

Jesus said, **“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).** This morning we’re going to continue our study of Christ’s first sermon about discipleship—the Sermon on the Mount—and talk about truth and truthfulness and what this has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 5:33-37: "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.' 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. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

These words from the Gospel, **“You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn,”** were not a Bible quote by Jesus. Rather, Jesus was quoting to the teachers of the Law their own teachings as regards an elaborate system they themselves had created for ranking oaths.

Which is to say, a person might swear by heaven, by earth, by the heavenly city Jerusalem, by God’s name, or by his own dumb head, and each object of one’s oath had points, so to speak. So swearing by God name’s was 100 points, and swearing by your head was 10 points, and if you broke a vow, they’d tally your points to figure out how much it was going to cost you for a Get Out of Jail Free Card, or something like that. Anyway, as was his practice, Jesus cleared the table of all nonsense and declared that there was no hierarchy in vows, that you’re either telling the truth or you aren’t.

Jesus said, **“do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.”** He could be such a kill joy.

But here’s his point: Granted, it’s your head by which you might take a vow, but who created it in the first place? And who determines even the color of your hair?

In other words, to swear by anything—God’s name, heaven, earth, or even your own head—is really to swear by the power of God, for he is Lord of all, and to take an oath by any measure is thus a very serious matter.

For the Christian, this is about understanding that God is our Shepherd and we’re mere sheep in his field. God’s in charge, and all I can do is follow him. I do not know what the future holds. Even our most sincere promises sometimes fall flat because we are not masters over what the future might bring. This is counter-cultural. Our society teaches us that we’re in control, that we’re the masters of our own destinies.

There’s a school of thought that teaches that if we have the right attitude, believe the right things in the right ways, and if we have a positive attitude, then we’ll get what we want, and I’ll be what I envision myself to be. But as Christians, we say with **St. James**, **“If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (4:15)**.

But there’s always two sides to the story: As we’ve learned, Jesus used hyperbole and exaggeration to make his points throughout the Sermon on the Mount. In this section the exaggeration is his command, **“Do not take an oath at all!”**

Some faith traditions, like the Jews, take this statement literally and do not permit any kind of oath-taking among their members. For example, they will not say the Pledge of Allegiance and they will not take an oath in a court of law. I appreciate their desire to be obedient to God’s Word, but what they’ve done is taken Jesus’ statement out of context and failed to look at the rest of Scripture.

For example, Jesus took vows himself. In the midst of his Passion, **Matthew 26:63-64a**, **“the high priest said to (Jesus), ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’⁶⁴ And Jesus said to him, “You have said so.”**

Jesus’ confirmation in the name of the **“Living God”** that he was the **“Christ, the Son of God”** was a vow.

St. Paul also took vows. In Romans, 2nd Corinthians, Philippians, and 1st Thessalonians he made several statements and then he declared, **“God is my witness!”** which, of course, is a vow. And during his 2nd missionary journey we read, **Acts 18:18**, **“(Paul) had cut his hair, because he was under a vow.”**

Jesus didn't condemn vows outright. His point was that we should be truthful, that we should always be conscious that we live under God's lordship, and that it is by that lordship we stand or fall.

The second commandment reads, **"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."** We remember this commandment when we hear people cuss, using the word, "God," as an adverb. But it's more than that. We were baptized in the name of the Triune God, and the Scriptures read that we were sealed with the God's name and the Holy Spirit. Thus when we lie or break promises, we do so as representatives of God, and we use his name in vain!

Indeed, because we call ourselves, "Christ-ians," we bear God's name, and to behave in any way that is contrary to his will is to use his name in vain. Thus we are warned by the commandment, **"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7).**

Jesus finished his teaching on oaths, saying, **"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."**

In other words, to lift ourselves up with lies is from the devil. That's what Jesus is saying. Whether it's coloring the truth; exaggerating our personal story; making promises we won't keep; saying anything that might lead to our praise or promotion, or anything that might be at someone else's expense. All bad.

Today, how often is the oath "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" nothing but a sham and a mockery?

And how often have we heard someone say, "I swear to God!" and then everything that dribbles out of their mouth is a lie?

You and I have taken vows. In Confirmation we were asked, "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" And we said, "I do so intend with the help of God."

If you're married, you said something like, "I pledge myself to you as your spouse according to the Word and ordinance of God our Father. As God is my witness, I will never forsake you. I am your spouse until death do we part."

But sometimes, despite our best intentions, we have broken our promises to God. Perhaps it was in a fit of rage, a moment of passion, a time of desperation and fear. Perhaps our intentions were even premeditated. But alas, thanks be to God in the name of our Lord Jesus, God himself took a vow on our behalf. We read in **Luke 1:68-74, "(God) has visited and redeemed his people...to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him"**

Redemption, mercy, covenant, deliverance – gifts from God by his oath to himself. This is our salvation. This is Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, the name of God is a part of our identity, of our thoughts, words, and deeds. There is no other name in heaven or on earth greater than his, and he's given it to us. Let us bear the name "Christian" with confidence and respect. It is an awesome thing to bear this name in this world in which we live.

Friends in Christ, this week let us meditate on our Lord's promises and vows to us. He took an oath for you and me when he said, "**I will never leave you nor forsake you.**" Let us cling to that. And he made a vow to us when he promised, "**on the last day I will raise you up.**" Let us give thanks.

This week let us be truthful with one another, with our families, and coworkers, looking for ways to build one another up in God's name.

And this week let us find opportunities to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.