

February 26, 2012  
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Matthew 5:33-37

Title: "Yes, Yes ... No, No"

(Series: Following Jesus Into His Sermon on the Mount)

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Over the past few weeks, we have been following Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest Preacher who ever lived, into His famous Sermon on the Mount, the greatest Sermon ever preached. Through His "You have heard it was said, but I say to you" sayings, He has been drawing us deeper and deeper into one of the deepest passions of His heart; He has been drawing us deeper and deeper into His passion for "righteousness." "Righteousness." "Right-relationship." "Right-related-ness." In His Sermon Jesus is taking us into the full-orbed "right-related-ness" for which we were created.

Through His six "You have heard it was said, but I say to you ..." texts, He is drawing out the original intent of the Law of God as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. On another mountain top, by the Sea of Galilee, the Law-giver, living in our world as one of us, draws out the fuller meaning of His Law, thereby taking us step by step into the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven. Thus far He has spoken to us about obviously critical issues: murder and anger, and adultery and lust, and divorce and re-marriage. Today – in the text we just read – He speaks to us about the issue of making oaths. "I say to you, make no oath at all."

On first hearing, does this not feel a bit anti-climatic? Oaths? As big a deal as murder and anger, adultery and lust, divorce and re-marriage? Apparently so. Words matter to the Preacher on the Mount. Especially words of promise. Why? Because authentic relationships are made and sustained by words. Yes, also by deeds. But fundamentally by words. Authentic relationship involves meaning what we say, and saying what we mean. "Yes" has to mean "yes" – and not, "well, maybe, maybe not." "No" has to mean "no" – and not, "well, it all depends." Words matter. Especially words of promise.

The Preacher on the Mount is, after all, the Word Himself.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being by Him ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten, full of grace and truth ... But I say to make oath at all."

It turns out that this seemingly anti-climatic text opens up for us the nature of reality as few texts do. It turns out this text opens up for us the consequences of the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven as few texts do. It turns out that his text helps us realize just how brilliant Jesus of Nazareth is.

“But I say, make no oath at all.” Here Jesus is working with two of the 10 Commandments. Jesus is working with the 3rd commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” And with the 9th commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

As you likely know, the 10 Commandments were originally given in two halves, on two different stone tablets. On the first tablet were commandments 1-4, dealing with our relationship with the Living God.

You shall have no other Gods between us.  
 You shall not make any images of God.  
 You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.  
 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

On the second tablet were commandments 5-10, dealing with our relationships with one another.

Honor your father and your mother.  
 You shall not murder.  
 You shall not commit adultery.  
 You shall not steal.  
 You shall not bear false witness.  
 You shall not covet.

In His “make no oaths” saying Jesus is working with a commandment from each half of the law. Suggesting just how important the apparently anti-climatic issue is? Suggesting that somehow the issues around “oaths” integrate the law in ways no other issue does? “You have heard it was said, . . . but I say to you, make no oath at all.” What is Jesus getting at in this section of His Sermon?

Clearly He is saying that when the kingdom of heaven invades the earth, there is a birth of integrity and faithfulness. When Jesus and His new world order get a hold on us we become people of integrity and faithfulness. Words are taken more seriously. Promises are taken more seriously, made with greater care and reverence. But as important as that is, Jesus is taking us deeper.

And we get at His deeper concern by grappling with His command: “make no oaths at all.” No oaths at all? None at all? Thus our Quaker friends, and many of our Mennonite friends, refuse to take or make oaths in business dealings or in a court of law.

“Make no oath at all.” Never? What Jesus says in this text has fresh relevance for me and Sharon, as we will be taking our oath of Canadian Citizenship on March 16. We will be asked to say: I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen. “

So, what does Jesus mean, “make no oath at all”? If you know the rest of the Bible well, you know that Jesus’ command initially seems to fly in the face of God’s revelation in other places. For in the rest of Scripture we find positive words about oaths. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses commands the people of Israel: “You shall fear the Lord your God; Him shall you serve, and swear by His name” (10:20).

Jeremiah speaks of a day when the Gentiles will join Israel:

“Then it will come about that if they will really learn the ways of My people to swear by My Name, ‘As the Lord lives,’ even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they will be built up in the midst of My people” (12:16).

Throughout the great story, many of God’s chosen leaders made or asked for oaths in the Lord’s name. Abraham, “the friend of God,” when he sent his servant to find a wife for his son, extracted an oath from him. Jacob extracted an oath from Joseph to bury him in the Promised Land. Jonathan asked an oath from David ... and got it. The apostle Paul, who surely knew the Sermon on the Mount, seems to make oaths. Romans 9:1 – “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing witness in the Holy Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 1:23 – “I call God as witness to my soul.” **[See also Romans 1:9; Philippians 1:8; 1 Thes. 2:5,10].**

What is even more significant is that in a number of places in the great story we find God taking an oath! God does not appeal to a higher authority, as we would need to do; but He does take a number of oaths.

In Genesis 15, for instance. God promises Abraham that he will have a son from his and his wife’s bodies. And God promises to give a particular piece of land to Abraham and his descendants. Abraham asks God: “How shall I know that I shall possess it?” (15:8). That is, “what kind of assurance can you give me that You will do what You say?” God’s word should have been enough. Later in the story God will say as much ... God’s word is all we need. But at that point Abraham needs more than a word. Is that because Abraham lives in a society where the words of others are not enough? Is it because Abraham knows that Abraham’s own word is not enough? Whatever the case, God condescends to Abraham’s need and takes an oath. “Know for certain,” God says, and goes on to “cut” a covenant (15:13). Later in the story God will even say, “By Myself I have sworn ... I will indeed bless you” (22:16).

The writer of the book of Hebrews seems to celebrate God’s oath taking and making, finding in the fact great assurance. Hebrews 6:17-18:

“In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement.”

And then there is the fact that Jesus Himself seems to take an oath! At His trial the High Priest says, "I adjure you by the Living God, tell us if you are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of God" (Matthew 26:64). Jesus is placed under a formal oath. And He does not refuse to reply. "You have said it yourself," He says (26:65). But note. Jesus seems to only come up to the edge of an oath. For He says, "You have said it yourself." Meaning, "they are your words." Meaning, "I am echoing your words." Meaning, "I do not need to say anything for Myself." So what is going on in the Sermon on the Mount? Why does Jesus say, "Make no oath at all"? Oaths are asked for and made only in the context of doubt. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century oaths were intended to give assurance by calling God to witness the truth and hold people accountable for falsehood. Most oaths began with a formal declaration of the truth. Then came an acknowledgement that the words are spoken in the presence of God. Then God was invoked to witness to one's intended faithfulness, and to reveal and punish any lies. Nothing to be entered into lightly!

You can see then that there is a difference between making a promise and making an oath. A promise is the simple: "I will." Period. An oath brings God into the picture. "I will ... and I call God as my witness."

Now, in Jesus' day, people were trying to get out from under the weight of such oaths. The Pharisees, in particular, did not want to be found guilty of taking the name of God in vain. Neither do we! So, they argued, when you make or take an oath do not use the Lord's name!

If you do not use the Lord's name, you could break the oath without any adverse consequences. Say, "I swear by heaven," or, "I swear by earth," or, "I swear by Jerusalem," or even, "I swear by the hair on my head." All supposedly ways to avoid bringing God into the picture. Some of the Pharisees took this to ridiculous extremes. And Jesus took them on for the silly sophistry of it all.

In one of His "woe to you" sayings in Matthew 23, Jesus says:

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing; but if any one swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If any one swears by the altar, it is nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and he who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it; and he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it."

Jesus exposes the game playing. The subtle distinctions do not cut it. So to free us from the games, and to make authentic righteousness happen, Jesus says, "Make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is the footstool for His feet,

or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.” The point? However we try, we cannot avoid bringing God into the picture. When we make an oath, even if we do not use God’s name, we are still involving God. Even when we swear by our own name we are invoking God, for we would not even be able to speak were God not giving us breath. We can never avoid bringing God into play. God is everywhere and present to everything. If we swear by heaven, we are bringing God in for it is His throne. If we swear by earth, we are bringing God in for it is His footstool. If we swear by Jerusalem, we are bringing God in for it is His city. Every city is His! If we swear by our head, we are bringing God in for although it is our head and no one else’s, it is ultimately His! Our whole body is His. There simply is no way we can avoid involving God in the making of oaths. So, “Make no oath at all.”

But it goes deeper. Jesus is taking us deeper; deeper into the nature of the reality in which we live. Do you hear the word “evil” in the text? Do you see the word “evil” in the text. “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.” Or, “anything more is of the evil-one.” Jesus never uses the word “evil” lightly. Make no oath at all, because making and taking oaths brings us into encounter with evil, with the evil-one. It does? Not that an oath itself is evil. And not that making or taking an oath is evil. But because an oath is only needed because of evil. Evil in our hearts. Evil in human systems. And the evil-one. Whom Jesus calls “the father of lies.” In whom, Jesus says, there is no truth. Who seeks to un-do righteousness, right-related-ness. Oath taking and making ... in and of themselves not evil ... brings us into encounter with evil. If evil were not at work there would be no need for oaths. The reason we humans ask God for an oath, as Abraham did, is that we do not trust the word of other human beings, because we do not trust our own words! And we transfer each of that suspicion on to God. Oaths are asked for only in the presence of evil. And here is Jesus’ major point ... what He wants us to understand about the reality where we live and work.

“Make no oath at all,” because each time we do we are giving credit to evil. Each time we make or take an oath we are implicitly acknowledging the place of evil in our lives ... and thereby letting evil onto the playing field. One of the sad signs of a troubled society is the huge amount of paper work involved in simple business or legal transactions. It says evil is having a hay-day.

I remember buying my first car, a used Volkswagen Beetle, on a hand-shake. The volumes and volumes of pages needed to buy things now says evil has been allowed on the stage and has far too big a role. Adding to a promise, “As God is my witness,” although sounding appropriately pious, is not a sign of godliness in a society; rather it is a sign of evil necessitating an oath, a sign that we do not trust people to say what they mean and mean what they say.

So Eugene Peterson boldly renders Jesus’ words this way: “You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true.” “Make no oath at all,” because when we do we inadvertently give evil room to work. It goes deeper yet! And it is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who helped me understand. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that oaths are intended as barriers

against untruth, as barriers against the lie. Makes sense, right? But, says Bonhoeffer in his *Cost of Discipleship*, in trying to be the barrier against the lie, the oath actually grants the lie “a certain right to life.” Here is how he explains it:

“The Old Testament had expressed its condemnation of the lie by the use of the oath. But Jesus destroys the lie by forbidding oaths altogether. Here as there it is the same question, one and undivided, of the destruction of untruth in the life of the believer. The oath which the Old Testament set against the lie is seized by the lie itself and pressed into service. It is thus able through the oath to establish itself and to take the law into its own hands. So the lie must be seized by Jesus in the very place to which it flees, in the oath. Therefore, the oath must go, since it is the protection of the lie” (152).

Wow! I told you this seemingly anti-climatic section of the Sermon on the Mount would open up the true nature of reality as few others do! Jesus seizes the lie ... and seizes it in the very place where it thinks it has the right to life ... in the oath. “No oath at all” takes away the protective cover of the lie. “No oath at all” keeps evil off the playground. “No oath at all” means evil has less room to work.

So, what do we do when we are asked to take an oath? Especially when asked to take an oath by some authority? Like the Government of Canada? What are Sharon and I to do on March 16<sup>th</sup>? I agree with Martin Luther and company, who make a distinction between *making* oaths and *taking* oaths. When a legitimate authority ... a duly constituted state, for example ... asks us to take an oath, we can. But we do so without adding anything pious. A simple “yes” is enough. But we ourselves are to avoid making oaths. Our word is to be enough. “No oath at all,” breaks the spell of the lie. The simple, “Yes, yes,” or “No, no” pushes back the lie. Evil has no place to hide.

A number of years ago (1987), I taught the Sermon on the Mount for a Seminary in Manila. I had some 30 students from 9 different countries of the world in the class. All from countries with the deeply rooted cultural value usually called, “smooth interpersonal relationships.” You who come from such countries know what I mean ... and realize that teaching what Jesus says to us today got me into hot water!

“Smooth interpersonal relationships” means that you want the other person to feel good about an encounter with you. Not a bad value. It is just that in wanting the other person to feel good about you you will more often than not tell the other person what you think they want to hear. If you think they want to hear “yes” you will say “yes,” even though you really want to say “no.” Or vice-a-versa. As those of you who know about this cultural dynamic know, the potential for manipulation is very high. And makes for extremely convoluted relationships! Well, as the class worked through Jesus’ “Yes, yes, no, no, anything more is of evil,” many of the students grew incensed! They had no problem with the other hard sayings in Jesus’ Sermon. texts which people from Western countries fight. But this one was a big problem. Finally one of the students stood up and said to me – angrily – “Professor Johnson, if we took this text seriously it would turn our societies up-side down.” To which I responded: “Now you know what it means for the kingdom of heaven to invade the earth.”

When we take Jesus seriously, evil loses its place on the stage. When men and women, boys and girls, teachers, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, husbands and wives, take Jesus seriously, the Kingdom of Heaven advances in the city. “Yes, yes ... No, no ... anything more is of evil.” How Jesus? How can we follow You in this radical way of Your kingdom? In three ways.

First, we confess. We confess the power of the lie at work in our own souls. We confess the temptation to ignore the truth, to twist the truth, to cover the truth, to stretch the truth. We confess the tendency to “put a spin” on the facts. We confess the drive of “image-making” at work in our society and souls. Again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer nails it: “Only those who are in a state of truthfulness through confession of their sin to Jesus are not ashamed to tell the truth wherever it must be told” (155). And this: “The cross is God’s truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful” (155).

Second, we realize that Jesus’ words emerge from His character. He says what He says because He is who He is. He is truth incarnate. He always says what He means and means what He says. He never plays games with the facts. He never plays games with us! His “yes” is always “yes.” His “no” is always “no.” He says what He says to heal our souls. He says what He says to establish His character in us.

Third, we rejoice that Jesus is the Great YES to all of God’s promises. 2 Corinthians 1:19-20: “For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, Who was preached among you by us ... was not yes and no, but yes in God. For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes!” Jesus is the assurance that God keeps all His promises. What more need God say? Jesus is the embodiment of all of God’s promises! God has said His ultimate “yes.” You can see then that to simply promise, “yes, yes,” or, “no, no,” not only breaks the spell of the evil; it also, and more importantly, puts our feet on solid ground. For to simply promise, “yes, yes,” or, “no, no,” is a sign that we are finding our security in the Living Lord Who always keeps His promise. And we soon discover that Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes is right: “We are never more like God than when we keep our promises.”