



ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS -  
THE SERMON ON THE  
MOUNT 13

# Oaths (Mt 5:31-37)

**“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’**

**But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.**

**And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”**



# Initial Questions

- What are these oaths?
- How does “swearing” fit in?
- What about “swearing on a Bible?”
- Others?

# What was written

- Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD. (Lev 19:12)
- You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. (Ex 20:16)
- 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. (Num 30:2)
- Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, (Ps 50:14)

# What was being said

- **'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. (Mt 5:33)**
- **Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that 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 anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Mt 23:16-23)**
- **He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" (Mt 23:72-74)**

# Compare and contrast!

- Was what was being **said** and **done** the same as what was **written**?
- What was written :
  - *Be truthful. Have integrity.*
- What was being done :
  - *Words being used for advantage, or to manipulate.*
- Are these the same? Where does the emphasis lie?





# In Jesus' Day

- Apparently, in Jesus's day, respect for the divine name had led to oath taking based on symbols for God's name rather than God's name itself, such as the temple altar, the gold of the sanctuary, heaven, earth, and Jerusalem (Mt 5:34–35; 23:16–22). In each case the vow-taker swears by something holy, sacred, or greater than himself (cf. Heb 6:16), perhaps in combination with making the oath in a sacred space, such as the temple (1 Kgs 8:31//2 Chr 6:22), all in order to vouchsafe truthfulness of speech.
- Oaths were a big part of Jewish civil and religious culture, as well as part of the legal system.

# Various interpretations

- Don't take any oath at all
  - *Church Fathers (Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen)*
  - *Anabaptists, Quakers – even legal settings > trouble*
- Principle of honesty but not a *rule rejecting oaths*
  - *Luther, Calvin*
- *How do you process what Jesus is saying?*





# Recap: Threefold approach of Jesus

- **Traditional Righteousness = the traditional statement of the law/command/precept**
- **The Sinful pattern = the sinful violation, what it looks like.**
- **Transforming Initiative = what to do when you actually in that situation.**

# What was being said

- Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that 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 anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Mt 23:16-23)

# What was happening...

- Apparently, some were using the oath system to draw fine distinctions between oaths that had to be carried out and those that did not have to be carried out.
- Oaths and vows, which had been intended originally as sacred guarantors of truthfulness, commitment, or covenant, were now being thrown around casually or manipulated in a manner that somehow differentiated truly binding vows and oaths from non binding and deceptive imitations. (S&G, 293).
- Jesus was appalled at these kinds of practices. But more broadly, says Garland, Jesus was offended by “the infringement on God’s majesty” involved in routinely calling on God as a witness to fallible and deceptive human speech (“Oaths and Swearing,” 578; cf. Gundry, Matthew, 93).



## What's wrong with making oaths?

- System of binding and non-binding oaths undermines the whole point of oaths.
- Quite often a way to avoid keeping the promise.
- God's name invoked frivolously.
- Makes oath-taking less reliable.
- Others?

# Applying this approach...

Traditional  
Righteousness – Do  
not break your oath

Sinful pattern – verbal  
untrustworthiness (Mt  
23)

Transforming Initiative  
– just say yes or no.



# So, in practice...

- **Transforming Initiatives.**
- **Instead of getting involved in the problems that accrue from employing oaths and invoking God's name**
- **Just say yes or no.**

# New Testament examples

- Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned. (James 5:12)
- But Paul. – 2 Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20; Phil 1:8; cf. 2 Cor 11:31
- I call God as my witness —and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. (2 Cor 1:23)
- I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. (Gal 1:20)
- When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6:13-20)

# So, today....

- Swear on a Bible, or not?
- Not so clear?
- What do you think?





**The Swiss New Testament scholar Hans Weder catches this when he says, “In church history, again and again this teaching is reduced to the legalistic, a Christian may swear no oath.” But that “passes right by the actual intention of Jesus,” which is not about abstaining from swearing, but about uttering consistently truthful speech (Die “Rede der Reden,” 127).**

# Making decisions like this....

- Truthfulness rather than any kind of deceit is a characteristic of the in-breaking reign of God.
- This interpretation is consistent with others offered in this volume — we view Jesus's teaching as dynamic instruction for how disciples can participate in the dawning kingdom (KME 1), rather than as a set of new legal rules or restrictions.
- Kingdom-oriented approach.
- Creating shalom for all!

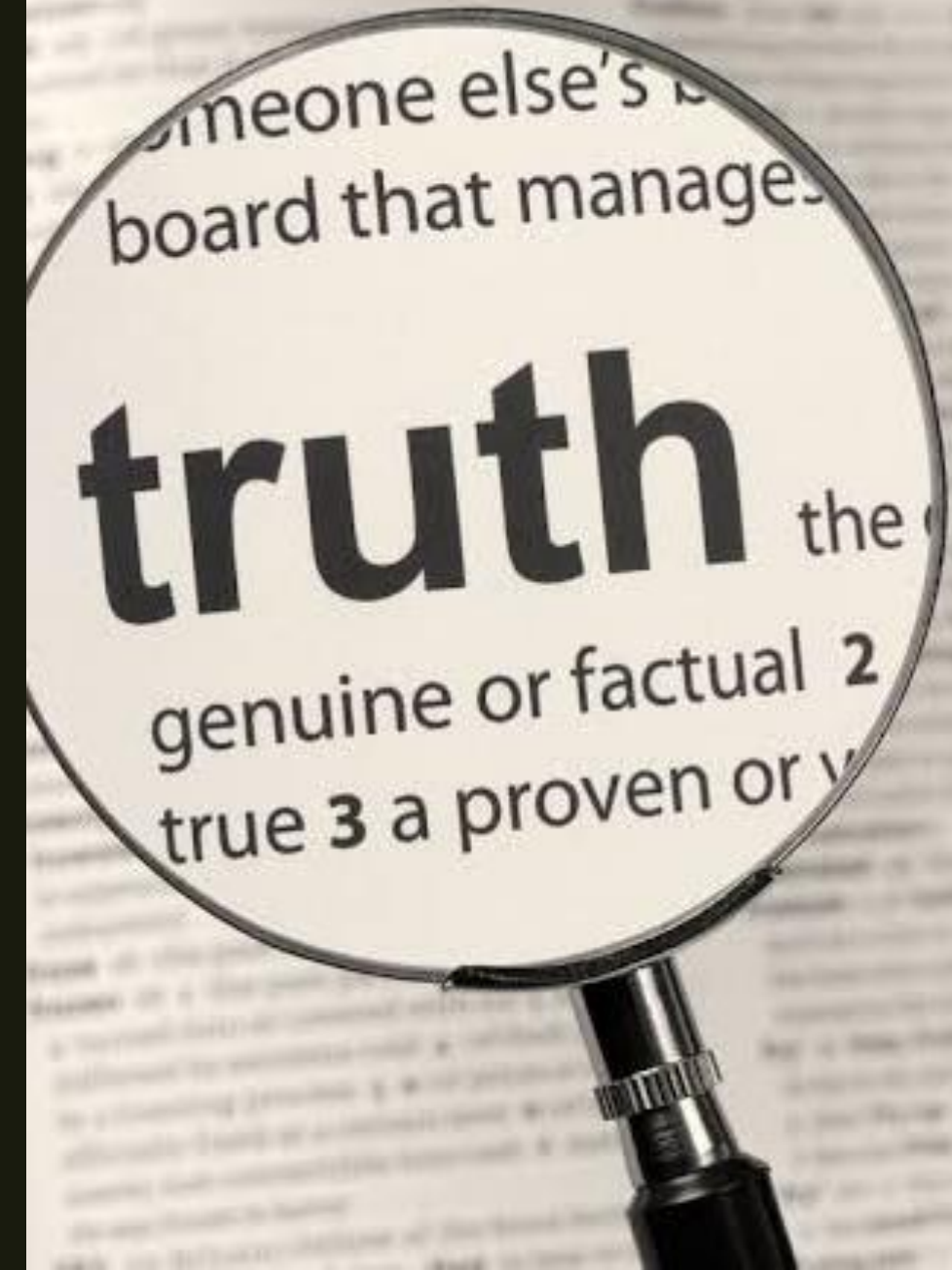


# The evil one.

- All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this **comes from the evil one**. (Mt 5:37)
- When anyone hears the message about the **kingdom** and does not understand it, the **evil one comes and snatches away** what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. (Mt 13:19).
- We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the **evil one**. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is **true**. (1 Jn 5:18-20).
- The **evil one's** project is to harm and destroy the **kingdom**, and the battle-ground is **truth**.

# Truth and discipleship

- First, the truth is not simply something that is believed or spoken, but instead is a character quality, a way of being. It is a path that is followed (2 Tm 2:18; Jas 5:19), a place one inhabits (2 Pt 1:12), and a commitment of the self.
- Truth is something that is either “in” us or not (Gn 42:16). It dwells in our “hearts” or “inward being” (Ps 51:6), and thus emerges from our “mouths” quite naturally when we have occasion to speak (cf. Mk 7:21–23; Pss 5:9; 15:2; 51:6).
- Truth is to be loved (Zec 8:19; 2 Thes 2:10), sought ardently (Jer 5:1, 3), rejoiced in (1 Cor 13:6), and sided with (2 Cor 13:8).
- (S&G, Kingdom Ethics, 296)





# Reflection

- Anything new for me here?
- Do I have a two-level truth system?
- Let your yes be yes, and your no, no?
- How core is a commitment to truth in my faith?