

Swear Not at All
Matthew 5:33-37

“Swear not at all.” At first glance, Jesus’ words might tend to give hope to all those from Bill Clinton to Roger Stone whose rather loose relationship with the truth has gotten them into hot water. So, instead of getting into trouble by lying to Congress or to the courts, why not just quote Jesus? Why not refuse to give sworn testimony on religious grounds?

But is that really what Jesus is saying? After all, He says, “Swear not at all,” immediately after urging us to greater faithfulness in marriage. So, if Jesus really were telling us not to take any oaths, how could He insist at the same time that we keep our marriage vows? Surely, we need to dig a bit beyond the surface here.

And sure enough, once we take a closer look at this passage, we’ll see that, far from overturning the Mosaic Law’s requirements to keep the promises that we make to God, Jesus actually strengthens these admonitions. But He does this in a roundabout way, by attacking a rather subtle, overly legalistic argument that was popular among the Pharisees at the time, one that requires a bit of explanation.

Now, the Pharisees certainly believed in keeping the letter of the law. They knew they needed to treat God’s name with respect – after all, the third commandment clearly says: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” So in order to keep this commandment, they recommended that people not swear by God’s name at all. For such a vow would of course have to be kept at all costs.

But they didn’t stop there. Instead, in order to escape the terrible consequences of misusing God’s name, the Pharisees taught that people should swear by other, less important things. Instead of swearing in the name of God, they encouraged people to swear by heaven, or the earth, or Jerusalem, or the head of the person taking the oath. And I suppose that all makes a certain kind of sense – if you want to give yourself some wiggle room so that you can weasel out of your promises.

But Jesus would have none of this. Instead, he condemns each one of the Pharisees’ alternatives, from most important to least important, from most distant to most up-close and personal. Over and over again, Jesus makes it clear that swearing by anything God has created is tantamount to swearing by its Creator.

And that means that if we swear by anyone or anything while at the same time leaving the door open to break our word, we are dragging God into our lies. Any lie thus attacks God and His truth, because everything is made by God and thus reflects His truth. No, Jesus had no use for those who kept the letter of the Law while trying to undermine its essential meaning at the same time.

So much is clear. But how does any of this affect us? We aren’t ancient rabbinical students, trying to split hairs where it comes to keeping the Law of Moses. And we don’t make the sorts of strange oaths that Jesus condemns – I mean, when was the last time any of y’all said, “I swear by Jerusalem?” Moreover, I certainly hope we all agree that perjury and lying under oath are bad things for anyone to do, regardless of his or her political party. So what do these verses have to teach us?

Well, let's take a step back and look at the broader picture. For remember, these Pharisees were simply trying to tell lies without making them look like lies. They were trying to deceive other people while cultivating the appearance of honesty. But worst of all, by using watered-down oaths, they were draping a cloak of piety to cover their deception. They were making promises with their fingers crossed behind their backs. Hence Jesus' well-earned warning to them.

But in our own post-Christian culture, we do the same sorts of things, don't we? It's so common, for example, for people to hide behind the technical or legal definitions of words instead of using their plain meaning. It's so easy for us to tell only the part of the truth that makes us look good, while ignoring less flattering facts.

We even have a name for this kind of lying – we call it “spin,” and it has become a fact of life for leaders across the political spectrum. We've even heard Presidents do this, haven't we? “I am not a crook.” “Read my lips: no new taxes.” “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” “If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor. If you like your health care plan, you can keep your health care plan.” And with federal elections in full swing, if you don't get all the spin you want from the candidates themselves, you can always turn to the journalists who report on their campaigns. After all, they put their own spin on the spin the politicians put on the truth. It's enough to make you dizzy. Stop the merry-go-round – I want to get off!

But is spin just a problem for politicians? After all, as my Yankee friends like to observe, we Southerners are all pretty good at spin, at telling half-truths. I mean, we live by the old adage, “If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,” right? But doesn't that often involve hiding part of the truth? You can't stand her new haircut, so you complement her dress.

Or what about our habit of veiling even the most pointed criticism behind a ritual statement of our concern? “Well, he just doesn't have good sense, bless his heart.” Aren't we trying to hide our feelings at the same time that we express them? Don't we try to keep people guessing about what we really think?

But in our elaborate endeavors to be nice, to maintain the veneer of politeness, don't we all too often slip beyond the bounds of honesty? Don't we sometimes catch ourselves saying, “Good to see you,” even to people we didn't really want to bump into? Don't we sometimes say, “Y'all come see us,” to people we secretly hope don't in fact pay us a visit? Don't we sometimes allow politeness to degenerate into insincerity or even hypocrisy? Aren't we often as intentionally deceptive as those politicians and journalists we love to condemn?

But when we look carefully at Jesus' words, we find that it is not just open perjury that He condemns. No, it is to any sort of deception, any twisting of the truth that Jesus responds, “Let your communication be yes, yes, or no, no. For whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

Isn't that a bit strong? Surely a little white lie every now and then isn't so bad, right? Surely there's nothing wrong with putting a sugar coating on an unpleasant truth, right? That's the Southern way, after all.

Well, maybe we Southerners need to take a closer look at Jesus' last few words. For the Greek can also be translated, "anything beyond these is from the evil one," meaning Satan. And here Jesus' meaning becomes frighteningly clear.

For what do we know about Satan? Jesus says that "there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it." And there can be no doubt that Satan has always dealt in lies. As far back as the Garden of Eden, he lied when he told Eve she would not die if she ate the Forbidden Fruit. So it is no accident that, after our first parents disobeyed God, they began to follow Satan's example, following his pattern of deception.

In fact, we might call Adam the first spin doctor. For of course God knew what Adam had done. So by asking him, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" God was simply giving him a chance to confess his sin.

But instead of coming clean, Adam tried to put a spin on what he had done. First he blamed Eve for giving him the fruit. Then, Adam blamed God for giving Eve to be his wife. Only when he had nowhere else to turn did Adam admit what he had done. Yes, after trying to hide from God among the trees of the Garden, Adam tried to hide his sin by putting a spin on it – and both times, he failed miserably.

So, how about us? Why do we find telling the truth so hard? Why do we follow Adam's example and try to spin things our way? Why don't we allow our yes to be yes and our no to be no?

It could be that, like the Pharisees, we are trying to give ourselves some wiggle room to change our minds. Or maybe, like Adam, we are ashamed of our thoughts or feelings. Or maybe we don't want to be honest with others because we don't want them to have the advantage over us.

But whatever the reason, since the Fall of Man, deception has become a part of our daily life and experience. Because sin is everywhere, so is spin. And so, to cut through all the lies we hear and the lies we tell, we are often tempted to add extra emphasis to our words by using oaths. "It's true. I swear!" It's that kind of oath-taking, indeed it's that whole culture of lies and spin that Jesus is condemning.

So, why does Jesus make such a big deal about all this? Why does Jesus so forcefully condemn our misuse of words? Because whenever we try to put spin on the truth, whenever we tell a half-truth, or a fib or even a little white lie we are going against Who God is. For God not only predicts what is going to happen thousands of years in the future. God not only tells the truth all the time. No, Jesus told us that God is truth. In fact, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

So it turns out that the way we use language reveals our ultimate allegiance – it shows whose side we're on. We either stand with God and the truth, or we stand with Satan, the one who tells lies. And no, we can't have it both ways, telling the truth to some people and being deceptive with others. For as James put it in chapter 3 of his epistle, "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?"

So, where do we go from here? For however foreign deception may be to Jesus, it is very much a part of our experience. As long as we continue to sin, we will want to hide our sin from others. As long as others continue to sin, we will shrink from being totally honest with them. God may be truth, but we are not. So what can we do?

Well, once we are honest enough to admit our fundamental dishonesty, once we stand convicted of our sin, and of our spin, we are ready to hear the truth – God’s truth. Yes, the bad news for us is that God is true to His word and we are not. But the good news for us is that God is always true to His word, even if we are not.

For what was the promise God made on the same day that Adam and Eve tried to deceive Him? On the same day that they hid from Him in the Garden in shame and fear, God promised them a savior, One who would bruise, One Who would crush the head of the serpent, defeating the power of sin and death once and for all. And God kept His promise. Thousands of years later, through His death on the cross, Jesus destroyed the power of Satan and Satan’s lies forever. And by His Resurrection on the third day, the truth about Jesus’ Person and Work was fully displayed for all the world to see.

So, if we have believed and received Christ’s promise of salvation, we can be sure that the power of sin over us has been destroyed. And that means we have no more reason to fear God, because all our sins have been forgiven in Christ. As a result, we can face the truth about ourselves. We can ask God to reveal our most secret sins, even the ones tucked away in the corners of our souls. And then we can come clean with God knowing that He will forgive us, no matter what we confess to Him.

Moreover, because Christ has paid the penalty due to all our sin, because Christ has redeemed us from the power of sin, we no longer need to fear other people. And that, in turn frees us to be more honest with them, to be more forthright, more transparent. Why should we care what other people discover about us? If God has forgiven us and if Jesus loves us, what else could possibly matter?

And so, because God has kept His promise to us, we are forgiven and free, free to obey God with all our hearts, free to keep our own promises as we follow our promise-keeping God. We are free, not just to say, “Bless your heart,” but truly to bless one another, showing our love for one another with our lips as well as with our lives.

So, yes, let’s continue to be polite and courteous with one another. But let’s mean all those gracious words that we say. Let’s speak the truth in love, drawing closer to Christ and to one another in honesty and openness. For is there any other way to follow the One Who is the Way, and the Truth and the Life?