

# Matthew: The Life & Teaching of Jesus the Messiah

Lakewood Presbyterian Church

**Key Idea:** *On certain solemn occasions the Bible requires we take an oath in His name; but in day to day living, simple honesty is required.*

**Lesson 24**  
**Matt. 5:33-37**  
**Honesty In Speech**  
**(5-3-26)**

## Honesty in Speech: Matthew 5:33-37

Over the past few weeks we have been discussing how Jesus corrects six specific examples of Pharisaic distortion of Old Testament Law. This week we come to the fourth Antithesis in this series; and once again, we find Jesus not abolishing the Mosaic instruction concerning oaths, but restoring its full intent. This is wholly in keeping with the pattern developed earlier with regard to unrighteous anger (5:21-26), adultery (5:27-30), and divorce (5:31-32) and with our own discussion of Matthew 5:17-20 where Jesus outlines how his disciples should approach all the ethical and legal material of the Old Testament: *With a basic presumption of continuity.*

### I. Oaths: What the Rabbis Taught

In the Judaism of Jesus' day, the making of oaths was apparently commonplace. Both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo found the practice--and its abuse--so widespread as to warrant comment. Similarly, the *Mishnah* which records the rabbinic interpretations and additions to Moses handed down orally until the 2nd century A.D.--what Scripture sometimes refers to as the "traditions of the elders"--includes a whole subsection dealing with various oath formulas. These in turn were divided into formulas which specifically named the name of God and others which did not. For according to the rabbis, one was obliged to keep only those oaths specifically invoking the name of the Lord; or as Stott puts it, "They argued that what the law was really prohibiting was not taking the name of the Lord *in vain*, but taking *the name of the Lord in vain*" (p. 100). Or to put it another way, to them Moses had prohibited *profanity*, not *perjury*.

What is the difference between the two?

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Are both prohibited? Where? \_\_\_\_\_

Give several examples of oaths which the scribes and Pharisees thought did not invoke the name of God (see Matthew 23:16-22)?

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What are some examples of this same practice today?

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<sup>33</sup>Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'

## II. Oaths: What Did Moses Actually Teach?

If the Pharisees strove to shift attention away from a vow itself and the need to keep it to the formula used in making it, what then had the Law actually taught? Did it only prohibit misusing the Lord's name? We might first consider the way in which Moses was understood quoted above, for the Old Testament command to keep one's oath is never given in exactly these words, but neither is this summary wholly inaccurate either.

### A. Case Law Applications of the 3rd and 9th Commandments

When we turn to the pages of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we find the subject of oath-taking scattered throughout the case laws. As we discussed before, the case laws apply the general moral principles of the Ten Commandments to specific situations. They are an authoritative guide to how we, too, should go about moral decision-making. In this case, the 3rd and 9th commandments forbid two specific categories of acts: (1) Misusing the name of God and (2) knowingly falsifying one's word. The case laws then bring these principles to bear on the already existent practice of oath taking. An *oath*, one may recall, is a *solemn statement*, not simply a promise, *affirmed to be true before God*. Essentially, swearing is primarily self-cursing should one not be speaking the truth.

### B. Oaths, Like Divorce, Are a Concession, Not a Commandment

Oaths are intended both to safeguard truth-telling and to convince others of our trustworthiness. They are concessions to living in a sinful world. In regulating the practice of oaths, the Mosaic Law makes three main points concerning their use:

- i. Is it sinful to refrain from taking an oath (see Deuteronomy 23:22)? \_\_\_\_\_
- ii. Must all oaths be taken in the name of the Lord? Why or why not (see Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20)? \_\_\_\_\_
- iii. What must the man who makes a vow to the Lord do (see Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23)? \_\_\_\_\_

### III. Oaths: How Jesus Restores the Full Intent of the Law

Given the context described within the case laws, some oath-taking occurred within a civil context and some within a religious or "ceremonial" one; but regardless of the particular situation, the scribes and Pharisees in shifting the focus of oaths from truth-telling to formulas had blatantly ignored Moses' command in Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20, namely that all oaths must be taken in the Lord's name and His name alone. This is why Jesus deals with such seemingly odd alternatives as swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one's own head (5:34-36).

<sup>34</sup>But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; <sup>35</sup>or by earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

Jesus' response is to show that this distinction between formulas which mention God's name and those which do not is wholly artificial and irrelevant, but the scribes and Pharisees should have known better already. How so?

- Heaven and earth (see Isaiah 66:1; Psalm 99:5; Lamentations 2:1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Jerusalem (see Psalm 48:1-2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- One's own head (see Psalm 139:13-16; cf. Matthew 10:30) \_\_\_\_\_  
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Jesus' point is clear. In none of these can one avoid a reference to God for He is the one in control over all things, even male pattern baldness! Therefore, rather than both perjure oneself and treat the Lord's person and name with such contempt, it is better not to swear *at all* (5:34).

Is this an absolute prohibition? Why or why not (see Matthew 26:63-64; Genesis 22:16; II Corinthians 1:23)?

Why does God on occasion swear by himself?

<sup>37</sup>Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

#### IV. Oaths: Applying Jesus' Teaching

Jesus prohibits Pharisaic oath taking--not lawful oath taking--but even so, resorting frequently to the use of oaths implies that one's simple word is not sufficiently credible, but rather, suspect. The real point of both the Law and Jesus' correction is that the people of God must keep their promises and be people of their word. Vows, therefore, become unnecessary (v. 37, cf. James 5:12) under such circumstances.

Under what circumstances would it be proper to take an oath or make a vow?

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What does it mean that "anything beyond this comes from the evil one"?

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How should Christians apply Jesus' words in the following areas:

- Marriage
- Business
  - i. Contracts
  - ii. Sales
  - iii. Employer-employee relations
- Taxes
- What others can you think of?

**NEXT WEEK: Vengeance vs. Love for Enemies: Matthew 5:38-48**