

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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SWEAR NOT AT ALL

Matthew 5:33-37

We will examine today the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. This is a passage that deals with the matter of oath and swearing. Matthew 5:33-37 reads like this.

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.'

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

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

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

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

Can we swear?

When we read this passage, we have the feeling that there doesn't seem to be much of great importance that the Lord is saying. All that the Lord Jesus seems to be saying is that under the requirement of the OT, you may swear. 'But now, under the new covenant, I abolish this and I say, *Don't swear at all.* Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'. Just let your speech to be truthful.'

Some people have taken this statement literally to mean that they must never take an oath. This means that they will categorically refuse to take an oath in a court of law, otherwise their conscience will be bothered.

If the Lord Jesus in this passage is simply saying, 'I prohibit swearing (i.e. taking an oath)', then that, for the perceptive reader, raises some problems. Let me show you why this kind of statement about swearing cannot be understood quite as simply as that.

The problems of a literal translation

The first problem is this. If the Lord Jesus is simply prohibiting an outward action, then He is doing something contrary to His normal practice in His teaching. If you are acquainted at all with the Lord's teaching, you know that it never emphasizes outward action. Because the Lord Jesus knows very well that you can stop doing a thing without your heart being any purer. Saying that people may not swear is simply to govern a purely external action. And Jesus, in all His teaching, doesn't waste time with that. He is concerned about your heart, about the purity of your heart.

So if He is saying that you cannot swear, He is simply multiplying one more law to the law of the OT, one more *Thou shall not*, which here becomes 'Thou shall not take an oath.' And this emphasis on purely external actions is very uncharacteristic of the Lord's teaching.

Secondly, the Lord Jesus would be abolishing the law because the OT permits the taking of oath. In fact, just a few sentences before, in v. 17, He said, 'I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.' Then He goes on to abolish the law by saying that from now on, you cannot swear, even though the OT allows the taking of oath.

And thirdly, we find that God Himself swore. The writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 6, *Having no one greater to swear by, God swore by Himself* (Hebrews 6:13). So God is also taking the oath. Then we find that the holy men of God in the OT often made statements under oath. Abraham, Jacob, David, Nehemiah, Elisha, all these men took oath. This is done also in the NT. We sometimes find Paul for example making statements of oath, calling God to witness. For example, in 2Corinthians 1:23, he says, *I call God as witness against my soul* that I speak the truth. Hey, this is taking an oath. Didn't Jesus say, 'Don't swear at all'?

Spiritual authority

How are we to understand this passage? First of all, let's consider Matthew 5:34-36.

Matthew 5:34. But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

This last sentence, in v. 36, means that you have no control upon your life whatsoever. You have no control on the advance of your age. *You cannot make one hair white or black.* It is God who is in control. The issues of life are in God's hands. Therefore, you have no right to swear, because you don't have the power to fulfill what you promise. You depend totally upon God to do it.

Once you see that, you also see that God, given that principle, may swear. For when He swears by Jerusalem, He swears by what is His own. If He swears by the earth, He swears by His own footstool. If He swears by heaven, He also swears by what is His. It is the throne of God. And if He swears by the head, He can make every single hair to become black or white. In other words, all power belongs to God. And therefore, God may swear.

But granted also the same principle, it follows that God's servant may also swear because it is a well-known principle in the Bible that God's servant is like God's agent himself. A servant of God acts on God's authority. He has the power to act in God's name. That's what it means when Jesus says, *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* As an ambassador for Christ, a Christian has the authority to act in God's name. And this means, in the context of our passage, that you are entitled to swear when you are acting in the name of Him who has every power to swear.

The rule and the exception

Now let's summarize. Having worked through this principle of spiritual authority, we find that after all, we may swear. But Jesus says in v. 34, *Don't swear at all.* So where do we stand? Can we swear or can we not swear? The teaching of Jesus is very challenging to the mind, isn't?

Let's put it this way. The prohibition to swear is a general rule, but not an absolute rule. You may compare that to traffic lights. Not going through the red light is a general rule, but it is not an absolute rule. It is not an absolute rule because you may go through the red light when it is necessary

to do so. Suppose for example that you are in your car, waiting for the red light to change. Then an ambulance comes behind you, screaming up with its sirens because you are blocking its way. What should you do? Should you stay there because there are 30 more seconds of red light to wait for? Of course not! In a situation of emergency, you may go through the red light and let the ambulance pass. Nobody is going to fine you, even if you cause an accident by going through the red light.

So it is the same thing about swearing. Not to swear is a general principle. But it is not an absolute principle. There are circumstances in which it may be broken. It may be necessary for the sake of the welfare of a certain person, or for the community as a whole. If, for the sake of telling the truth, you are asked in a court of law to take an oath, you can do so in good conscience, with no fear that you have broken any part of the Lord's teaching. So as a general rule, don't swear. But you may swear when it is necessary, especially when truth is to be defended.

A matter of truthfulness

Now look at the last verse of this passage, v. 37. I will read it following the original text. Because otherwise, we will not be able to see what the Lord Jesus is trying to teach. So a literal translation from the Greek text of v. 37 would read like this. *Let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond this is of the evil one.*

What I want you to observe is the double 'yes' and the double 'no'. The significance of it is important and we need to go into the rabbinical background to understand it. Remember that the Jews who were listening to Jesus were listening with their Jewish background in mind. And if you check the rabbinical teaching of that time, you will find amazingly that a double 'yes' and a double 'no' is itself a form of oath. If I say 'yes', there is no oath. But if I say 'yes, yes', then there is an oath. The Jews recognized a double 'yes' and a double 'no' as a statement of oath.

Now that is strange. The Lord Jesus said in v. 34 that you shall not speak under oath. And now, in v. 37, He says that you will speak everything under oath. *Let everything that you say be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'.* What is the Lord Jesus getting at? Puzzling, isn't it?

We saw that when the Lord Jesus said, *Do not swear at all*, He was not making an absolute statement, but a general statement. Then He goes one step further in His teaching. He is saying, 'Don't swear at all, but let every statement of yours be an oath.' That is to say, 'Let every statement that comes out of your mouth be as true as an oath.' This is the heart of the meaning of this passage, the matter of truthfulness in the life of the Christian. Here the Lord Jesus is saying that as a Christian, our word has to be as firm as an oath. When a Christian speaks, he speaks only the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Every statement that you say must be as if it were made under oath.

Now, if you understand that principle, you will also understand that the truth is as binding as any oath. Don't think that you do not need to do a thing because it was not done under oath. The Lord Jesus says that the truth is always binding, under oath or not under oath. Because the truth is as binding as any oath.

This means that if a thing is true, you are under the spiritual obligation to follow it and to do it. In the Bible, the truth is to be obeyed, not just to be believed. Romans 2:8 and Galatians 5:7 speak of *obeying the truth*. If you are a Christian, you have the obligation to obey the truth of the Word of God. Faith is established in the truth, a truth that you believe and obey.

Stretching the truth

Now look at the second part of v. 37. The Lord Jesus says that anything more than truth is from the devil. He did not simply say, 'contrary to the truth', but anything that goes beyond the truth.

The point of it is this. A lie does not have to be only lie. It can contain elements of truth, but it has gone beyond the truth. The truth becomes a lie when it is mixed with half-truth. Do you see how perfectly the Lord Jesus words His teaching? He is saying, 'Anything you say may be true, but beyond that, if you stretch it, it is of the devil, because by doing so, you have made the entire statement to become false.'

You know, the most effective kind of lie is the lie that is partially true. A total lie is never convincing. But a partial lie can be quite convincing because it contains elements of truth which you recognize as truth. It is in their partial truth that heresies gain their force. You are shown part of the truth, but not the whole truth. And the Lord Jesus is telling us that when we speak, we have to be absolutely true, or else, we are on the devil's side.

Be truthful

I hope that by now, you would have seen that the very basic spiritual principle that comes out of this passage is truthfulness. If you want to experience spiritual power and God's blessings, you must make this principle a reality in your life, to be true in everything that you say and do. If there is one area of perfection that we seek to have in the Christian life, it is to be perfect in truth.

This means that when you come to God, you come honestly and truthfully. You talk openly to God. Don't pretend that you are feeling fine when in reality, you are angry, or depressed, or confused. You won't embarrass Him. As our Father, God wants us to share everything and anything with Him with a sincere heart. Look at the example of the prophets. Take Habakkuk. The prophet Habakkuk had a burden in his heart and he asked some pretty tough questions to God. Why are the wicked doing so well in the midst of God's people? Why are the righteous beaten down? Why is God not doing anything about this violence and this injustice? And God answered Habakkuk because He is delighted with honesty.

If we want to grow in the Christian life, we have to learn to be absolutely truthful. This is true in our relationship with God as well as in the area of our personal relationships. We are to communicate with one another in truthfulness. You know, our natural tendency is to hide from each other. We feel that we don't have the freedom to speak the truth for whatever reasons. And then, we begin to play politics with one another. We keep our distance to make sure that we won't get hurt.

God cannot do His work in us with this kind of attitude. Pretense destroys relationships. If He is going to transform the church, truthful communication must be found in the family of God. Because when we share the truth, when we share our inner thoughts and feelings, we allow people to come closer to us. And we grow together, in maturity and unity, as we share the truth between us. This doesn't mean that we can say anything, to anyone, at any time. The point is not to tell everything that is in our mind. Paul says in Colossians 4:6, *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.* Our speech must be absolutely true, full of grace and appropriate for each person that we speak to. That's how we grow closer together.

Swearing with your life

The Lord Jesus, in this passage about swearing, is actually commenting on the Third Commandment of the Ten Commandments. Remember the Third Commandment. *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.* You see, it is not only a question of swearing with the mouth. It is a question of swearing with the life. This means that if you are a Christian, you are taking the Lord's name on your life. And the commandment says, *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*, i.e. falsely, or unworthily. Everywhere you go as a Christian, you are known to belong to God. You take the name of the Lord your God in whatever you do in your life and in whatever you say with your lips. When your conduct or your speech is a disgrace to the Lord, you have actually taken

the name of the Lord your God in vain. And this means that you have committed perjury. Make no mistake about it.

It is either truth or perjury. If you deny Him in your life, you are guilty of perjury because perjury is the breaking of the covenant between you and God. If you are committed to the truth, you are required to live by the truth, to obey the truth. No one should take the name of the Lord Jesus upon himself if he is not prepared to obey the truth. Either your life is governed by the truth, or don't call yourself a Christian.

God does not require of us that we become sinless in our conduct. This, we will never attain in this life. But He expects perfection in our commitment to the truth. Perfect in truthfulness. That means to say that we are absolutely honest with God, with one another and with ourselves.

Men of integrity

King David was a man with many sins. But he was a man of truth. When he sinned, he made no pretense, no defense, no excuse. He came before God and said, 'I have sinned, O Lord. Let me only fall into your hands. Don't throw me out of your sight. Deal with me as You see fit. I have failed and I have nothing to offer to You but the truth of my heart.' If you are prepared to be absolutely true, if you are committed to let no falsehood to have any part in your life, in your thought and in your conduct, then you will become a man of God and a woman of God.

Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Do you know why the tax collector was forgiven? Because he was absolutely honest about himself. He said, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. I have no pretense to make. I am simply the sinner that I am. I have no righteousness to plead before you. I come to You just as I am. Please, accept me.'

Protection against sin

If you have this kind of honesty, not only God will forgive you, but He will keep you from sinning. We are weak and we do sin from time to time, but God is able to keep us from falling into sin if we are committed to love the truth. We see that in Genesis 20:5-6 where Abimelech was kept from sinning because of the integrity of his heart. God said to Abimelech, ... *I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me...* 'Because of the integrity of your heart, I kept you from committing a sin against Me.' And God will do the same for us if we are truthful to Him and to His word.

It is also through truthfulness, truth in the inward part, that we come to know God's revelation and the wonders of God's wisdom. Many people say, 'I read the Bible and I don't understand it.' Let me tell you a secret. Learn to be absolutely truthful in your heart with God and you will begin to understand the wonderful things of God. In Psalm 51:6, David said to God, *You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.* The wonders of God's wisdom will be revealed to those in whom God finds truthfulness.

I dream of a church where there is truthfulness in all our relationships. Do you know what will happen? When there is truth in the church, the church will have a tremendous impact on the world. It is the person of truth in all his conduct and speech that makes him to stand out from the world. He stands out from the crowd. Not because we are all the time talking about God and preaching to them, but because your life stands out in truthfulness and carries the mark of God. When the truth is in us as it ought to be, that's when the world can see that there is light in our lives, and that they can benefit from that light that comes from God.