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Matthew 5:34 - 5:37



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 5:34 - 5:37, Jesus teaches about righteousness and the law. He gives two illustrations of the law showing concern for justice, specifically relating to divorce and the importance of keeping vows. The speaker explains that while there is nothing inherently wrong with taking an oath in the name of God and keeping it, Jesus is cautioning against making false promises and directly lying. The speaker clarifies that Jesus is not saying that all oaths are wrong, but rather that people should be truthful and not use God's name in vain.

Transcript

We continue now in our studies of the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in Matthew 5 and the following two chapters. But in the portion that we're looking at today, it is Matthew 5, verses 33 through 37. Now, this is one of the six examples that Jesus gives to illustrate his approach to the law of the Old Testament.

Remember that Jesus was a Jewish teacher. He was more than that, of course. We don't consider him only to be a Jewish teacher, although many in his day did.

But everybody acknowledged that he was a Jewish teacher, a rabbi. And his disciples were Jewish men who lived under the law of Moses. And Jesus was introducing some ideas that seemed radical and new to them, although in fact, there was nothing really radical or new about what Jesus said at all.

Radical, maybe, if we understand radical to mean its original meaning, which is to go back to the roots. Jesus was teaching about what the righteousness of the law is and what the law requires. Well, everything that Jesus taught on the subject really is found in the Old Testament law.

And he was bringing out the old and pure and original meaning of things as he talked about the law. Now, in Jesus' day, the law of Moses, as it had been given 1400 years earlier by Moses, had been much obscured by traditional teaching of the rabbis. And therefore, in many cases, the practice of the law among the Jews was very much different from what the law had originally intended.

And so this is why Jesus has to expound on the law, because the law of the Old Testament was God's revelation of his will for his people. And God's will does not change, essentially. I mean, especially the issue of what he considers to be right and wrong, what he considers to be righteous or unrighteous.

And what Jesus is talking about is how the law is to be understood as an evidence of God's opinions about righteousness, really. And so we have God's righteousness expounded by Jesus using the law of the Old Testament, because the moral issues of the law have never really changed. Morality cannot change.

And for that reason, Jesus wanted to bring out the original intent of the law of Moses, and that's what he did here. He did not introduce new or strange ideas. It may have been strange to the ears of his hearers, only because the truth and the true meaning of the law had so long been ignored or obscured or neglected.

Now, he gives six examples in this section at the end of Matthew 5. And in each case, he says, you have heard that it was said, and he quotes something from the law. And essentially, these Jewish men had heard the law expounded from their synagogues every Sabbath. And they had heard many of these things, but they had not understood what the real issue was in each case.

When God said, don't do this or do that, they didn't understand really what God's principal concern was. Now, the way Jesus put it elsewhere, for example, later in the same sermon in Matthew 7.12, he said, if you do to others as you would have them do to you, this is the whole law and the prophets. Or in another place, he said, if you love your neighbor as yourself, this is the whole law.

So, what Jesus is saying is that what God wanted out of his people when he gave them the laws in the Old Testament was that they would learn what it means to love their neighbor as they love themselves. And that's what it really is all about. Now, in another place, Jesus said that the weightier matters of the law, and he said this in Matthew 23.23, the weightier matters of the law, the more important issues in the law, are justice and mercy and faithfulness.

And in these illustrations that Jesus is using in Matthew 5, he gives two illustrations of how the law expresses a concern for justice. He gives two on how the law expresses a concern for faithfulness. And he gives two illustrations of how the law has a concern for mercy.

These are the three things that Jesus, in Matthew 23.23, said were the weightier matters of the law. These are the issues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. And so, in the first two examples that Jesus gave about murder and adultery, I believe that he was amplifying on what it means to be just and not trample upon the rights of other people.

Now, he's talking about two other issues in this section, and one of the issues was divorce, and we talked about that last time. And the passage before us is going to raise the subject of oaths or taking vows. Now, divorce and the keeping of vows are both issues related to one topic, and that is the topic of faithfulness.

The reason that divorce is related to this topic is because when a person divorces his wife, or when a woman divorces her husband, they are breaking a vow. Yes, they may have forgotten this, but when they got married, they made a vow. They made a vow before God and witnesses and said they would stay together for life, no matter how difficult their marriage would become.

That's what they said they would do, and they vowed that they would do this. And so when a person divorces his wife for any cause other than that she has been unfaithful to him, Jesus said that man is being unfaithful. He's involving her in unfaithfulness, and he's being unfaithful, and so on and so forth.

The issue here is that you do not divorce your spouse for any grounds less than that she or he has committed adultery, because to do so is to break a vow, and breaking a vow is to exhibit lack of integrity or unfaithfulness. This is something that God greatly dislikes, to put it mildly. In fact, liars will have no place in the kingdom of God, according to the scripture.

So if you take a vow and break it, you are doing nothing less than lying, or at least making a lie out of a vow that you took earlier. If you break a promise, you turn that promise into a lie, although you might not have intended it as a lie in the beginning. Once you have made it, you have an obligation to keep it, or else make yourself a liar.

Now, having talked about the issue of divorce last time, there is this other passage, another illustration where Jesus talks also on the issue of faithfulness. And I believe this passage about taking vows has been greatly misunderstood by Christians. Now, I don't mean this as an issue to raise controversy.

I just know that most people, when they have talked about this passage, have indicated that they understand it a certain way, which I believe is incorrect. Let me read the passage to you, and I'll let you know what I mean about that. In Matthew 5, verse 33, beginning there and reading through verse 37, Jesus said, And yet again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but you shall perform your oaths to the Lord.

But I say to you, Do not swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is His footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your yes be yes, and your no, no.

For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. Now, what is Jesus getting at here? I happen to be looking at a Bible that has a, they sort of put in subtitles, or they put in subheadings, I should say, or paragraph titles. And over this paragraph, the editors have put these words in, Jesus forbids oaths.

Well, it certainly sounds like Jesus is forbidding oaths here. However, I believe that that misunderstands what Jesus is getting at. Jesus said that in the law, the Jews were told they should not swear falsely, and that they should perform any oaths that they have made to the Lord.

And now Jesus goes on and says, Just leave out the oaths altogether. Just let your yes mean yes, and let your no mean no. Now, when Jesus says, Do not use oaths, or when He says, Don't swear at all, of course that sounds like it's a command.

And if Jesus said, Don't swear, then it would seem that Jesus is forbidding swearing. Well, that's a fair way of understanding it, but I don't believe it's really catching His meaning. For one thing, Jesus never did take anything that was morally right in the Old Testament and then say it's morally wrong now.

He often clarified what things in the Old Testament were morally right and wrong, which were not as clear to the Jewish men as they could have been. For example, on the issue of divorce, which is the previous subject discussed in the Sermon on the Mount, the Old Testament had said that a man could divorce his wife if he found some uncleanness in her, in Deuteronomy chapter 24. But it never explained what that uncleanness was that would qualify as a divorceable offense.

And so Jesus makes it clear that uncleanness in a woman that makes it possible for a man to divorce her is fornication or unchastity. So Jesus doesn't change anything. He just explains things.

Now, in the Old Testament, it is very clear that swearing oaths was not wrong. And people would swear an oath in the name of God or in the name of something else. And generally, the idea was that people take an oath in order to guarantee that they are telling the truth.

Of course, we have the same phenomenon in court of law today where a man swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That's taking an oath. Or even the marriage vow is a modern kind of oath.

Apart from these, though, we don't see the practice of taking oaths as common in our modern culture as they did in biblical times. However, an oath in biblical times had the same force, essentially, as our signing a contract does today. Or in the older times when people used to shake on an agreement, to shake on it meant that they were bound.

That once they had shaken on it or once we've signed a contract, we are bound. Before

that, we could get out of it. But once we've done that, we are stuck and we must keep our promise and our word.

That's the function that oaths played in biblical times. If a man said, I will pay you Thursday if you let me take this merchandise home today. And someone said, well, I don't know if I can trust you on that.

And he says, well, I swear by God, I will do it. I swear by Jehovah, I will do it. Then that was considered to be, oh, OK, well, then you're bound.

You've just bound yourself with an oath. And people would always swear by something superior to themselves. It says that in the book of Hebrews.

In Hebrews chapter six, it says men always swear by something greater than themselves. It even mentions that God swore once, but he couldn't swear by anything greater than himself. So he swore by himself.

This is talking about the time when Abraham offered Isaac on the altar and God said, By myself, I have sworn that in blessing, I will bless you. Now, notice God swore by himself and men always swear by something greater than themselves. But there is nothing greater than God for him to swear by.

So he just swore by himself. Now, the reason that men would swear by something greater than themselves is because it was assumed that if you don't trust me. If you don't think my word is good, if you have questions about my character, let me invoke the character of something greater than me.

Let me swear by Jerusalem. Let me swear by heaven. Let me swear by the earth or even let me swear by Jehovah himself.

Now, this was a way of saying, if I break my word, I am impugning the name of this one by which I've sworn. So if I swear by Jerusalem that I'm, as it were, committing a blasphemy against Jerusalem, if I break my oath. If I swear by God, I'm performing a blasphemy against God.

If I break my oath. So this is what sip wearing did. It was assumed that there's a certain amount of fear of God in people and that they would not dare invoke the name of God or any sacred thing in an oath unless they were really telling the truth.

Now, that's what oaths were all about. Now, Jesus is saying to his disciples, you should tell the truth with or without oaths. Let your yes always mean yes and your no always mean no.

You shouldn't need an oath to keep you honest. That's the essential truth he's telling. But I need to clarify some things because Jesus says, do not swear at all.

And James even emphasizes this in James chapter five. He says, above all things, my brethren, do not swear at all. And he basically quotes what Jesus said here.

Now, did Jesus forbid the use of oaths as if the taking of an oath is some kind of an immoral thing, offensive to God? I don't think that's the correct way of understanding it, though some Christians have. And there are Christians who will not take an oath in a court of law. And there are many Christians who feel like any kind of an oath is a violation of what Jesus taught.

And it's easy enough to see why they would think so. These verses sound that way. But let me say that there is another way to understand this.

There is nothing intrinsically immoral about taking an oath, even swearing by God. As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches that swearing by God is appropriate. Now, I'm not saying we should swear by God.

I'm saying that the Jews were commanded to swear by God as opposed to swearing by other gods, by false gods. In Exodus 23, 13, in the law, God said, In all that I have said to you, be circumspect and make no mention of the name of other gods, nor let it be heard from your mouth. By this, he means don't use the names of other gods in oaths.

We know that he's not saying you simply can't ever mention the names of other gods, or else the prophets themselves frequently violated this when they mentioned Baal and Molech and so forth. What he means is don't mention their names in oaths. And that becomes clear when you find the same expression in Joshua 23, 7, where Joshua said, Unless you go among these nations, these who remain among you, you shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them.

You shall not serve them or bow down to them. Now, making mention of the name of their gods has to do with swearing by the names of their gods. No, they're supposed to swear by the name of God, Jehovah, not by the names of false gods.

In fact, in Isaiah chapter 65, 16, it speaks of a circumstance that should prevail in the new covenant era. That's the context of what Isaiah is talking about. And he says, So that he who blesses himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth.

And he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of truth. Because the former troubles are forgotten and because they are hidden from my eyes. In other words, once God has brought his salvation, which he now has in Christ, he says those who swear or those who bless themselves will do so in the name of the God of truth.

What they mean by that, what these words mean is that you swear by the name of the true God, not by the name of false gods. Throughout the Old Testament, to swear by the name of God was never forbidden. In fact, it was often approved of.

He said in Leviticus 19, 12, You shall not swear by my name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God, for I am the Lord. Now, notice profaning the name of God was when you'd swear falsely by his name. That means that if you said, I swear by Jehovah, and then you didn't keep your oath, then, of course, you profaned his name and you were not supposed to do that.

It was not that you were not supposed to ever swear by the name of Jehovah. It was that if you did, you should keep your oath. For example, in Deuteronomy 23, verses 21 through 23, it says, 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 a sin for you.

But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God that you have promised with your mouth. Now, of course, this is talking about a vow made to God.

But a vow or an oath is the same thing, whether it's made to God or to man. The idea is that you are to, if you take a vow, keep your vow. Now, there's nothing immoral about taking a vow in the name of God or anything else.

Never in the Old Testament was it considered immoral or wrong, nor in the New Testament is it. Jesus was put under oath when he was in court. In Matthew 26, when Jesus was remaining silent in the court, Caiaphas, the high priest, got down off his bench and came down and confronted Jesus and said, I adjure you in the name of the living God that you answer me.

Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus answered and said, I am. He allowed himself to be put under oath. Paul himself took oaths from time to time in order to guarantee he was telling the truth to people who might doubt him.

In Galatians chapter 1, for example, he said, before God, I am not lying. And this kind of language is found in Paul more than once. That he was saying, I am telling you the truth before God.

That's more or less saying, I'm swearing by the integrity of God himself. Now, these are oaths. These are the very things that some Christians think we should not do because Jesus said, don't swear at all.

But let me explain to you what I believe Jesus was after here. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees had turned the system of taking oaths into yet another way of deceiving people. In the Jewish traditions of the rabbis, they had made up a whole system of oaths, some of which were binding and some were not.

We know this because Jesus refers to this fact when he addresses them in Matthew 23, verses 16 through 22. He says, Woe to you blind guides who say, whoever swears by the

temple, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.

Fools and blind, for which is greater the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And you say, whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Now, you can see Jesus is addressing a practice of the scribes and Pharisees.

They were saying, well, if you swear by the temple, it's not binding. But if you swear by the gold of the temple, it is binding. If you swear by the altar, it's not binding.

If you swear by the gift on the altar, it is binding. Now, what they were doing is looking for loopholes. If someone said, listen, I'll pay you Thursday for the merchandise I'm taking today.

And they said, I don't trust you. You could say, I swear by the temple, I will return and pay you on Thursday. Well, if you don't show up on Thursday and pay him, and he comes knocking on your door and says, hey, you swore by the temple that you would pay me Thursday, and now it's Thursday and you haven't paid me.

They could say, ah, but I didn't swear by the gold of the temple. And if you look it up, swearing by the temple is not a binding oath. Now, this is what they had done.

So this had become, this whole system of taking oaths had been so corrupted by the religious hypocrites and by people who were dishonest that oath-taking, which was intended originally to keep people honest, had just become another way to be dishonest. And therefore, Jesus said, just don't even bother with it. Now, he was not saying there's something intrinsically wrong with taking an oath in the name of God and keeping it.

What he was saying is this whole oath-taking business shouldn't even be necessary. Your yes should be yes with or without an oath. Your no should mean no with or without an oath.

You should be honest all the time. Being faithful is what God is concerned about, not whether you take the right oath. In fact, as far as God's concerned, you can just dispense with oaths altogether and just be honest, as honest when you don't take an oath as if you had taken one.

And that is essentially, I believe, what Jesus is getting at. I don't think that he is saying that Christians cannot be put under oath in a court of law. I don't think he's saying it's wrong to take a marriage vow.

That's an oath. And I don't believe that he's really saying that oaths are a bad thing at all. It's just that what oaths had become in the Jewish society at that time was something

that made it better just to stay away from them altogether and just be honest.

Just be honest all the time. Be a person of integrity. Be a person of character.

Be somebody whose word is their bond. Unfortunately, in our own day, there are many people who hope to be trusted because they have a fish on their checkbook or they have a fish on their bumper sticker. And because they're basically wearing the name of God or the name of Jesus or the name of Christian, they expect people to believe them.

But then, just as if they weren't Christians, they often don't keep their commitments. And unfortunately, many people doing business with people who profess to be Christians have found this to be so. This is taking the name of the Lord upon you in vain.

This is calling yourself a Christian. You're not necessarily swearing by Christ, but you're advertising that you're a truthful person and a follower of Christ. And then if you are not honest, it is a great reproach and a sin before God.

God wants faithfulness, and that's what this whole teaching about oaths is about, as near as I can tell. Next time we'll continue our studies in the Sermon on the Mount. We'll take another point.