

# The Problem with Swearing

Good to see everybody today. If you have a bible, go with me to the book of **Matthew, chapter 5**. If you're new, we are in a series walking through the book of **Matthew**. And currently, we are in a section where Jesus is discussing what life should look like as a follower of Jesus in several different arenas of life. So far he's discussed *morality* and ethics, anger and interpersonal conflict, sex and sexuality—several things that at least for a lot of people, are fairly front-and-center to how we think about life.

**But all that said, today's passage** is probably one that we read and think, “ummm...I'm pretty sure this one doesn't apply to me.” **You and I probably weren't in the drive-thru at Starbucks this week overcome with guilt over an oath that we swore to our roommate or spouse before we left home.** That's just not a regular part of our life. And *maybe* to you, that's *good news*. Maybe you didn't feel like you were doing so hot at 'do not get angry' or 'do not lust' the past two weeks, but today you feel like you're nailing it. You're like, “well, I've sworn right around zero *oaths* this week, and you can't swear them 'falsely' if you don't swear 'em in the first place!”

So **to be sure, on the surface**, this section of Jesus' teaching doesn't seem immediately relevant to most of us. But I think what we're going to discover today is it might be more relevant than it first appears. To be sure, on some level, this *specific expression of problem* is unique to Jesus' first century context. But I think it has plenty of very pointed things to teach us about how we go about *our* lives today. And we're going to get into all of that as we go along.

So let's dive in and take a look. Follow along with me, starting in v. 33:

*[33] “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’*

So a little **background** is helpful here. In the Old Testament, people would swear **oaths to verify the authenticity** of something they said or promised. **In our day, we would be more likely to use something like a legal contract.** If you want someone to believe you can be trusted *today*, you draw up a binding agreement, have a lawyer sign off on the language, you or you and the other person sign it, and **maybe you even have it notarized—that's how we would go about it today.** But *ancient* cultures were *oral* cultures: they operated far more often in *verbal* agreements than *written* ones. So there needed to be some way

to *verify* the reliability of those verbal agreements that people would make with each other. And to accomplish that, they often used *oaths*.

I know that **might seem silly** to *us*. But if you really think about it, it's also silly that signing your name in cursive on a piece of paper means more than just saying you'll do something. It's just that *our* society has decided that signing names in cursive *means* something. And *their* society had decided that *oaths* meant something.

And for some time, people had been **invoking God's name** in these oaths. In a highly religious culture, God's name carried some *weight*, so using God's name in your oath was a significant way to reinforce it. And *because* of that, there were all sorts of commands in the Old Testament about how, **if you invoke God's name in an oath, you had better be sure to follow through on it.**<sup>1</sup> Because if you *didn't*, you weren't just trashing *your* reputation, you were trashing *God's* reputation. ~~Basically, God was like, "if you want to be a shady person, do that under your own don't get me and my name mixed up in it."~~

And this is actually a big part of what it meant to **"take God's name in vain,"** if you've ever heard that language before. **Growing up, I always thought that taking God's name in vain was saying things like "oh my God."** So then I started saying "oh my gosh," and was quickly told I couldn't say that either because "gosh" is just a substitute for "God." And I think the word "gah" (like gah-lee) was okay but there were a lot of mixed reviews on that one. **Anybody else grow up hearing things like that?** Okay, so that's not exactly what "do not take the Lord's name in vain" means, at least according to the bible.

**Really, what it meant** was to **not invoke God's name and God's reputation into something flippantly.** And specifically for today's topic, **not to leverage his name to cover for your lack of trustworthiness.** It was a very serious thing to invoke God's name in an oath, so there were lots of serious consequences for doing that, and then not following through on whatever it was.

But then here's **what started to happen.** People knew that it was a grave sin to take the Lord's name in an oath, especially if you ended up not following through on it. So people started finding ways *around* it. They would still swear oaths, but they wouldn't swear by *God*. They would instead swear by "heaven," or by the "earth" itself, or maybe swear by "Jerusalem" (the "holy city" where the temple was located). Sometimes people would

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; and Deuteronomy 5:11, 6:13, & 23:21-23, others.

even swear “by their own head.” So **people started swearing by all these different things that were still *significant*** (so the oaths had some *weightiness* to them), **but because they weren’t *God* or *God’s name*, there weren’t the same severe consequences for breaking those oaths.** I know that all might seem a bit odd to us, but does it at least make sense?

So that’s what people were doing. And so **into that, Jesus says** the following. Picking it back up in v. 34:

*[34] But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. [36] And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

So Jesus says, “hey this **whole system is broken.**” He says “**the problem isn’t actually just that you swear oaths and don’t follow through. The *problem* is that you deceive each other often enough that you need oaths in the first place.** And this pattern of dishonesty and deception has led to creating this *entire bizarre system* where you can make yourselves *appear* honest, while simultaneously avoiding any of the *negative* consequences of *dishonesty*.” Jesus calls that for exactly for what it is.

And **to expose how silly this all is,** Jesus goes on to show how really, swearing by any of *those things is still effectively* invoking God’s name. He says don’t swear by “heaven,” because that’s where *God is*. Don’t swear by “the earth,” because that’s God’s footstool. Don’t swear by Jerusalem, because that’s the holy city. And don’t even swear on your “own head,” because you aren’t in control of your head either—God is! Jesus is saying, effectively, “you think you’re being clever by coming up with all these other things to swear by, but God is in charge of those things too, so that’s not better.”

**Instead,** Jesus says, *here’s* what you should do. Look at v. 37:

*[37] Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.*

Instead, just be who you say you are, do what you say you’ll do, and no oaths of any type are needed. Bypass the whole system by living a life of integrity to begin with. Make sense? Okay. So **at this point you might be thinking,** “okay the *passage* makes more sense now, but I’m still not seeing how it applies to our lives today. That’s still all pretty

foreign to me and how I go about my day-to-day.” That’s fair. So let me offer at least three ways that this might all apply to our lives in the 21st century. First...

## Tell it like it actually is (or was).

I think there’s probably **a temptation in every single one of us** to *appear* just a little bit better than we are. Maybe we’d *like* to *think* we wouldn’t ever just go around telling bold-faced *lies* to people—because that’d be obviously wrong. But maybe we have a habit of stretching the truth a little. Embellishing for effect. Making ourselves look just a little more noble, a little more impressive, a little more interesting in how we talk or tell stories about ourselves.

One *constant* way this happens in our world is via **social media**. Social media is the most *ideal environment* to tell it just a little bit better than it is. And I’m just as guilty of this as anybody. Like if you scroll through my Twitter feed, you’ll probably see a lot of me getting to do semi-cool things in semi-cool locations with semi-cool people. You’ll hear me talking a lot about how excited I am about a teaching, or a series. You’ll *never* read me saying, “today, got distracted this week reading BuzzFeed articles and ran out of time to work on the teaching. Pretty sure this Sunday is going to suck. See y’all Sunday at 9:30 or 11:30!” **Because that’s not what we do. Social media is our highlight reel.**

But what’s more is that some of us **take that approach to our lives**. For some of us, the way we talk about certain events in our lives is one lifelong highlight reel. One perpetual Instagram filter. **So maybe you find yourself recounting an interaction you had with somebody else earlier in the week. And in that interaction, the other person got the best of us. But in how we tell other people the story of that interaction, we had the perfect thing to say, or the perfect come back, or the perfect one-liner. Anybody done that before? Or how about when your spouse asks you why you didn’t do that thing you were supposed to do (run that errand, wash those dishes, take out the trash—whatever it was). And you respond by explaining how unbelievably busy your day was. And in the story, instead of you having to sit in traffic on the way home for fifteen minutes (which was what actually happened), it comes out of your mouth as thirty or forty-five minutes. Anybody ever found themselves doing something like that? Okay those types of things would be included in what Jesus is warning against here.**

And we do this, right? We constantly make these **tiny little tweaks to the truth**, these tiny adjustments to what actually happened, in order to make ourselves appear just a little better than we are. For some of us, we do it almost subconsciously. Maybe we even

justify it in our minds by telling ourselves that lying will lead to a better outcome than telling the truth would. But I need you to see that that is the same core problem Jesus is warning against in this passage: people were swearing on this and swearing on that, and being dishonest, because they were convinced it would lead to a better outcome than if they didn't.

So **instead of all that**, as the people of Jesus, let's *tell it like it actually is, or was*. Let's develop a habit of telling the truth, even when it makes us look a little silly, or a little selfish, or a little wrong. **Because that's what's really behind it all, right? We exaggerate to better control what other people think of us.** So this week, when you catch yourself embellishing or exaggerating, maybe even stop in that moment and go "I'm sorry—that's not actually true. That's not what actually happened. What actually happened was *this*." It will be so incredibly awkward, and everyone involved will be better off for it.

That's the first way this passage intersects our lives today. Here's **the second** way...

## **Honor your commitments whenever possible.**

Jesus says to let your **yes be yes**, and your no be no. He says that **in theory, a follower of Jesus shouldn't need to give anything more than his or her word**. As a follower of Jesus, you shouldn't need to invoke promises or oaths or the name of God for people to believe you you'll do what you say you'll do. Or that you'll *be* where you say you'll *be*.

Back in 2017 there was an **article in the New York Times** by David Brooks called *The Golden Age of Bailing*.<sup>2</sup> And I'll just be honest—it's a pretty convicting article, especially for people around my age and younger. In the article, the author makes the point that there has never been a time in our society's history when "bailing" on people and commitments has been more common than it is right now. I'll read you the opening paragraph:

*All across America people are deciding on Monday that it would be really fantastic to go grab a drink with X on Thursday. But then when Thursday actually rolls around they realize it would actually be more fantastic to go home, flop on the bed and watch Carpool Karaoke videos. So they send the bailing text or email: "So sorry! I'm gonna have to flake on drinks tonight. Overwhelmed. My grandmother just got bubonic plague...."*

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/opinion/the-golden-age-of-bailing.html>

Anybody gotten a text like that? Anybody *sent* a text like that? Isn't this what so many of us do? We say yes to all these commitments, we commit to all these hangouts with people, and yet **some of us have never *scheduled* an event on our calendar that we aren't willing to *bail* on if the right mood hits us.** A lot of us put all those things on our calendar because to us, they're all *hypothetical* and can be cancelled at a moment's notice. And maybe that seems like a very harmless, inconsequential thing to do.

But let me tell you why it matters. **Believe it or not, a *prerequisite for meaningful relationships* in life is *commitment*.** All other things being equal, **the more *committed* you are to a friendship, the more meaningful and beneficial that friendship will be.** That's just the way friendships work. Which means on the other hand, the more you are willing to *bail* on relationships, the less likely you are to have many deep, meaningful relationships. The New York Times again, for the kill here:

*There was a time, not long ago, when a social commitment was not regarded as a disposable Post-it note—when people took it as a matter of course that **reliability is a core element of treating people well, that how you spend your time is how you spend your life, and that** (listen to this) **if you don't flake on people who matter you have a chance to build deeper and better friendships and live in a better and more respectful way.***

The ***New York Times* will preach** occasionally if you'll let it. "If you don't flake on people, you have a chance to build deeper and better friendships and live in a better way." Do you see this? This is how relationships work. This is how *character development* in your life works. **If all you ever do is bail on people and commitments, you will likely find yourself in a perpetual circle of shallow relationships,** and stunted personal growth too.

So in our church, we probably see this problem the clearest in the context of **our *LifeGroups***. We'll have someone join a LifeGroup because they really want meaningful, deep, relationships with other followers of Jesus who can help them grow and become more like Jesus. Which is great—that's precisely what LifeGroups are for. But then they'll also want to wait until every week at the last minute to decide whether they feel like going to that LifeGroup meeting or not. Which more often than not, leads to them texting at the last minute and saying "sorry everybody, I'm just really tired today and don't think I can make it. Today was really busy and I just need a bit to rest."

Now listen, **I get it.** Days can get busy. Life can be exhausting. And there may be a day here or there where you need to take an evening to catch your breath, and that is totally understandable. But I'll say this: if that's a *pattern* for you—if **every other week you're saying you had a busy day or you're tired, it is going to be really difficult for you to have meaningful relationships with other followers of Jesus.** If all it takes for you to bail on your LifeGroup is being slightly more tired or busy than usual, you may be surprised to find out that those relationships remain pretty shallow in your life. Because **to grow in depth and relational intimacy with other people, there has to be a reasonable expectation that you won't constantly bail on them at a moment's notice.** Which is why we need to honor our commitments.

Now, to that maybe some of you are **thinking, "really?"** 'Honor your commitments'? That's what we're talking about in *church*?" Maybe to you, that feels very unspiritual in nature. But here's why it's *not*: **at least a lot of the time, if you have a *habit* of bailing on people, it comes down to you caring more about your own convenience and "freedom," than you do about them.** That, so much of the time, is what drives this tendency. And right here in the sermon on the mount, in just a couple chapters, Jesus is going to say that the summary of all that we're called to as God's people is this: to "love God...and *love your neighbor as yourself.*" **And if you are regularly bailing on people, you aren't loving your neighbor as yourself—you're loving them significantly less than yourself.**

**But if you're willing to not only make commitments, but also to *honor* them, that's a good way to demonstrate you are at least as committed to other people as you are to yourself.** And when that is true of us, we've got a real shot at lasting, meaningful, transformative relationships with other people. So **whether it's** your commitments to being present with your LifeGroup, or commitments to family, or commitments to friends or acquaintances or colleagues in your life, do whatever you can to *honor* those commitments. There will always be scenarios where you *have* to cancel, and know that that's okay. But whenever that's *not* the case, honor your commitments. Make sense?

Okay, last one, and **this one might be** a little **controversial...**

## **Don't use God as cover.**

Let me explain what I mean by that. So **remember from our passage,** at the core of the problem was that people were invoking the name of *God* (or things *related* to God) to cover for their dishonesty. If they didn't think people would believe them, they would

swear by God, or by Jerusalem, or by heaven, or by the temple. It was a way of *bypassing* people's suspicion by appealing to a common belief in God—essentially, using God as *cover* for their dishonesty or evasiveness.

And while it may look a little different today, I actually think this is **something that still happens** on a regular basis. Think of all the times Christians throw out **phrases like** “God told me to...” or “God is leading me to...” or “I feel like God is saying this to me...” or one of my personal *least* favorites, “God opened a door...”. Now *with* this, let me first say, I *sincerely hope* that we are *all* listening to the Holy Spirit *frequently* and *regularly* enough to have him speak to us in very *specific* ways. I *hope* we are regularly hearing him speak things to us about how we should live and what we should do. The Holy Spirit is *alive* and he *speaks*, and I believe he *regularly* leads people to do and say *specific things*. And if *that's* what we mean when we use phrases like that, to that I give a loud “yes and amen.” Absolutely. Keep on keepin' on.

But **that** being **said**, I've been around the Christian “block” a time or two. And I can't help but notice that at least *some* of the time, Christians use phrases like “God is telling me to...” a little *differently* than that. **It's almost like people use language like that to preface things that they just personally want to do.** Sometimes, it seems like what some Christians mean by “God is telling me to do this,” is “**I've made up my mind and I don't want anyone to question my decision.**” And *sometimes*, I'll find that people say that God is leading them to do things that don't really seem all that consistent with who the Scriptures say God *is*, at all.

So I'll **pick on pastors a bit first**. Growing up in the church, I always found it interesting that whenever a pastor would accept a job at a new church, he would tell his *existing* church that God was “*calling* him to a new opportunity.” And it was just curious to me that God never seemed to “call” pastors to new opportunities at *smaller* churches that paid *less*. The only “new opportunities” God called people to were *bigger* churches and/or *higher* salaries. That seems a little odd, right? But that one's **not unique to pastors** either. I find not many people ever experience God leading them to take a worse job at a lower salary. Quite frequently, it's always the better company with better pay and better benefits that people feel “led by the Spirit” to work for. And that's not all wrong, for sure. But it's also not always *right*.

Or how about when people play the “**God card**” in romantic relationships? We've got a good many single people in our church—I'm assuming some of you may have experienced this? **The “God card” is when someone invokes the name of God in**



**entering into (or exiting) a romantic relationship.** I knew a guy back in college who would *ask girls out* by saying “God told me I’m supposed to ask you out.” One time he tried that in a coffee shop, and had the woman respond by going “oh wow, thank you for sharing that with me—if you could just hang tight for a bit, my husband is going to be meeting me here in a few minutes, and I’m sure he’d love to hear what God is speaking to you lately.” What an *amazing* response that was.

But it’s **not just men** that do this. *Ladies*—I’ve heard on quite a few occasions that you may have used the God card as well, maybe even to get *out* of a dating relationship? Now, I’m not saying that’s never valid—God can *absolutely* speak to you about needing to end a dating relationship. But here’s the thing: if all you actually mean is “I don’t *want* to be in the relationship anymore,” don’t just tack God’s name onto that as a smokescreen. And especially if there are *specific reasons* you feel like it’s not a healthy relationship, or that the guy isn’t a healthy guy to be in a relationship *with*, it might actually be helpful for you to *tell him* some of those things in breaking up with him. Those are opportunities to help him grow as a human being and a follower of Jesus that could be *helpful* to him in the future.

One more. There was a guy I knew who was regularly tempted to hook up with girls he met on **Tinder**. Thankfully, he was super transparent about it with his LifeGroup, and they regularly checked in with him about it. But one day, out of nowhere, he announced to his LifeGroup that a position had opened up with his company in another city, and that he was going to take the job. The strange thing was that it wasn’t a better job, or even a better *paying* job, it wasn’t even that cool of a city, and he didn’t know anybody there. But in telling his LifeGroup about it, he said it really just felt like “God was opening a door.” Long story short, he moved to take the job, and within months of moving, called his LifeGroup leader and said that he was really struggling because he had hooked up with over a dozen girls that he met on Tinder, and one of them turned out to be a minor. So turns out, whether he realized or not, the draw to the new city had a lot to do with him being able to hide really well there.

So here’s my point: **I’d almost be inclined to think that some people say things like “God told me to…” to avoid being *challenged* on whatever they’re about to do.** And the problem is that when we *do* that, we often short circuit hearing the *actual* voice of God through people in our life that care about us. And **often, over time, we will begin struggling to hear the *actual* voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives, because we have so confused him in our minds with the voice of our own desires and longings.**

And again—I believe that **sometimes God really does “open doors” for us.** *Absolutely* he does. Sometimes he provides us with opportunities, and sometimes they really are *good* opportunities. *Sometimes*, God will even lead you to do things that happen to run parallel to the *good* desires and longings and passions that you have.

But **don't use God as cover** to just do whatever you want, and keep other people from challenging any of it. Don't use God as some sort of *trump card* to justify disregarding the voice of other Spirit-filled people in your life. **If God really is calling you to do something—to move somewhere, to be in or out of a relationship—then other Holy Spirit-filled people in your life will be able to help you confirm that God is saying that.** But if you think you're the only person who can hear clearly from God about your life, you may have confused the voice of God with your own arrogance and selfishness.

So **in summary: tell it like it is, honor your commitments whenever possible, and don't use God as cover.** Three ways that I think Jesus' teaching on swearing oaths directly impacts the way we conduct our lives today.

But as we wrap up, we need to answer **one last, very important question.** And it's this: **why do we lie?** What prompts us to exaggerate the truth and misrepresent reality? What inspires us to make commitments that we know we have no intention of keeping, and lying about why we bailed *on* them? What leads us to use God as cover for our decisions instead of explaining our *actual* motivations behind them? Why do we *do* all of that in the first place?

Well we've **already hinted at it**, but I think it comes down to **one word: fear.** **We lie because we fear the results of telling the truth.** Because we know the truth might make people think differently and negatively about us. If people knew what we actually felt, what we actually thought, they might not like us or accept us. If we just said “no” to the commitments we know we won't be able to keep, people might think we don't like them or that we're stuck-up. If we just said “the reason I want to move is because I don't like being known by people and just want to do what I want,” people might think ill of us as a result. **The reason we lie, most of the time, is fear.**

So **what is the solution** to *fear*? That's an easy one: *love*. But not just *any* love—*perfect* love. Look with me at 1 John 4, v. 18:

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.*

So when you encounter *perfect love*—the type of love that accepts you just as you are and does not change its opinion of you based on knowing the truth—that type of love *casts out* fear. It creates a safe space for honesty, because there's not a fear of what will happen as a result of that honesty.

Can you imagine what it would feel like if none of us felt like we had to pretend to be someone we aren't? If we didn't constantly make decisions based on what other people might think about us? **Can you imagine an environment where so many of us are convinced that our righteousness comes from Jesus, that we no longer feel the pressure to *prove* our righteousness to each other through exaggeration and embellishment?** Does that not sound *freeing*?

Jesus says *that environment is possible* through his people. So within a community of followers of Jesus, there can be honesty because there is no longer *fear* associated with that honesty. So **to eradicate fear from our community, we need to learn to love each other like that.**

But most *importantly*, look at *where the ability to love* like that *comes from*, in v. 19:

*We love because he first loved us.*

Just a *handful of verses earlier*, 1 John is going to say that **love is shown in God sending Jesus into the world to die for our sins.** That is true, perfect love. And when you understand that, you start to learn *from* that how to love *others* the same way. And as we all learn to do that, we *all* start to see that we don't need to lie or misrepresent to manage people's perception of us. We don't have to live in fear of what people will think if they know what really happened, who we really are. None of that has to control us any longer, because you have encountered and have access to a *perfect* kind of love.

And by *being a community* *built on* the love of Jesus, we can be people who *relay* that perfect love to each other. We can create an environment where we don't operate out of fear—managing each other's perception of us. We can live into and out of complete transparency, because *we've been perfected by the love of Jesus.* That's where it all starts.

So I'd love for us to pray this morning and ask the Spirit to make that more and more true of us. Let's pray.