

Matthew 5:33-37

Telling the truth

Outline

The Messiah defines the true nature of Kingdom life: The sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)

- a. The character of Kingdom people (5:1-12)
 1. Attitude toward self: humble hunger for righteousness (5:1-6)
 2. Attitude toward others: passion for peace (5:7-9)
 3. Attitude toward enemies: joy in face of persecution (5:10-12)
- b. The calling of Kingdom people (5:13-16)
 1. Salt: “I have been crucified with Christ” (5:13)
 2. Light: “Christ liveth in me” (5:14-16)
- c. The conduct of Kingdom people (5:17-7:27)
 1. In respect to moral purity (5:17-48)
 - a. The letter of the law. (5:17-20)
 - b. The spirit of the law. (5:21-48)
 1. with respect to how we treat others (5:21-26)
 2. with respect to how we treat marriage (5:27-32)
 3. with respect to how we treat truth (5:33-37)

³³ Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, '*You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.*' ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is *the city of the great King*.³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' {or} 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil.

- For more information see apptoteach.org (theology files #110, #307)

A. The ethics of truth telling

1. **The use of the tongue (speaking) is at the heart of the Biblical story of God and His people.**
 - a. God spoke the creation into existence.
 - b. The word “angel” means “messenger.”
 - c. The Messiah Jesus is described as “the Word become flesh.”
 - d. Prophets and teachers played a pivotal role among God’s people.
 - e. The Gospel is a message or story that is proclaimed with words.
 - f. Christians are to grow to spiritual maturity (Christ likeness) as they speak the truth in love.

2. **Godly speech is committed to speaking the truth in love. Eph.4:15** “but **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head even Christ.”
- a. **Speaking the truth – Eph.4:25** “Therefore, lay aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with this neighbor, for we are members of one another.”
 - Keeping one’s word.
 - Giving an honest report.
 - b. **It is to be wholesome, timely, gracious and edifying – Eph.4:29** “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word that is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Jas.3 “⁹ With it we **bless** {our} Lord and Father; and with it we **curse** men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come {both} blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”
 - c. **Confession of faith – Rom.10:9** “If you **confess** with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.”

I Jn.1:9 “If we **confess** our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
3. **Matt.5** “³³ Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘*You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.*’ ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is *the city of the great King*. ³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil.”
- a. The Kingdom of God is a “no spin” zone.
 - b. A lie is the proclamation of a fact, idea, or feeling that we know to be false. This suggests that if I am communicating information that is false (but I believe to be true), I am not lying. I am honestly communicating what I believe.
 - c. The cultural context of Matt.3:33-37 is shaped by
 - **Deuteronomy 10:20** “You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear.”

(**See also** "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (Exodus 20:7) "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:12) "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said." (Numbers 30:2))
 - The Pharisees would create technical boundaries that would permit them to distinguish between oaths that were tied to the Lord (binding) and those that were not (not binding). **Matthew 23:16-22** "Woe to you, blind guides! You

say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."

- d. What about oaths today? Consider the fact that Jesus may have been using hyperbole in forbidding all oaths.
- **God swears oaths.** Luke 1:73 speaks of "the oath that [the Lord] swore to our father Abraham." Acts 2:30, speaking in reference to Psalm 16:10, says that "God had sworn with an oath to [David]." Hebrews 6:17 says, "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..."
 - **Jesus testified under oath.** In this same gospel, when Jesus is being questioned before Caiaphas, he remains silent. That is, he remains silent until the high priest puts Jesus under oath. Matthew 26:63 records this: "But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Then, Jesus answered when put under oath.
 - **The Apostle Paul swore oaths.** There are at least six examples of Paul using God's name to swear an oath, such as Romans 1:9-10, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." (II Cor. 1:18, 23; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8; I Thess. 2:5) Either Paul did not see Jesus' teaching as an absolute prohibition of oaths, or his words of Scripture are disobedience to Christ as He swears an oath by God's name.
4. **But what do we do when love and truth do no seem to be on the same page?**
- a. Is it ever appropriate to lie, steal or break one of the other moral "absolutes?"
1. A missionary is imprisoned in a Latin American country on a trumped-up charge. His fellow missionaries can free him if they bribe the police (which is a common practice, but illegal). Bribing is strictly forbidden by the mission authorities. What should they do? Let's say three years have passed. Let's say he is being tortured. Let's say that the family and children of the imprisoned man are suffering because of his situation. Are there any situations that would warrant a bribe?
 2. A young Christian student feels strongly that his nation (Germany 1942) is engaged in an immoral war. He defies his government and refuses to fight.

Is he doing the right thing? Let's put him in the USA in 1965 — protesting the Vietnam War. Does that make a difference? Why?

- b. **Three degrees of “self protective lies”**
- 1st degree** – deliberate deception with harmful intent – “He never spoke to me about it.” (when we know that he did).
 - 2nd degree** – white lies, half truths, advertising, political spin – “Come see the friendliest church in town” (a phone book add for a new start up congregation).
 - 3rd degree** –distortion, exaggeration, silence – “The sermon was wonderful.” (when it was just so so).
- c. **As we face complex moral challenges we can make one of two mistakes.**
1. We can make God too big and the moral challenge too small. That is, we can belittle the complexity of the moral challenges we face.
 2. We can make the moral challenge too big and God too small. That is, we can start with the assumption that God's revelation is not sensitive enough to apply to the really tough moral challenges of life.
- d. **There are three types of lies in the Bible.**
1. **Lies to cause harm** —
 - “Trust me on this one.” (when the speaker is wanting to take advantage of the listener)
 - “You surely shall not die.” Gen. 3:4
 2. **Lies to protect the liar** —
 - “The dog ate my homework.”
 - Greed (“Things go better with Coke.”), and fear (“I didn't do it.”) are the big incentives here.
 - “I do not know the man” Matt.26:74
 3. **Lies to protect others** —(two categories)
 - a. Social grace —
 - 1) “I love your dress.”
 - 2) In this context, people want to be fooled.
 - b. Social necessity —
 - 1) Rahab in Joshua 2
 - 2) In some cases, this is a matter of life and death.
5. **Practical guides for discerning what to do in conflicted situations.**
- a. The **LIES** test
 - L**ove – Is it loving?
 - I**nnocent – Is it selfless?
 - E**ffect – Does it edify?

Sleep – Do I have peace?

- b. **The “sleep – test”** ethic says that if you can sleep well after a decision it is probably a good one. This test raises some questions however.
- Does the “right thing” always condition our conscience?
 - Is the individualism that this test implies a sound basis for moral decisions?
 - Can we assume that a good conscience can be developed in a community context that does not encourage virtues like – courage, justice, prudence, and temperance?
 - Is it not true that often our conscience pulls us in different directions?
 - **Note:** The key to a valid “sleep – test” ethic is the development of character.
- c. **Good decisions should pass the test of all three questions raised by St Thomas Aquinas.**
- Does the Scripture address the issue directly?
 - Is your motive one of selfless love or is it fear, anger, etc.? A technical conformity to the letter of the law without a loving heart is no virtue.
 - Is the timing right? A good deed or word done at the wrong time and in the wrong setting can be more harmful than helpful.
- d. **Wisdom = Spirit guided common sense.**
1. Don't expect to be in situations where truth and love will not be on the same page. Most of us will never have to avoid the truth.
 2. Pray for and seek creative alternatives to avoiding the truth.
 3. Be slow to speak and quick to listen. Sensitive listening will give us insight in knowing how to speak the truth in a loving way.
 4. Respect the power of the tongue for both good and evil.
 5. Commit yourself to speaking the truth in love.
 6. Audit your conversations.
 7. Make it safe for others to tell the truth. When we give signals that suggest that we refuse to hear the truth or will penalize those who bring it to us, we discourage truth telling.