

Matthew 5:33-37 *Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil.*

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT?

Why is it so difficult to simply say yes or no? Perhaps we like the ambiguity of not having to follow through; or we want to put off a tough decision; or we may not want others to know our true intentions. Bottom line is that sometimes we just don’t want to commit. And when we do commit with a “yes” or “no,” how often do we not follow through. After all, they’ll understand.

But God wants His kingdom citizens to be clear cut with our words. And He wants us to follow through on our commitments. Ambiguity, deflecting the question or lack of commitment smells of deceitfulness and is certainly not being forthright and transparent. He is faithful, and want us to be.

OTHER NEW TESTAMENT VERSES ON OATHS AND HONESTY

Ephesians 4:25 *[put on the new self] Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.*

Colossians 3:9 *Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.*

James 5:12 *But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.*

RESIST OATHS

Swearing in this context is not about using profanity, though God clearly condemns profane talk. Here swearing is about making oaths or promises to others.

Do you remember the oaths you made as a child? “Cross my heart and hope to die!” And maybe you added “stick a needle in my eye!” Or perhaps just “I swear” would do. And as adults we might say “I really mean it” or “I swear to God” or simply, “I promise.” All these and more were to add credence to our promises.

It used to be that to take an oath before a judge and jury the hand was placed on the Bible. For a US president and high officials taking the oath of office it still is that way. Why? Because it was, or is, thought that to take an oath on a Bible gives the oath more credence.

But why would righteous believers need to make promises or take an oath if they are trustworthy, faithful and always true to their word?

Feeling the need to make a strong promise or oath reveals having to prove oneself, perhaps for a history of not following through on promises. How can we get better? Sincerely confess your weakness in this area and determine with God’s help to begin a life of honest faithfulness to your word. A simple but sincere “yes” or “no” should suffice as our bond.

WORDS REVEAL CHARACTER

Matthew 12:33-37 *Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*

2 Corinthians 1:17-20 [regarding intention to come to Corinth, but not able to fulfill] *Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time? But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us – by me and Silvanus and Timothy – was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.*

Does God care about our promises? Yes! As citizens of the Kingdom, we represent our King with our words and actions. And we will give account in the day of judgment. (Matt. 12:36-37) Honor is given to God when our words match our actions. His faithful character is represented and reflected in our faithful character.

For God, His yes is always “Amen” = “so be it.” (2 Cor. 1:20) You can trust God to keep His word – always. So may it be with us. No not do so is to dishonor Him. To do so is to honor our Lord.

A TIME FOR OATHS

This is not to say that there is not an appropriate time to take a solemn vow, and make an oath by witnessed words or a signing of our name that is notarized.

Wedding vows are serious business, and rightly made solemn by serious words exchanged before witnesses with documents signed and recorded. Likewise, witnesses before a judge and/or jury or special prosecutor are called to make public vows of honesty lest they be guilty of perjury. And we are glad to hear a public official swear to fulfill the duties of their office as a matter of record. And when we make promise to pay back a significant loan, such as for the mortgage for a home, we sign multiple documents before a notary with the giving of fingerprints and cards of identification. Even significant private promises made to one another are often made by exchanging signed notes of intention. All these giving of oaths show the importance and solemnity of the promise and hope to secure the keeping of these promises.

Yet, God expects our day to day smaller commitments to be kept as well. Our “yes” or “no” is meant to be our bond of reliability despite a signed and notarized document.

When we say we are going to be somewhere for an agreed upon appointment, we should feel an obligation to keep that appointment. When we offer to do something and say we will, that should be our bond to do so. Even an RSVP should have a weight of responsibility to follow through.

Yes, circumstances sometimes come up to make us late or prevent the follow through of a promise made. Then communication as early as possible, accompanied by a sincere apology is always appropriate.

GOD APOLOGIZING?

And before you make being late or apologies a regular practice, imagine if God were in the habit of apologizing for not keeping His promises.

“Dear child, I’m sorry but I’m not able to be with you today – something more important has come up.” Or, “I know I said I have plans to prosper you, but I’ve decided to not prosper you this time.” Or worse yet: “Yes, I said that ‘whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved’ but I just don’t find you worthy enough for my grace to save you – sorry.”

Or imagine bowing your head in prayer and getting a busy signal, or a message saying “The caller you have reached is not taking calls today, and the mailbox is full.”

We might chuckle at these divine absurdities, but the truth is we should cringe at what they reveal about ourselves. If we indeed are ambassadors of our Lord’s character and person, our faithfulness to promises made should match His as much as is humanly possible, and relying upon His Spirit’s inner self control.

THE OLD COVENANT INTENTION & JESUS FULFILLMENT

Because of the fallen human condition, honesty and follow-through on promises was then, as it is now, at a low and need for accountability. Here are the standards as laid down in God's law:

Leviticus 19:11-12 *You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.*

Numbers 30:2 *If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*

Deuteronomy 23:21-23 *When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you. However if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, what you have promised.*

Psalms 116:12-14, 19 *What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. I shall pay my vows to the Lord, oh may it be in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!*

Do you find any of these outdated? I think not! We are not to lie to one another. We are not to break sacred promises made to the Lord – such as marriage vows. If a vow is made, it must be kept. And how do we “repay” God for His many benefits? We are to call on His name – in prayer and thanksgiving. And we are to assemble in His name – in worship.

Now the Rabbinical interpretation and specifically the Pharisaical interpretation became “don’t make false vows, but fulfill what you make.” (Matt. 5:33) So how did people respond? How would you respond? They didn’t make vows so they didn’t have to keep them. And that is the false interpretation of God’s intention in the Law. They never considered that the true fulfillment of the law was to go far deeper – to the integrity of our intent in making promises.

Jesus in Matthew 5:34-37 gives His divine fulfillment of what the deep meaning of the law is, regarding oaths and honesty.

1. Any oath made to God is to be kept. Don’t qualify what “counts” or “doesn’t count.”
2. Let your word of “yes” or “no” be your bond of promise – to God and to others.

This is how our righteousness is to “exceed” that of the scribes and Pharisees. This is how the law of Moses is to be fulfilled or completed. This is how we are to be excellent kingdom citizens.

A FULFILLMENT OF TWO COMMANDMENTS

Jesus has already taught on the full meaning of the 6th commandment, “do not murder.” He taught to shun the root cause of murder, which is anger. Then He taught on the full meaning of the 7th commandment, “do not commit adultery.” And he taught to shun the root cause of adultery, which is lust. And His teaching on divorce touched further on how divorce can lead to adultery.

Now in this the fourth comment by Jesus on the law He does not reference one of the 10 commandments specifically. But on closer inspection of His interpretation, we can see that keeping our oaths to God and letting our words of “yes” or “no” be our bond are really instructing us on the deeper meaning of commandments #3 and #9.

Commandment #3 tells us that we must not take the name of the Lord our God in vain. And every time we fail to keep a sacred oath we are doing just that. To not honor our marriage vows is to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. To not honor our vow to serve our country faithfully is to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. To not honor our signature promise on an official document is to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. And to perjure one’s self before a judge or jury after taking a vow of truthfulness is also to take the name of the Lord our God in vain.

Commandment #9 says “You shall not bear false witness.” And every time our “yes” is not yes and our “no” is not no, we have borne false witness and broken the commandment.

MY COMMITMENT

I conclude by quoting from a song I wrote for a children's musical years ago. They are words from the mouth of a child struggling with honesty – but they are so appropriate for children of all ages.

God, you are so big and wise;
I'm so small and full of lies.
Take my words and make them Yours
So I can be like You.
God, Your words are always true;
With Your help, mine will be too.
Fix my life and make it right,
So I can be like You.

Oh how we need God's help and strength to be the men and women of integrity he expects from His kingdom citizens. Let us renew our commitment to pay our vows of love and allegiance to our God, consistently and faithfully. And let us renew our commitment to let our word be our bond, reflecting His faithfulness to us.

- √ HONEST
- √ FAITHFUL
- √ TRANSPARENT
- √ DEPENDABLE

Lord, I need You!