

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BUT I SAY: OATHS”

Matthew 5:33-37

☑ Between December 8th and 11th, 2014 Gallup polled thousands of U.S. residents regarding the honesty and ethical standards of professionals in various fields.

Forty-six percent gave clergy a “very high” or “high” rating for honesty and ethical standards. Thirty-five percent rated us “average,” and 14% rated us “low” or “very low.” Six percent registered no opinion.

In 2008 56% rated clergy “very high” or “high” for trustworthiness. In 2001, 64% did. Thirty years ago in 1985, 67% rated us “very high” or “high” on honesty and ethical standards. That is a decline of 21%!

But after decades of child abuse, high profile sexual immorality and financial impropriety, and an ugly habit of self-protection at the expense of justice and truth, who can blame the public?

This is wrong! We should exemplify honesty and integrity. Anything less is hypocrisy.

☑ The problem is not exclusive to clergy. In 2013 the Barna Group asked people nationwide to compare the attitudes and actions of Christians to those of Jesus and his opponents the Pharisees. They provided Bible-based examples of each.

Fourteen percent said the typical Christian demonstrates Christ-like attitudes *and* actions. They see a

close correspondence between the attitudes and actions of Jesus and his followers.

Another 14% said the typical Christian exhibits the attitudes of a Pharisee, but the actions of Jesus.

Twenty-one percent said the typical Christian exhibits the attitudes of Jesus, but the actions of a Pharisee.

The largest group – 51% – said that the typical Christian exhibits both the attitudes and actions of a Pharisee.

In total, 86% of those surveyed – many of whom must be professing believers – say that the typical Christian thinks like Jesus but acts like his opponents, or acts like Jesus but think like his opponents, or thinks *and* acts like an opponent of Jesus.

{Mt 7:3} Their cynicism is not entirely unwarranted. Many Christians vociferously insist on trying to remove “**the [specks] of sawdust**” from others’ eyes while they “**pay no attention to the [planks] in [their] own.**”

This is wrong! Every Christ Follower should exemplify honesty and integrity.

■ Please turn with me to **Matthew 5:33**: “**Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’**”

Christ Jesus is summarizing three Scriptures.

● Scripture 1 is Numbers 30:2: “**When a man**” (or woman) “**makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he *must not* break his word but *must do everything* he said.**”

★ Whenever we make a promise we create a new world of obligation and expectation. If we fulfill the pledge, that reality is solid and true; but if we fall short, that reality is proven hollow and false.

It is an issue of *what* we say and *who* we are. Our words cannot be separated from our identity. Messiah puts it this way: **“out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”** (Matthew 12:34), and **“the things that come from the mouth come from the heart”** (Matthew 15:18).

No mere mortal is perfectly consistent. Still, our patterns of speech are a window onto our souls.

- Scripture 2 is Dt 23:21: **“If you make a vow to the LORD... do not be slow to pay it, for [he] will... demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”**

The manner of our action is as important as the action itself. Our God does not value a cursory, going-through-the-motions discharge of vows. When we make a promise to him, we are to make it of our own free will and put our heart and soul into fulfilling it.

- Above all there is Scripture 3, Leviticus 19:12: **“Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.”**

“[Swearing] **falsely**” includes deliberate deceit, yet not only that. It also covers oaths that we make with sincere intent but do not carry out.

☹ {Ex 20:7} To **“swear falsely by” “the name” of “the LORD”** is the worst kind of false oath. It reveals falsity within us, it impairs our future integrity, and it “[profanes] **the name of... God**”!

★ By saying, ‘As God is my witness,’ or ‘By God’ we are claiming divine validation. Our words establish a direct connection between God’s honor and our vow.

What happens, then, if we do not keep it? Not only do we fail, we make an alleged failure and liar of God!

{Ex 20:7} To **“swear falsely by [his] name”** is to **“profane”** it, to desecrate it, to defile it as surely as if we used it as a curse word. Do you recall the third of the Ten Commandments? **“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”**

Do we exemplify honesty and integrity? Do you and I truly exalt the sacred name of God with our words?

- **“You have heard ... ‘Do not break your oath’ ... But I tell you,”** (verses 34-36) **“do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”**

“Do not break you oath.” I hope that each of us would affirm the goodness and rightness of *this* directive, even if we do not always abide by it.

But what about the next directive: **“Do not swear an oath at all”**? How are we to interpret and apply it?

☑ It has been noted that “**a text without context is pretext.**” Interpreting Scripture without taking the milieu into account ends in misinterpretation and misapplication.

✧ Big picture, this is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which I believe to be a self-portrait of Jesus. His goal is to equip all of his people to participate in his life and mission. Jesus had no need to swear because he never broke his word. The sermon invites us to mirror his integrity. That is the larger textual context.

Zooming in for a closer look, our text follows the teachings about adultery (in verses 27-30) and divorce (in verses 31-32). This is highly relevant since matrimony is defined by oath-taking.

We draw two great truths from this. 1st, oaths are made to be kept. 2nd, God permits the formal dissolution of a vow only as a concession to our sinfulness. That’s the immediate textual context.

✧ As for historical context, first century Jews would rather die than profane God’s Name. However, accidents can happen.

📖 To prevent slips of the tongue they have come up with *kinnuyim*, substitutionary words that imply YHWH’s presence or work, substitutes like “**heaven,**” “**earth,**” and “**Jerusalem.**” This sounds like a great solution; unfortunately, it has some hidden flaws.

☹ 1st, substitutes encourage evasive promises.

{Barclay} The rabbis have ruled that oaths which “**contain the name of God are absolutely binding,**” and observant Jews who “[swear] **by [his] name**” will “**rigidly keep that oath.**” at all costs.

The rabbis have also ruled that oaths which aren’t taken in God’s name are not binding even when *kinnuyim* are involved. In such instances, breaking one’s vow is not considered to be deceitful and un-virtuous. It is the equivalent of crossing your fingers.

☹ 2nd, substitutes transmit a false view of God.

This presumes that God is connected to our words only if and when we invoke his name. Hence his name is not profaned if we do not an oath taken with *kinnuyim*.

But God is omnipresent. Any oath that touches anything that is under God makes us accountable for our words. Our lack of integrity always dishonors God.

☹ 3rd, swearing, with or without substitutes, assumes too much about ourselves.

“**Do not swear by your head for you cannot make even one hair white or black.**” We don’t swear on these terms. Still, we might make foolish assumptions about what is (or isn’t) a certainty and what we can (or cannot) do. E.g., most couples believe their marriage will end only with death – yet a high percentage get divorced.

■ Verse 37: “**All you need to say is simply ‘Yes,’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.**”

● This teaching is repeated almost word for word in James 5:12: “**Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Otherwise you will be condemned.**”

Evidently, many in the early Church applied this teaching literally. Few in the modern Church do.

I will not solve that dilemma! I will make several brief comments.

✈ {Mt 19:8} 1st, if God permits oath-taking it is as a concession to human untrustworthiness. Remember what Jesus said about dissolving one's matrimonial vows?

“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.”

✈ 2nd, if we take an oath we should do so only after careful consideration and with utmost caution. On many occasions it is better to say “No”.

✈ 3rd, if we take an oath we must make every effort to keep it regardless of the cost in time, money, hardship, and reputation. We are responsible to complete it unless doing so will require us to sin.

✈ 4th, we are called to embody honesty and integrity so purely that people who know us will be satisfied with our “Yes” and our “No.”

✈ {2 Co 5:17; Ro 8:29} Finally, this is not beyond Christ in us! **“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”** God has **“predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”** That process is not yet complete, but it certainly has begun.

Increasingly, Americans do not trust religious clergy. Christians in general are commonly seen as hypocrites.

We cannot control what others think of us, and we shouldn't try. This is not about spin! In some respects, our reputation is unimportant.

What matters is that Christ Jesus calls us to be trustworthy beyond question. He is calling us to exemplify honesty and integrity.

This is beyond us. It is not beyond Christ in us!

Matthew 5:33-37 is the word of the Lord.