

“Honestly, be Honest!”

Matthew 5:33-37

As Jesus instructs us how to use our words here, I was curious to know how many words a day, on average people speak. So I googled it and found that we speak anywhere from 7,000-20,000 words a day! That makes me tired just to hear that! That’s a lot of words. How many of those thousands of words we say a day are positive and encouraging? How many are negative or critical or even dishonest? We need to be more careful with our words and this is where Jesus was going in this next section of the Sermon on the Mount. So far Jesus corrected the Pharisaic interpretation of the commandments on murder and adultery, now He deals indirectly about the commandment of using God’s Name in vain especially in the context of swearing oaths.

Initially we might think this has very little to do with us since most of us probably rarely swear an oath. And yet an oath was to confirm a promise to do something or state something that was true to the point where one would back it up by saying ‘As God is my witness’ or ‘as surely as the Lord lives’, to validate what was said. Again, this was another favourite form of abuse by the religious leaders to make bold claims about what they taught as truth, validating with oaths as if they were made to God but they had their own way of crossing their fingers behind their backs as an escape clause, which we’ll see. Essentially, they would make these claims or make these oaths to do something but then their actions did not follow their words.

That’s something we can identify with and be challenged about this morning. How often are we guilty of not following up on what we say? Do we think how much that affects our witness to the unsaved and our credibility to each other? Some of the ‘promises’ we make but don’t follow through on or some appointments that we agree to go to but then back out on, we may not think are a big deal but as Jesus shows us, they are really acts of dishonesty or even a form of deception that belittles our integrity and can bring discredit to God Himself.

So as Jesus reminded the people of His day to speak the truth so He calls upon all His followers to . . .

Speak Truthfully and Back it up With Your Life **(5:33)**

When Jesus said ‘*Again you have heard it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord’* He is referring to Scripture that the religious leaders had misapplied or interpreted incorrectly. There are a few verses that Jesus could be referring to since there were many that dealt with oaths.

Lev. 19:12 “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

Num. 30:2 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.

The 3rd commandment states

Ex. 20:7 “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

But the Pharisees made a loophole. They would not make a vow supposedly 'in God's Name' but would get around that by swearing by the gold on the temple, or a piece of temple furniture or heaven or their hair, etc. This way if they didn't fulfil the vow (or intentionally deceive people into thinking they would), they would defend themselves by saying 'On, but I didn't swear by God's Name). In the Mishnah – a collection of rules and traditions laid down by the rabbis over the years, they have a whole section on what are binding and non-binding oaths. Some of it borders on silliness. One Rabbi stated that if you swear **by** Jerusalem it is non-binding while if you swear **towards** Jerusalem it is binding.

What was the purpose of oath swearing anyway? God shows us Himself in Hebrews 6:16

Heb. 6:16 People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.

God confirmed His promises to Abraham by swearing by Himself He would bless Him and give Him many descendants. The purpose for swearing an oath was to confirm the promise that your word is sure and you will follow it up with action. However, to not follow up on an oath sworn to God is to invite His curse on yourself.

Jesus would go on to encourage us to bypass oath swearing altogether as a way to back up your promise by just living out a life of integrity. Be consistent when you tell people you'll do something that you'll do it and they will believe you because you are consistently honest. Or, don't promise to do something you know you probably won't. That's what Jesus means by letting our yes be 'Yes' and your no mean 'No'. Just speak truthfully and back your words up with action.

The religious leaders were notorious for swearing oaths and making loopholes should they not follow through with a promise or something they claimed to be true was actually untrue. In vv.34-36 Jesus points out the ridiculousness of their oath taking when they swore by heaven (and not God), or swore by the earth/land (but not God!) or swore by Jerusalem (but not God!) but heaven is God's throne and dwelling place and earth is His footstool and Jerusalem is the place of Jesus' future reign!! Since God is in all these places and owns everything then. . .

Speak as if God is Your Audience **(5:34-36)**

. . . which He is anyway because He's omniscient and omnipresent. Every time we make a promise God hears us and holds us accountable. The Pharisees made vows as if God were not present in some places or in some circumstances or if they avoided certain words. Want to see for yourself? Look at Matt. 23:16-22.

¹⁶ "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.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

Why then did they make oaths like these, trying to loophole their way to innocence in case what they said was wrong or to intentionally try to deceive people? The Pharisees would make an oath when they were trying to win an argument and swear that what they said was true so that people would go 'ooooh' and 'aaahh' that if he swore an oath what he said must be true because you certainly don't want to bring a curse on yourself.

But if we consciously speak with the understanding that God is our audience and He hears everything we say then . . .

We won't exaggerate the truth to impress others (23:16-22)

Like a gossip might when they only have part of a story and make it sound like they were there (when they were not). Or knew the person personally (when they didn't) or heard the story firsthand (when it was already second-hand news).

Or like someone who's been caught in a lie or shown to have less knowledge about something they had pretended to know more about and they say something that is only half true to impress others when they know it isn't.

Or when we expand on the possibility of a difficult situation (which really isn't that bad) to garnish empathy when all we're really doing is using it as an excuse to get out of something we don't want to go to.

Like the Pharisees we too can be guilty of exaggerating the truth to impress people or manipulate them or mislead them into thinking we're smarter than we are or we're suffering when we're not.

The problem however, is when our words are discovered to be less than what we intended them to be. When our excuse is uncovered, our knowledge found wanting or our suffering to be not really true did God not hear everything we told that person? Yes. Do we not think there are consequences to our false words? Like losing the trust and respect of fellow Christians or family members? Be honest. Speak as if God were our audience – which He is. He is even the audience of our thoughts.

If we speak as if God is our audience . . .

We won't make promises we won't keep (Deut. 23:21-23)

Oath swearing was not a command in the Old Testament; it was optional. Jesus probably also had Deut 23:21-23 in mind,

²¹ If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. ²² But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. ²³ Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.

"If" not when. If you're going to make a vow to the Lord do it otherwise you sinned because you lied. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do because God heard you.

Again, we don't usually make oaths but we do make promises sometimes to be at an event or a place or at a certain time and we're not (and we knew we weren't going to go or we knew we would not arrive on time because we didn't want to). Things happen in life that disrupt our plans and make

us late or miss meetings, etc. But that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking the Pharisaic loophole system where we speak words sounding like we've promised people to be somewhere or do something or we intentionally arrive late for no other reason than we wanted to. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Why? Because God is our audience. And when our lateness or our absence or our false promises become a habit people start to doubt our word, to mark us as unreliable and eventually stop inviting us to be part of their lives. 'Hey let's invite so-and-so to this event?' Why? They never come? Yeah, you're right. Let's not bother.'

Or, 'What time does that thing start? 7:00? Yeah but so and so is leading it and he's never there on time. If we get there at 7:15 we won't miss anything.' Or you're waiting for people to come because of an activity in the community. 'Didn't so-and-so say they were coming to help?' Yeah they did, but they've said that before and never showed up.'

Could people be saying these things about you or I because we have shown in the past that we are unreliable by our lateness or absence? That's our testimony we're talking about. The Pharisees spoke as if God were absent or that He didn't hold them accountable if they left out certain words. Sometimes we are guilty as well of making promises we don't have any intention of keeping, as if God wasn't there.

In the eight blessings in 5:3-12, I emphasized that Jesus wanted people to know God wanted to bless them because the Pharisees were cursing them, saying they weren't blessed of God because they were poor or had a disability or lacked an education. I never saw it more clearly than Wednesday night when we were at Bible study and we were in John 7. The Pharisees had sent temple guards to arrest Jesus but they came back empty handed saying '*No one ever spoke the way this man does*'. The Pharisees responded:

47 "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 48 "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

Who said the people were cursed? They did – the Pharisees! And they obviously let the people know these things. When we speak as if God is our audience,

We will bless people and not curse them

Do people feel blessed when they find out we made false promises to them or misled them with gossip or let them down when we expected their presence? Bless means to lift up, curse means to bring down. James reminds us of the power of our words when he writes in James 3:9-10

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Surely, our little white lies or lame excuses or misleading absence or gossip can't be considered a form of cursing? Is it a blessing? No. The only reason I go in this direction is because Jesus does right here in Matt. 5:37.

37 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus exhorts us to speak honestly since God is our audience wherever we and . . .

Don't Speak Like the Enemy **(5:37)**

If it's not the truth, if we're not completely honest then we are acting like Satan himself because he is called the deceiver, and disguises himself as an angel of light and prowls around seeking whom he can devour. Jesus was even more blunt when He said of the Pharisees

⁴ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

God doesn't lie and when we lie we're not speaking from God. Yes, they may be half truths but the half that isn't true was intended to deceive others into thinking we were speaking truthfully.

Let's remember who we are because we don't need to speak this way. John wrote in 1 John 2:14

¹⁴ I write to you, dear children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

We are strong, the Word of God lives in us we have overcome the evil one so let's not be like him with our little lies and half-truths and lame excuses. Remember how Jesus prays for us in John 17,

¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

'Sanctify' means set them apart, make them distinct by the truth of the Word. We distinctly show ourselves to be people of the Word when we do what it says. Be honest with each other. Bless each other. Speak truthfully and back it up with our life. Speak as if God is standing beside us.

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