

Promises, Promises?

Matthew 5:33–37ⁱ

It's All Connected.

Last week we considered Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, and although we are moving on to the next of the six illustrations that Jesus used to make the point, it's worth noting once again that all six illustrations are indeed making the same point. It's found in Matthew 5, verse 20, where Jesus said:

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20 ESV

But there's a connection between each of the individual illustrations as well. Last week we considered Jesus' teaching on divorce, which has become, if it has not always been, the most common point at which covenants and promises are made and broken, but consider this. What are two of the most common causes for divorce? I think anger, and lust, would be very high on that list.

Further, what is at the very heart of the matter? At the heart of divorce is the breaking of oaths. That's what divorce is, the breaking of the oaths that were taken and the promises that were made when a man and a woman called upon God, by the presence of His church, to bear witness that they were to be joined "from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

So, we haven't really changed subjects since we began this section. It's all connected. From the very first "You have heard that is was said..." to the end of chapter 5 we see Jesus exposing the false manner in which the scribes and Pharisees handled the law, always framing the letter to their own advantage while ignoring and sometimes even discrediting the spirit of the law as given by God to His people.

For example, in our text this morning, Jesus said:

³³ "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.' Matthew 5:33 ESV

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote of this:

Those exact words are not to be found anywhere in the Old Testament, which again is a proof that He was not dealing with the Mosaic law as such **but with the Pharisaical perversion of it.**ⁱⁱ

We see this even more clearly when Jesus addressed the same subject in Matthew 23, verses 16 – 22. There, He said:

¹⁶ "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.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?"

¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. Matthew 23:17–22 ESV

He was addressing exactly this kind of legalistic sophistry in Matthew 5 when He said,

³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Matthew 5:34–36 ESV

So, we are not meant to isolate the phrase “Do not take an oath at all...” from the immediate context. The phrases “either by heaven”, “or by the earth”, and “by your head” are added to explain the opening exhortation, and this was necessary because when the Pharisees swore by heaven or by the earth or by the gold of the altar at Jerusalem, “they reckoned it”, as Calvin wrote,

...to be next to nothing; and, as one vice springs from another, they defended, under this pretense, any profanation of the name of God that was not openly avowed.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Pharisaical use of what they considered to be less binding oaths, then, was no different than the childish attempt to escape from a promise by saying, “but my fingers were crossed when I said that.” So, Jesus was not speaking of the formal taking of an oath, as in marriage, or in a court of law, but of frivolous oaths taken between individuals as a matter of establishing the truth, and particularly when such oaths were framed so as to escape from the truth.

The Divine Witness.

This can be fully demonstrated by the fact that God Himself takes oaths. There are other passages that we could go to, but in Genesis 22, for example, God spoke to Abraham, saying:

¹⁶ ...“**By myself I have sworn**, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore...” Genesis 22:16–17 ESV

And the writer to the Hebrews picked up this theme, explaining it's profound significance to all the people of God in Hebrews 6, verses 13 – 19:

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself... ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show

more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

So, God Himself swears oaths—we call them covenants—and God always keeps His word, and,

¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,^{Hebrews 6:13–19 ESV}

The Old Covenant Witness.

We should also remember here that Jesus did not come to abolish or to contradict the law but to fulfill it, and the Law does not forbid the swearing of oaths, it simply reminds us that such oaths are binding and ought not to be taken lightly. This is fully demonstrated in the way that the Law generally deals with the subject. We have, of course, the negative injunction expressed in Leviticus 19, verse 12, where God said:

¹² You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.^{Leviticus 19:12 ESV}

But we also find a positive statement in Deuteronomy 10. Moses first asked:

¹² “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”^{Deuteronomy 10:12–13 ESV}

Then, some language that should remind us of our text in Matthew 5:

¹⁴ Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.^{Deuteronomy 10:14 ESV}

It was in this context then—and Jesus would have been fully aware of it—that Moses went on to say in Deuteronomy 10, verse 20:

²⁰ You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, **and by his name you shall swear.**^{Deuteronomy 10:20 ESV}

This would have been a really odd commandment, if the spirit of the law was simply, “Do not swear at all...” But as Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 5, verses 4 – 6:

⁴When you vow a vow to God...

Not don't make a vow or take an oath, rather,

⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶ Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a

mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Ecclesiastes 5:4–6 ESV

What Did Jesus Forbid?

So, if certain oaths *are* permitted, then what exactly was Jesus forbidding in Matthew 5, verses 33 – 37? Well, as we have already seen, evasive oaths—oaths that are taken not to establish the truth, but to undermine it; oaths that are framed in such a way as to give us the largest loophole possible. Jesus forbid just this sort of sophistry when He said,

³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. Matthew 5:37 ESV

This commandment would certainly apply to the contracts we strike in business, and to the promises we make in our personal lives as well.

One example would be seen in a set of marriage vows I heard some years back. Instead of the usual, “from this day forward...for as long as we both shall **live**,” the couple made the same vow, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health,” but they followed up with this, “for as long as we both shall **love**.” Presumably then, if either partner were to decide that the love was no longer there, they had a way of breaking the covenant that, in their eyes at least, did not actually involve breaking the covenant. But, according to the Heidelberg Catechism,

A legitimate oath means calling upon God as the one who knows my heart to witness to my truthfulness **and to punish me** if I swear falsely.^{iv}

Both the Law of God and the word of the Lord Jesus Christ, forbid us from taking evasive oaths that provide us with an out, but they also forbid what we might call frivolous oaths, the unnecessary invocation of the Holy name of God in circumstances where it is not called for. Saying, “O my God...” over and over to the point where it means absolutely nothing. Boice wrote that this is,

...exactly as if a servant living in the household of an honorable state official should go around talking about the honorable house, the honorable chair, the honorable mop, the honorable dishpan, and so forth. His speech would then have much less meaning when he called the lord of the house, “your honor.”^v

It is the boy who cried wolf. If we invoke the name of God for every worthless little thing, eventually the name of God will be become, to us at least, a worthless little thing.

See, we have this way of cheapening language. We say, “I just love...something...” whatever it may be, but if you love Cheetos, and you love your spouse, what exactly does “love” mean, and if we swear to God that every little statement we make is true, then what does it mean when we make an oath in the name of the Lord to be faithful to that spouse?

So, what we have here,

...is the condemnation of the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oath, used in order to make an impression and to spice daily conversation. Over against that evil Jesus commends simple truthfulness in thought, word, and deed.^{vi}

What Are We to Do?

As He said:

³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. ^{Matthew 5:37} ESV

But here's the thing... Are we guilty in this matter? I certainly have been (and so have you if you are as honest with yourself as you want everyone to think that you are). As The Heidelberg Catechism states,

...my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments and of never having kept any of them...

including this one. Further, we are

...still inclined toward all evil...

including this failure to simply let our yes be yes, and our no, no. Even in the best of lives, it's who we are and it's what we do, and if we can't see it in ourselves, then we're no better than the Pharisees, who were really quick and really good at pointing out everyone's sin but their own. Scrupulous honesty is called for here. We are commanded,

⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. ^{Matthew 5:48} ESV

But we all fail, and we all fall. Even as children of God we find that we are still inclined toward all evil; that failing to watch and pray that we may not be led into temptation,

...not only **can** [we] be carried away by the flesh, the world, and Satan into sins, even serious and outrageous ones, but also by God's just permission [we] sometimes **are** so carried away...^{vii}

Still,

...nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.^{viii}

And this is how we are right with God on this matter. Not through perfection under the law—under the law we are all sinners—but through the perfection of Jesus Christ, applied to us by the Holy Spirit as a work of God's free and sovereign grace.

⁵ ...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he

poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

⁸ The saying is trustworthy...

(it is the promise of the Living God),

...and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

Titus 3:5–8 ESV

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- i All Scripture citations unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Volume One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 184 (emphasis mine).
 - iii John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, vol. 1* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 294.
 - iv Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 102", *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 60.
 - v James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 152.
 - vi William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 309.
 - vii CRCNA, "The Canons of Dort, Point 5.4", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 139.
 - viii CRCNA, "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 38.