

## Citizens Tell The Truth

Matthew 5:33-37

### Introduction

The Sermon on The Mount is one of the most loved and most studied passages in the New Testament. It's theme: True Righteousness as opposed to the false righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It's purpose: in part to describe the laws of God's Kingdom and the spiritual principles that are to govern our conduct in that kingdom. Jesus has spoken of our character; poverty of spirit—humility; mourning; sorrow over sin; meekness—waiting before God for His mercy; hunger and thirst—asking for God's righteousness; merciful—a willingness to condemn ourselves rather than condemn others, purity of heart—peace-makers—persecuted. We are salt and light and we are to put off sin. Jesus has addressed the issue of anger (vv.21-26); lust (vv. 27-32); and will now deal with the problem of deception (vv.33-37). **Citizens in God's Kingdom tell the truth. Christians are supposed to be truth tellers.**

In this passage we will learn the reason for telling the truth and look briefly at the rabbinic tradition for telling the truth and our responsibility to tell the truth.

C.S. Lewis wrote; “A man can't be always defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it.”

### The Reason For Telling The Truth (v.33)

*Matthew 5:33 (NKJV)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.’*

The Law of Moses contained several prohibitions against swearing falsely by the name of God (William MacDonald; p.1222—Lev.19:12; Num.30:2; Deut. 23:21) Two vows are given in verse 33: The word “swear” is the Greek word (epiorkeo) which means to perjure oneself or to swear falsely. The second “oath” (horkos)—was a word that meant to enclose—like a fence—or surround—and so to fence in the truth or surround the truth. MacArthur p.321 “The truth of an oath or vow is enclosed, bound, and therefore strengthened by that which is invoked on its behalf”.

To swear by God—or swear in God's name meant that He was the Witness that you were telling the truth. Some of the religious leaders would try to avoid the impropriety of swearing in the name of God—by substituting heaven or earth or Jerusalem or their own head. Jesus will expose the hypocrisy—for those who want or need wiggle room for tall tales and outright lies.

Richard Nixon said, “Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth—to see it like it is, and tell it like it is—to find the truth, to speak the truth, and to live the truth.”

When people talk like that the expectation rises. All cultures and societies need a way to get to the truth. In a very real sense—the desire for truth is a desire for God. Even the Deist Thomas Jefferson wrote that “Truth is the first chapter in the book of wisdom”.

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

In a literal rendering of the third commandment reads; “Thou shalt not lift up the name of Jehovah thy God to vanity” (or falsehood)—to lift up the name—was a phrase that meant to swear by it. An oath is an appeal to God.

Why do people swear to God or appeal to God to strengthen a statement? In courts people swear; “To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God.”

Why do we do that? Because we live in a world where we have come to expect people to lie. We expect the politician to lie to us, the mechanic to lie to us, the government to conceal the truth, the butcher who cuts meat in the store to lightly place her thumb on the scale. We expect the advertisers to lie about their product, we have even come to discover that educational facilities sometimes mix truth with error, science and medicine and media lying, parents, lying, churches lying, who can we trust to tell us the truth?

An elderly wealthy woman was very happy with own chauffeur. He was courteous, prompt and efficient. The only complaint she had concerned his personal appearance. One day she said to him diplomatically, “Randall, how often do you think one should shave in order to look neat and proper?” “Well, Madam,” said Randall, also trying to be diplomatic, “with a light beard such as yours, I’d say every three or four days would be enough”. Someone said that men were born to lie and women were born to believe them.

Lying is not new. It’s as old as the serpent in the Garden.

John 8:44; “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.”

Why are we so shocked? If Satan the Father of lies—is in charge of this world’s system—then why does the presence of so much deceit shock us? Truth is a precious commodity in short supply. Do we live in a corrupt and broken world? The answer is yes. But no matter how corrupt or broken there needs to be a mechanism—a way to get to the truth. The Bible made a provision for perjury. If someone falsely accused someone of a crime, the penalty for that crime would befall the perjurer. For instance if the penalty for adultery was stoning—and a person falsely accused someone of adultery—the person who falsely accused—and it was discovered it was a false accusation would suffer the same fate. Can you imagine a world where lying carried those catastrophic consequences? Without truth—justice is impossible!

Even in motor cycle gangs and street gangs there is a code of honor. People who use lying and stealing as a way of life are still not expected to lie and steal from each other. They insist on truth in the gangs for their own survival.

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

In Hebrews 6:16 we read; “For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute”. The reason people swear is to give greater credibility to what is being said. In ancient times when a person called upon God, they were in effect asking God to be the witness and judge to what was being said. If it was a lie, it was an invitation for God to judge the liar. That is why an oath was “the end of all dispute”. It was the ancient way of saying, “end of discussion”. “God provided for making oaths by His name (Lev.19:12); Abraham confirmed his promises to the King of Sodom (Gen.14:22-24) and to Abimelech (21:23-24) with oaths in the name of God” (MacArthur p. 321).

God even swore by Himself (He could swear by no greater; Gen.22:16-17); “and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand on the seashore, your seed shall possess the gates of their enemies.” The writer of Hebrews explains since God could swear by no greater He swore by Himself” (Heb.6:13-14).

Whenever God says anything, it is truthful and binding. Why then would God swear? Does this mean that God might say something untruthful or unreliable? No. When God swears it is for emphasis and permanence.

When Jesus says, “verily verily” or I am telling you the truth—it is not because He is in the habit of lying about other things. It is for attention and emphasis.

Why did God in the Old Testament allow circumstances for people to make vows or take oaths? Again because of the evil sinful nature of people. Human beings are prone to lie.

In the book “The Day America Told The Truth” we read; “Americans lie. They lie more than we had ever thought possible before the study. But they told us the truth about how much they lie. Just about everyone lies—91% of us lie regularly. The majority of us find it hard to get through a week without lying.

The Deist Voltaire famously said, “I am very fond of truth, but not at all of martyrdom.”

### **The Rabbinic Tradition For Telling The Truth (v.33)**

The religious leaders and Rabbinic authority believed; “the world stands fast on three things: on justice, on truth, and on peace.” Since the Law allowed for oaths, the Jewish community had developed a hierarchy of values for swearing, a pattern which made some statements more binding than others” (Augsberger p.77). Since the Law of Moses allowed for oaths, people would sometimes use oaths in wrong ways. The religious leaders and some people failed to realize there were only certain circumstances that really necessitated an oath. To the Jew, almost any kind of oath for any reason was acceptable; “. . . just as long as it was not false and the person would fulfill it. The missing ingredient of a serious circumstance led to frivolous, meaningless oath-making that completely vitiated the legitimate purposes of oaths. People would declare anything and promise anything with an oath, while having no qualms about providing means by

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

which lying or breaking their word could still be done. Indiscriminate and insincere vows became so commonplace that no one took them seriously. Instead of being a mark of integrity they became a mark of deceit. Instead of prompting confidence they prompted skepticism.

If something were true, they would swear by God. If something were less than true they would swear by something else. Honest vows made to the Lord had to be kept. But all other vows became brittle and breakable. Oath-taking became lie making. People would swear on their mother's grave or their father's eyes or their children's lives; they would swear by the temple, or the furniture in the temple (the golden menorah, or the table of showbread or the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat). Some people would swear by the hairs on their head. "The command 'you shall not swear falsely by My name' (Lev.19:12) **was conveniently interpreted to mean that swearing falsely by any other name was allowed**" (MacArthur p.323). This was a kind of Jewish 'cross my heart and hope to die—stick a needle in my eye' but all the while your fingers were crossed behind your back.

Why this elaborate system that would allow for deception? Because people wanted to lie. People still want to lie. People don't want to be dragged down by God's absolute standard of truth. It sounds so 'absolute'. Instead of asking God—begging God to help them tell the truth—they would dumb down the standard. Josh Billings wrote; "I never knew an auctioneer to lie, unless he absolutely had to".

### **The Responsibility To Tell The Truth (vv.34-37)**

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

Jesus is calling for honesty without an oath. This is why some people in court do not 'swear on the Bible' but rather affirm to tell the truth. Mennonites, Quakers and others refuse to swear at all. Jesus is not denying the importance of oaths or that oath taking does not serve a legitimate legal or cultural function. They were important—and could be taken in the name of the Lord. William Hendrikson explains; "What we have here in Matthew 5:33-37 is the condemnation of the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oath, used in order to make an impression or to spice up daily conversation." Jesus is simply saying, "think and speak the truth."

Why do people lie? Is anyone interested in telling the truth? Again in the Book "The Day America Told The Truth the authors write; "It all started with this simple observation, a fact of research life: But that desire is tempered by the realistic fear that telling the truth will get them into trouble with their spouses, their bosses, their parents, their friends, or their neighbors. So people rarely find anyone they trust enough to let all of their precious defenses down" (p.4).

People tell lies for lots of reasons. We lie to protect ourselves, we lie thinking we are protecting others, we lie to have power over others, we lie to elevate ourselves at the expense of others. We act in anger, we act in lust, we set in motion a devastating chain of events. Serious lies hurt

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

people, violate trust and sometimes have legal consequences. George Stephanopolous on the Larry King Live show let slip; “The President has kept all of the promises he intended to keep.”

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

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

What is Jesus saying? Stop trying to dumb down the standard. Tell the truth. Heaven, earth, Jerusalem were all ways of trying to make truth speaking not so serious. All of these things were grand, important, and an appeal to the things in heaven or things holy were meant to strengthen a person’s willings to believe what was being said.

The whole purpose of oaths was to tell the truth. But now we have ‘truth in advertising’ and ‘truth in lending’ and ‘truth in selling laws’. Attorney’s phrase things, not always to get the truth, but to conceal the truth. Attorneys are not the only ones guilty—they are just a little more practiced. Campaign ads are geared, not to reveal the truth, but to conceal the truth. The point Jesus is making is that God is the Creator of all things, and all things belong to God, and God is a God of truth. Even in these examples that people are swearing by—Jesus says—note; “It is God’s heaven, it is God’s earth, it is God’s Holy City, and your head—(whether real hair or fake hair or dyed hair or no hair) belongs to God.

Some people might read this text and say—Jesus is wrong. You can make your hair black or white. All it takes is a little dye! With the write box of hair coloring and the write beautician you can make change your hair! Even in the ancient world people could dye their hair. You are missing the point. Jesus is not saying you may or may not be able to dye your hair—Jesus is saying God made you the way God made you! Think about what Jesus is saying—if you decide to try to disguise your appearance will it fool God? Can a life lift or Botox treatment or any other surgical treatment cause God to forget who you are? You may disguise yourself but you cannot fool God!

Jesus knows the truth. People like to be deceived.

*37But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.*

The Lord condemns promiscuous swearing.

The Lord condemns oath taking in ordinary conversation.

For the Christian and the Citizen in God’s Kingdom our yes should be yes and our no should be no.

William MacDonald; “To use stronger language is to admit that Satan—the evil one—rules our lives.”(p.1222).

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

What is the Lord saying? Tell the truth. Our speech should be what W. H. Griffith Thomas calls “strong and yet pure and true”. Keep your answers simple. Lying answers usually sound pretty complicated. The more words a person gives in explanation—the less likely it is true. The NASB reads; “let your statement be yes, yes or no no. The word statement is logos—let your word be yes or no. Every normal word should be truthful, unadorned and unqualified as to its truthfulness. Jesus was not interested in people covering up lies with hypocritical oaths.

There is no such thing as an innocent lie. All lies are against God. All lies disturb God. All lies dishonor God. Who is the Father of lies? Satan. How does Satan lie? Satan lies by corrupting, distorting or denying the truth of God’s Word. Lies honor Satan. Truth honors God. Lies in effect become a way of praising and honoring Satan! Every lie—has the net effect of praising honoring and glorifying Satan! If Satan is the Father of lies—if Satan is the original corrupter of truth—if lies honor him and glorify him—how can this be anything less than worship—of Satan? Every lie is against God. Every lie affirms the agenda of Satan.

Truth does not have 50 shades of grey. A half truth is a whole lie. God has not changed His standard. God requires absolute truthfulness. We have seen his standard concerning lust, concerning divorce and now lying. The Psalmist wrote that God desires “truth in the innermost being” (Psalm 51:6). Among the things God hates is a lying tongue (Prov.6:16) and lying lips are an abomination to the Lord (Prov.12:12). Jeremiah wept over the Israel because “lies and not truth prevail in the land” (Jer. 9:3). Revelation 21:8 contains the chilling warning: “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death”. Hell—becomes the liars—final destination.

One of Satan’s chief spokesmen of the 20th century (Adolf Hitler) said, “By means of shrewd lies, unremittingly repeated, it is possible to make people believe that heaven is hell—and hell heaven. The greater the lie, the more readily it will be believed.”

## **Conclusion**

Augsberger: “Jesus taught that swearing is unnecessary, irreverent, and ineffective in that it does not change anything. The critical issue is truthful speech. Jesus wants His community of Disciples to practice truth in relation to society and especially among themselves. Truthfulness is the expression of inner security and integrity” (p.68).

God’s absolute and unchanging standard is honesty in everything. When a Christians speaks, that should be enough. Are you a liar? The Bible give you hope. Paul wrote; “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph.4:29). Paul’s simple solution—stop lying start telling the truth—the kind of truth that is wholesome and helpful.

When does a liar cease to be a liar? When they tell the truth.

## **Citizens Tell The Truth**

### **Matthew 5:33-37**

Can I ask you a personal question? One to think about and reflect on. Is there one lie you have told that you wish you could take back? One lie. Maybe it was the lie that you really cared about someone when you really didn't. Maybe you told your parents that you hated them—but you really didn't mean it. Maybe you simply didn't tell the truth when your sin was exposed. Jesus is still in the business of forgiving sin. Even the lie—you told—a long time ago or a short time ago.

What is the most serious lie—someone has told you? Did someone lie to you about your identity?

What is Satan's most serious lie? Perhaps the biggest lie ever told is that God doesn't love you and doesn't care about you. Or that sin doesn't matter. Some of the most serious lies that have ever been told are being told right now. You are the product of blind random events. The Bible's not true. There is no God. God only cares if you are sincere.

Do you want to stop lying? Do you want to start telling the truth? I read a survey that said the majority of Americans (two in three) believe there is nothing wrong with telling a lie. Only 31% believed honesty is the best policy. If you are a Christian and you believe it's OK to lie—then you disbelieve what Jesus believes about this issue!

Let me ask you a few more questions before we close: Do you have a private life that you keep secret from your Christian family or friends? Are there things in your life—that no one knows about—not even your closest friends? If a plastic surgeon offered you a free nose job—mouth or chin—or other cosmetic procedure—would you take them up on it? If you broke something in a store would you let them know? Do you think people know the real you? Have you ever lied about your age, your income, your education, or your spiritual condition? Are you lying right now?

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote; “All truth passes through three stages. First it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” Jesus was ridiculed. Jesus was violently opposed. But something surprising happened. Jesus rose from the dead. And now it is surprisingly self-evident—that what Jesus said and did can be trusted.