The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION FIFTEEN — Oaths and the Truthful Life

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness · Texts: Matthew 5:33–37; James 5:12

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:33–37** *…you have heard… 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all… Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*
>
> **James 5:12** *Above all… do not swear… let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.*

The Little Phrase That Gives Us Away

After two hard roads, here is a gentler one — though no less searching. And it starts with a phrase we have all used: "I swear to God."

We reach for it when we really want to be believed. "I swear to God, that is exactly what happened." And if you listen closely, that little phrase gives the whole game away. Because why would you need to swear — to reinforce this particular statement with a special, God-sized guarantee — unless, somewhere underneath, you suspected that your ordinary word might not be quite enough? The very act of swearing quietly admits that the rest of our speech runs a little loose.

Jesus looks at that whole habit — the swearing, the promising, the crossing of the heart — and says something bracing: stop. Do not swear at all. Not because oaths are naughty, but because a truly truthful person has no use for them. His goal is to make you into someone whose plain "yes" is so trustworthy that "I swear to God" would be redundant.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

The Command, and the System That Grew Around It

Start where Jesus starts. The Law took oaths with great seriousness: do not swear falsely, and keep the vows you make to the Lord. To swear an oath was to call God himself as your witness and guarantor — no small thing.[1]

But over the centuries, a whole elaborate system had grown up around oaths — a graded ladder of them, some considered fully binding and some conveniently not. Swear by the Temple? Perhaps you could wriggle out of that one. Swear by the gold of the Temple? Ah, now you are bound. Swear by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by your own head — people had

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. This teaching appears only in Matthew among the antitheses; James 5:12 gives the clearest New Testament echo. The underlying commands: Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21–23.

worked out, with lawyerly care, which oaths "counted" and which left them a quiet escape hatch. In other words, the sacred practice of swearing before God had been turned into something almost the opposite: a sophisticated technology for sounding truthful while keeping your options open. A system of loopholes for the calculating.[2]

Jesus Blows Up the Loopholes

So Jesus takes the whole ladder and knocks it flat. Do not swear by heaven — it is God's throne. Do not swear by the earth — it is his footstool. Not by Jerusalem — it is the city of the great King. Do not even swear by your own head — you cannot make a single hair of it white or black; it is not finally yours either.

Do you see what he is doing? He is exposing the lie hidden under the whole system. There is no corner of creation you can swear by that is somehow God-free — walled off from God, a neutral zone where you could make a promise God is not part of. Heaven, earth, the holy city, your own body — all of it belongs to God. Which means every single word you speak is already spoken in his presence. There is no such thing as a promise God is not witness to. The loopholes were always an illusion; you were standing before God the whole time.[3]

Why We Swear at All

So why did we ever need oaths in the first place? Here is the uncomfortable answer: we swear because we lie. The whole institution of swearing is a crutch for a world where words have gone cheap and people cannot simply be trusted. We save our special guarantees — "I swear," "honest to God," "I really promise this time" — for the statements we most want believed, which is a quiet confession that our ordinary speech runs a little loose. An oath is a monument to human unreliability. And Jesus, in effect, says: I want a people who do not need one — whose every plain word is already as good as their most solemn vow.

Let Your Yes Be Yes

And there is the whole ethic, in five words: "let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No.'" The greater righteousness here is not more elaborate swearing; it is a self so transparently truthful that swearing becomes pointless. Picture the person Jesus is describing: someone whose yes has always meant yes and whose no has always meant no; who does not hedge, does not spin, does not exaggerate to impress, does not reach for the convenient little "white lie," does not leave themselves a technical way out. That person never has to swear, because their bare word already carries the full weight of their integrity. This is the undivided heart of the pure in heart, back in Session Seven — only now it has come all the way to the mouth. The single, un-

[2]Second-Temple practice developed graded distinctions among oaths—which formulas were binding and which not—a system Jesus critiques again in Matthew 23:16–22 (swearing "by the temple" versus "by the gold of the temple"). Its effect was a technology of evasion: sounding bound while keeping an escape. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 5:33–37.

[3]Jesus dismantles the loopholes by showing that no created thing is "God-free": heaven is God's throne, earth his footstool (Isaiah 66:1), Jerusalem the city of the great King (Psalm 48:2), and even one's own head is not finally one's own. Every word is spoken in God's presence; there is no oath God is not party to.

double self, whose words simply match reality. When there is no gap between what you say and what is true, you have no need of an oath to bridge it.[4]

"From the Evil One"

And then Jesus says something surprisingly sharp: "anything more than this comes from the evil one." That is strong language for what looks like a small thing. But hear what he is naming. The manipulation of truth — the parsing, the hedging, the technicalities, the fine print that lets us deceive while technically not lying — belongs, he says, to the father of lies. Jesus does not regard "spin" as a harmless social lubricant. To him, truthful speech is Kingdom, and the calculated bending of speech to deceive is its enemy.[5]

And this is no small matter, because a whole world runs on trust. When words become unreliable — when the powerful learn they can lie without consequence, when truth becomes merely whatever you can get people to believe — it is almost always the vulnerable who pay the price; lies overwhelmingly protect the strong and wound the weak. So plain, reliable, unpurchasable truth is not just a private virtue. It is a justice, and a gift to the whole community. A people whose word can simply be trusted is one of the quietly radical things the Kingdom builds in the world.

A Note on Courts and Vows

One honest note, because people always ask. Some Christians — the Quakers, the Anabaptists — have read this as an outright ban on all oaths, and will not swear even in a courtroom; it is a serious and honorable reading, and it is the reason a witness today can choose to "affirm" rather than "swear." Others read Jesus as aiming at the abuse of oaths and the deeper call to everyday truthfulness, not forbidding a solemn vow at a wedding or in a court of law. We will not settle that here. But notice: whichever way you land, the heart of it is identical, and it is the part none of us gets to dodge — become the kind of person whose word simply does not need propping up.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread. Truthfulness, it turns out, is deeply for others — it is the gift of being trustworthy, of letting people rest their weight on your word, of refusing to manipulate them with cheap or hedged or flattering speech. Every lie, every spin, every convenient exaggeration finally uses somebody — bends them toward believing what serves me. So ask with me: where has my word grown unreliable? Where do I hedge, exaggerate, shade, tell the flattering half-truth, keep a quiet escape hatch open? And what would it mean to become a person whose

[4] "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" (5:37; James 5:12): oaths are a concession to human unreliability, and the goal is a transparently truthful self for whom swearing is redundant. This is the undivided heart of Session Seven ("pure in heart") come to speech.

[5] "Anything more than this comes from the evil one" aligns the manipulation of truth with "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Truthful speech is a communal and justice good: where words become unreliable, it is usually the vulnerable who are harmed. On the two Christian readings—an absolute ban on oaths (Quakers, Anabaptists; hence the legal option to "affirm") versus a critique of oath-abuse calling to everyday truthfulness—see the standard commentaries.

bare "yes" others could simply trust? *Freedom for others may cost us the flattering exaggeration and the self-protecting hedge — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Why do you think we reach for "I swear to God"? What does the habit of swearing quietly admit about our ordinary speech?
- Jesus says no corner of creation is "God-free" to swear by — every word is spoken in God's presence. How might that change the way you speak this week?
- "Let your yes be yes." Where is there a gap between what you say and what is true — the hedge, the spin, the convenient white lie?
- Jesus calls the manipulation of truth something that "comes from the evil one." Where do you see the cost of unreliable words — in our world, and in your own relationships?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. What would it take for your bare word to be simply trusted?

This Week — A Practice

Two small, formative movements. First, drop one crutch: go this week without "I swear," "honest to God," "I promise" — and let your plain word stand on its own two feet. Notice how it feels to have nothing propping it up but your integrity. Second, catch one hedge: find the one place you routinely shade the truth — the flattering exaggeration, the convenient omission, the technical out you leave yourself — and speak plainly there instead. Small as it sounds, this is where the undivided life gets built. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, we come to one of the most famous — and most misunderstood — things Jesus ever said: "you have heard 'an eye for an eye' — but I say to you, do not resist an evildoer; if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." We'll discover that "turn the other cheek" is not the doormat surrender we've been told it is, but something far more daring — a creative, defiant, nonviolent way of resisting evil without becoming it. It is the meekness of Session Four, put into action.

Benediction

So go this week and become a person of your word — one whose plain "yes" needs no reinforcement, whose "no" can simply be believed. Drop the crutches. Close the escape hatches. Let there be no gap between what you say and what is true, and you will find you never need to swear again — because you will have become the kind of person whose bare word is already a solemn vow. Blessed are the truthful, for in a world of cheap and slippery speech, their plain word is a small, sturdy piece of the Kingdom.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION FIFTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

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We reach for it when we really want to be believed. "I swear to God, that's exactly what happened." And if you listen closely, that little phrase gives the whole game away. Because why would you need to swear — to prop this one statement up with a special, God-sized guarantee — unless, somewhere underneath, you suspected your ordinary word might not be quite enough? The very act of swearing quietly admits that the rest of our speech runs a little loose.

And Jesus looks at that whole habit — the swearing, the promising, the crossing of the heart — and says something bracing: stop. Don't swear at all. Not because oaths are naughty, but because a truly truthful person has no use for them. His goal is to make you into someone whose plain "yes" is so trustworthy that "I swear to God" would just be redundant.

[The system.]

Start where he starts. The Law took oaths seriously — don't swear falsely, keep the vows you make to the Lord. To swear was to call God himself as your witness. But over the centuries, a whole elaborate system had grown up around it — a graded ladder of oaths, some binding and some conveniently not. Swear by the Temple? Maybe you could wriggle out. Swear by the gold of the Temple? Now you're bound. By heaven, by earth, by your own head — people had worked out, with lawyerly care, which oaths counted and which left them an escape hatch. The sacred act of swearing before God had turned into almost its opposite: a technology for sounding truthful while keeping your options open.

[Blowing up the loopholes.]

So Jesus takes the whole ladder and knocks it flat. Don't swear by heaven — it's God's throne. Not by the earth — it's his footstool. Not by Jerusalem — it's the city of the great King. Don't even swear by your own head — you can't make one hair of it white or black; it's not finally yours either. See what he's doing? He's exposing the lie under the whole system. There's no corner of creation you can swear by that's somehow God-free — a neutral zone where you could make a promise God isn't part of. Heaven, earth, the city, your own body — it all belongs to God. So every word you speak is already spoken in his presence. There's no such thing as a promise God isn't witness to. The loopholes were always an illusion.

[Why we swear.]

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in effect: I want a people who don't need one. Whose every plain word is already as good as their most solemn vow.

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[From the evil one.]

And then Jesus says something surprisingly sharp: "anything more than this comes from the evil one." Strong words for a small-looking thing. But hear what he's naming — the manipulation of truth, the parsing and hedging and fine print that lets us deceive while technically not lying, belongs to the father of lies. Jesus doesn't think "spin" is a harmless lubricant. To him, truthful speech is Kingdom, and the calculated bending of speech to deceive is its enemy. And that's no small thing, because a whole world runs on trust. When words go unreliable — when the powerful learn they can lie without consequence, when truth becomes just whatever you can get people to believe — it's almost always the vulnerable who pay. Lies protect the strong and wound the weak. So plain, reliable truth isn't only a private virtue. It's a justice, and a gift to the whole community.

[Courts and vows — brief.]

One honest note, because people ask. Some Christians — Quakers, Anabaptists — read this as a total ban on oaths and won't swear even in court; it's a serious, honorable reading, and it's why you can "affirm" instead of "swear" in a courtroom. Others read Jesus as targeting the abuse of oaths and the deeper call to everyday truthfulness. We won't settle it here — but either way, the heart's the same, and none of us gets to dodge it: become the kind of person whose word doesn't need propping up.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: where has my word grown unreliable? Where do I hedge, exaggerate, shade, tell the flattering half-truth, keep a quiet escape hatch open? Because truthfulness is a gift to other people — it's letting them rest their weight on your word.

Two small things to practice. First, drop one crutch — go this week without "I swear," "honest to God," "I promise," and let your plain word stand on its own. Second, catch one hedge — find the one place you routinely shade the truth, and speak plainly there instead. Small as it sounds, that's where the undivided life gets built.

Next time, one of the most famous and most misunderstood things Jesus ever said — "turn the other cheek." We'll find out it's not the doormat surrender we've been told it is, but something far more daring: a creative, defiant, nonviolent way to resist evil without becoming it.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and become a person of your word — one whose plain yes needs no reinforcement, whose no can simply be believed. Drop the crutches. Close the escape hatches. Let there be no gap between what you say and what's true — and you'll find you never need to swear again, because you'll have become the kind of person whose bare word is already a solemn vow.

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