

The Sermon on the Mount

DEVOTIONAL STUDIES FROM THE
MEN'S MORNING FELLOWSHIP

Matthew 5:33 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'

Matthew 5:34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;

Matthew 5:35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Matthew 5:36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

Matthew 5:37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Today a salesman might be false in any of a number of ways:

1. He might withhold information. (It's not a lie; just an omission!).
2. He might exaggerate.
3. He might change the terms during the deal.
4. Or he might lie outright, as if it is your fault if you believe him since lying is to be expected as a part of the process.

In any case the salesman is passing off as true what he knows to be false.

Or you can look at it this way. You go into the encounter prejudiced against the salesman. Without even knowing him you already believe him to be false. Thus he must try every trick in order to sell you – even being false if necessary.

Here is another perspective. *Spin* is a sometimes pejorative term signifying a heavily biased portrayal in one's own favor of an event or situation. We talk about putting a positive spin on something.

CarFax is a company that says it can give you a used car's history. They have a TV commercial that shows a Honda caught in a flood. Someone is typing an add across the bottom of the screen. They initially type, 'flood damaged.' Then they delete it and type instead, 'new upholstery.' It's positive spin at its best.

These are modern equivalents of the kind of thing Jesus was addressing when He mentioned **swearing falsely**.

The Jews had developed a bad habit of swearing such false oaths in every day matters.

The Law of Moses contained several prohibitions against swearing false oaths by the name of God. Let me read a few:

Leviticus 19:12 And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I *am* the LORD.

Numbers 30:2 If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Deuteronomy 23:21 "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you.

Since swearing falsely by God's name was a violation of the Law of Moses, the Jews had to figure a way to swear falsely without coming under the condemnation of the Law.

The Jews sought to avoid the sin of swearing falsely by God's Name by substituting **heaven**, **earth**, **Jerusalem**, or their **head** as that by which they swore. They would swear by any of these and even if later found false they would not consider themselves guilty of breaking God's Law.

It was useless to try to avoid swearing by God's Name by merely substituting another noun for His Name:

1. To swear by **heaven** is to swear by **God's throne**.
2. To swear by the **earth** is to swear by His **footstool**.

3. To swear by **Jerusalem** is to swear by the royal capital.
4. Even to swear by one's own **head** involves God because He is the Creator of all.

Matthew 5:37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

It's not always wrong to swear or vow. We recite marital vows; we swear to tell the truth in court.

Jesus Himself testified under oath before the High Priest (Matthew 26:63ff). Paul also used an oath to call God as his witness that what he was writing was true (2Corinthians1:23; Galatians1:20).

Jesus was describing your ordinary conversation and circumstances. He was telling you to simply be honest. If in your every day dealings you find you need to swear by something in order to convince someone of your honesty, you are probably being dishonest. You are probably trying to rip-off someone or to get away with something.

Maybe the other person thinks you are being false. It doesn't help to swear an oath. It makes you look guilty! Just tell the truth.

Jesus closed His thoughts on this by mentioning **the evil one**, Satan. All that is false originates with him. Don't be get accused of guilt by association because you are being false.

Jesus was not reinterpreting the Law. He was returning to its original intent. Be honest in all your conversations and circumstances. Swear oaths only in very special circumstances. When you do you must fulfill your oath. Ordinary oaths are unnecessary. Your Yes should mean Yes, and your No should mean No.

We can glean a further insight from Jesus' teaching about swearing oaths. The Jews were dividing into compartments different parts of their lives. They wouldn't swear falsely by God in spiritual matters. But they would swear falsely in business or personal matters.

The insight is that life cannot really be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved but not in others.

I'll finish with this quote from commentator William Barclay:

There cannot be one kind of language in the Church and another kind of language in the shipyard or the factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of conduct in the Church and another kind of conduct in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life and kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life and in every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in His name; He hears all words... We will regard all promises as sacred if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God.

