ask and receive from Him. He then calls those who have been blessed by God's mercy to treat others with the same grace they have received.

Then he transitions into a warning on how difficult it is to enter the kingdom, and how our words expose our heart condition. He provides the dire warning that there are many religious people who think they are in the kingdom of God and are not. He concludes his sermon with a compelling parable about two men building houses and facing a storm. There is the wise man, who built on the rock. He represents the one who listens and obeys the sermon, and his house stood firm in the storm. And then there is the foolish man, who built on sand, who represents the one who hears but does not obey, and his house is devastated by the storm. This evening, I want each of us to hear and obey the words of Jesus concerning this matter of integrity.

Look again at verse 33 of chapter 5, and let's consider this subject of oaths. In this section, He is addressing specific topics, beginning each topic with "you have heard it said to those of old", and then ending with, "but I say to you". He first presents what they believe and were being taught, and then gives them where that

is deficient and the truth. Jesus, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, taught clearly, directly, and with absolute authority. The religious leaders and system had diluted the law by adding oral tradition and interpretations. Jesus exposes their error and false teaching, and then speaks the truth.

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First, Jesus exposes the common erroneous understanding about oaths promoted by the Pharisees. What they had heard was only part of the truth, which had misled them.

It seems that taking oaths and making promises had become common place practice. The belief of the day was that if you basically kept your promises, oaths were a reasonable acceptable way to communicate. The level of binding to the oath made depended on what you swore by. Some swore by heaven, some by earth, and others by the great city Jerusalem. Others would just swear based on themselves.

Jesus also addressed this practice in *Mt 23: <sup>16</sup> “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.’ <sup>17</sup> You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? <sup>18</sup> 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.’ <sup>19</sup> You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? <sup>20</sup> So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. <sup>21</sup> And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. <sup>22</sup> And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.*

This tradition and practice of taking oaths had so obscured God’s original intent by adding complicated interpretations and bindings to the point of utter nonsense. All of the integrity in the practice was lost. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exposes this rampant misuse of oaths with was an expression of hypocrisy and taking the Lord’s name in vain.

Jesus teaches that whatever you swear by, that when you make take an oath before men, it is also before God, it is binding, and you will be held accountable for every word you utter. Jesus is not forbidding the original appropriate use of oaths. He is saying that oaths administered and used appropriately are to be solemn, taken sparingly, with a great sense of fear and respect towards God. Otherwise, you are taking the name of the Lord in vain, which is a violation of the third commandment. The people were taking oaths in everyday common speech, and then justifying their lack of honoring the oath based on what was sworn. The truth is that any promise or oath is based on the veracity of God who will judge all men by their actions and words. Taking oaths and making promises without a sober, serious heart is a grievous sin. Think of Annanias and Sapphira!

The people were misusing oaths, and thus misusing the name of God. They were using oaths to provide some assurance that they were being honest and had integrity. Oaths were now so commonplace that they had lost their gravity, and in fact had become a signal that someone was probably trying to mislead another person.

Jesus then gives the remedy and plain truth. An oath is inappropriate and unnecessary in everyday communication. He said to let your yes be yes, and your no no. Jesus is not forbidding the legitimate use of an oath as prescribed throughout the Scriptures. The true intent of the law concerning oaths was that they were to be used sparingly, with a great sense of sobriety, and a fear and dread of not keeping them. An oath, when administered appropriately, is for the purpose of adding weight to testimony before witnesses. The one sworn in is acknowledging they are accountable to God for their words. A legitimate sworn oath is a public declaration before witnesses that you are telling the truth with God as witness and judge. It is a public affirmation of a clear conscience.

Modern day examples are the taking of marriage vows, giving legal sworn testimony, placing signatures on business and legal contracts and commitments, especially ones that require a notary witness. When used rightly, oaths recognize the fear of God and the gravity of His person. They point to Him as the ultimate righteous judge. They bring Him glory. Whenever an oath is administered correctly, the name of God is being invoked with great fear, respect and gravity.

Jesus is forbidding the use of oaths and promises in common, everyday conversation. It is a taking of the Lord's name in vain ... empty ... cheap ... light ...the opposite of heavy, sober, fearful and glorious.

When Jesus says “Let what you say be simply “yes” or “no”; anything more than this comes from evil.....He is rebuking the use of oaths as a means of persuasion and everyday communication. He is forbidding the invoking of God’s name to gain credibility and influence with others. A simple yes or no is sufficient and credible unless you are a liar.

So what lessons and applications can we take from this teaching of Jesus? I see five applications:

1. Concerning the **practice of taking oaths**; My understanding from the full counsel of Scripture that it is not absolutely forbidden to take an oath, but all legitimate sworn commitments and signatures should be taken with the utmost fear and respect of God.
2. **Since we have taken the name of God, we must always speak the truth, and nothing but the truth.** Because we bear the name of Jesus, people should be able to always believe our words. If people have reason not to trust your word, you have taken the name of the Lord in vain. Certainly, using the name of God and Jesus as swear words is sinful. There is no place for a flippant use of God’s name, including the name of Jesus Christ. That is obvious. But what is even more blasphemous is when we curse and insult the Lord’s name anytime we are less than completely honest and clear in our speech and responses. We proclaim the name of Jesus. He had no sin, no deception, no guile. We are God’s people. People of the truth. It is the devil who is the author of all lies and deception. We must have no part in deception, lying, or veiling the truth.
3. **Our YES must be clear and plain.** When you say “yes, I will be there” do you always show up? On time? Can people depend on you? Do you keep 100% of your agreements? Do you pay your bills on time? Do you pay your taxes? Do you meet your obligations? If you have borrowed money, do you repay it in line with the terms of the agreement? This is not a set of suggestions and mere helpful moral advice on how to live a better life. This is a critical call to live a life that expresses the nature of the One who owns our lives. The integrity and truth that we express in our speech and conduct points to our identity and displays our true character to a watching world. Do we just carry the name of Jesus, or do we display the character of Jesus? Do we carry His name in vain? Walking in transparency and honesty is an

expression of worship. Living serious, sober lives adorns the gospel and exalts the true God of veracity and truth. Our Yes must mean yes.

4. **We must say and use the word NO.** We are living in a pandemic of social people pleasing. People are afraid to upset people by speaking truthfully and plainly. We learn from Jesus that there is a wholesome, healthy, and kind use of the word no. Our no needs to mean no. No makes things clear. People seem to be afraid of that word. When someone asks you to do something, there are two legitimate answers. Yes or No. Anything beyond that tends to lead to unrighteousness. Ask the Spirit of God to raise your awareness to your words. Do you speak a clear yes, which people can absolutely depend on, and a clear no, which clearly defines your commitments and priorities to others? Or are you unclear about your commitments? Both words, yes and no, are wonderful, useful and godly. Words beyond yes and no are risky and can lead unclear communication, misunderstanding and a lack of integrity.
  
5. **We must avail ourselves to the mercy, grace, forgiveness and help that is ours in Christ.** Whenever we are before the presence of God in the Scriptures, we see our condition and need for a Savior, for grace, for forgiveness, and for help. It would be tragic and unnecessary for you to leave condemned this evening. Our gracious Savior offers us forgiveness and the power to change. We have a perfect, righteous, crucified, risen Savior who stands before the throne of God pleading His righteousness in our behalf. If we will confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us and empower us to change. If we will but ask for His help, His answer is always yes. He invites us to come and be transformed into people of integrity and truth. He wants to shine His light in and through us. If you love Him as your Lord and Savior, He has set you free to walk in the light...open, honest, confident, and dependent on Him to help all of us as we work out our salvation. If you have struggles or just want some encouragement, please reach out to a brother or sister or church leader.