



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 09
Matthew 5:33-37: Topic 09

Study By
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Greek NT

5.33 Πάλιν ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, Οὐκ ἐπιορκήσεις, ἀποδώσεις δὲ τῷ κυρίῳ τοὺς ὄρκους σου. 5.34 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ὀμόσαι ὅλως· μήτε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὅτι θρόνος ἐστὶν τοῦ θεοῦ, 5.35 μήτε ἐν τῇ γῇ, ὅτι ὑποπόδιόν ἐστὶν τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ, μήτε εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα, ὅτι πόλις ἐστὶν τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως, 5.36 μήτε ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ σου ὀμόσης, ὅτι οὐ δύνασαι μίαν τρίχα λευκὴν ποιῆσαι ἢ μέλαιναν. 5.37 ἔστω δὲ ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν ναὶ ναί, οὐ οὐ· τὸ δὲ περισσὸν τούτων ἐκ τοῦ ποιηροῦ ἐστίν.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

33 »Ihr wisst auch, dass unseren Vorfahren gesagt worden ist: 'Ihr sollt keinen Meineid schwören und sollt halten, was ihr Gott mit einem Eid versprochen habt.' 34 Ich aber sage euch: Ihr sollt überhaupt nicht schwören! Nehmt weder den Himmel zum Zeugen, denn er ist Gottes Thron, 35 noch die Erde, denn sie ist sein Fußschemel, und auch nicht Jerusalem, denn es ist die Stadt des himmlischen Königs. 36 Nicht einmal mit eurem eigenen Kopf sollt ihr euch für etwas verbürgen; denn es steht nicht in eurer Macht, dass auch nur ein einziges Haar darauf schwarz oder weiß wächst. 37 Sagt einfach Ja oder Nein; jedes weitere Wort stammt vom Teufel.«

NRSV

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." 34 But I say to you, Do not swear 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 swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

NLT

33 "Again, you have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' 34 But I say, don't make any vows! If you say, 'By heaven!' it is a sacred vow because heaven is God's throne. 35 And if you say, 'By the earth!' it is a sacred vow because the earth is his footstool. And don't swear, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Don't even swear, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

With this fourth premise/antithesis passage in vv. 33-37, we return to the full introductory formula found in the first passage in v. 21: Πάλιν ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις. This signals the first of three pericopes in the second set of the six found in vv. 21-48. In the manner of 21-26, this passage contains the contrastive core elements, vv. 33-34a, along with expansion elements, v. 34b-37. Additionally, this passage represents Matthew's understanding of Jesus' words, which are very close to the expression found in James 5:12² in a shortened form. The close parallel between these two passages necessitates a careful comparison. Additionally, Matt. 23:16-22 in one of the seven 'woes' pronounced on the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus, a similar emphasis is found that provides important backdrop regarding the abuse that is in mind.³

The topic of Jesus here is the making of oaths, as practiced among Jews in the first century world.

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²James 5:12 (NRSV): "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."

³Mt. 23:16-22 (NRSV): 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it."

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Because this custom is so different from anything similar in the modern world, the 'now' meaning of the passage becomes more challenging. This cultural gap between then and now has led to much confusion about Jesus' words here. The history of interpretation, i.e., die Wirkungsgeschichte des Textes, is littered with wrong and often strange interpretations of Jesus' teaching about oath making.⁴ Particularly puzzling is the tendency to lift these words out of their context and thus give them meaning that is in direct contradiction to other scripture texts on this topic. This is clearly the use of false methods of interpreting scripture. In the English speaking interpretive tradition is the inclination to translate μη ὁμῶσαι ὅλως by "Swear not at all" (KJV). A huge interpretative mistake is made thereby because of the double meaning of the English verb 'swear'⁵ that is not possible with the original Greek verb ὁμῶσαι. The Greek verb only relates to the first meaning of oath making with the English verb 'swear.' The second meaning of vulgar language is connected to an entirely different set of Greek words.⁶ But the English language mistake assumes the second meaning of 'swear' in Matt. 5:34, which is not possible.

Thus our study will give particular attention to this tendency and backdrop to the text here in Matthew. The earlier study on James 5:12 will contain much background material to be used here as we look at Jesus' words in relationship to James' words, rather than the other way around.

Historical Context:

In this topic where the ancient Jewish practice⁷ of oath making is not a part of modern western society, a clear understanding of that ancient pattern is critically important to correct understanding of this passage. Oath making in the ancient world had both a formal and an informal practice. Ancient society in general practiced formal oath making in both ceremonies and legal settings.⁸ The private, informal practice was overwhelmingly a Jewish practice in the ancient world. And it is especially this side of oath making that both Jesus and James address in their words. But much of modern interpretation fails to recognize this distinction. And consequently doesn't know how to handle the positive encouragement to oath making set forth in the Bible. Modern oath making almost exclusively relates to the formal aspect in a judicial setting. Modern western society tends to invoke religious terms into its swearing more as vulgarities and virtually never in a positive use of religious reference in the oath.

In the Jewish Mishnah, now contained in the Talmud, this definition of oaths was given in Shevuoth 3.1:

Oaths are of two kinds, which are actually four kinds; they are

"I swear that I will eat,"

or

"I swear that I will not eat,"

or

"I swear that I have eaten,"

or

"I swear that I have not eaten."

If one said, "I swear that I will not eat," and he ate the smallest quantity, he is liable. This is the opinion of

⁴Various religious groups have objected to the taking of oaths, most notably the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and Mennonites. This is principally based on Matthew 5:34-37, the Antithesis of the Law. Here, Christ is written to say "I say to you: 'Swear not at all'". The Apostle James stated in James 5:12, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear — not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned." ["Oaths: Christian Tradition," Wikipedia online]

⁵Cf. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "swear": 1: to take an oath; 2: to use profane or obscene language, curse"

⁶In the Greek New Testament, see particularly αἰσχρολογία, ἡ ('obscene or shameful speech'; e.g., Col. 3:8), αἰσχροτήτης, ἡ ('obscenity'; e.g., Eph. 5:4) and εὐτραπέλια, ἡ ('coarse jesting'; e.g., Eph. 5:4).

⁷For a summary of ancient Jewish practice see, "Extrajudicial Oaths," Jewish Encyclopedia online.

⁸In the Greco-Roman Tradition, oaths were sworn upon *Iuppiter Lapis* or the *Jupiter Stone* located in the Temple of Jupiter, Capitoline Hill. *Iuppiter Lapis* was held in the Greco-Roman Tradition to be an Oath Stone, an aspect of Jupiter is his role as divine law-maker responsible for order and used principally for the investiture of the oathtaking of office.

Bailey (1907) states:

We have, for instance, the sacred stone (silex) which was preserved in the temple of Iuppiter on the Capitol, and was brought out to play a prominent part in the ceremony of treaty-making. The fetial, who on that occasion represented the Roman people, at the solemn moment of the oath-taking, struck the sacrificial pig with the silex, saying as he did so, 'Do thou, Diespiter, strike the Roman people as I strike this pig here to-day, and strike them the more, as thou art greater and stronger.' Here no doubt the underlying notion is not merely symbolical, but in origin the stone is itself the god, an idea which later religion expressed in the cult-title specially used in this connection, Iuppiter Lapis.^[1]

Walter Burkert has shown that since Lycurgus of Athens (d. 324 BC), who held that "it is the oath which holds democracy together", religion, morality and political organization had been linked by the oath, and the oath and its prerequisite altar had become the basis of both civil and criminal, as well as international law.^[2] ["Oaths: Greco-Roman Tradition," Wikipedia]

R. Akiba.”

In this Jewish exposition of different kinds of oaths, two basic categories of oaths are present: (1) the promissory oath which looks to the future with either a positive or negative promise, and (2) the assertive oath which looks to the past with either a positive or negative assertion regarding something that happened in the past.

The pattern of oath making among ancient Jews is effectively described by M.H. Pope:⁹

The security of a society demands that its members speak the truth in crucial situations and keep their promises in matters of serious import. The oath is an ancient and universal means of impressing this obligation on the responsible parties in an agreement or an investigation. The obligation is fortified by holy words and holy acts which create confidence and afford a sense of security that serves to hold the community together.

The oath was an important part of the cult life of the Hebrew community, as it was among other peoples. The legal procedure of which the oath was a part was closely associated with the shrines and the priesthood, because the oath as a holy act was properly pronounced in a sacred place or administered by a holy person, in contact or connection with holy objects. Perjury and the violation of an oath were serious matters, the profanation of the name of the Lord (Lev. 19:12), which could not go unpunished (Ezek. 17:13, 16, 18-19). An oath must be kept, though to one's hurt (Ps. 15:4), and even rash oaths (Lev. 5:1-4). The covenant between Isaac and Abimelech was backed by mutual oaths at the sacred well of oaths, Beer-sheba (Gen. 26:28-31). The oath for the suspected adulteress was administered with a drink of holy water containing dust from the tabernacle floor (Num. 5:17). Jephthah, when he became chief of the Gileadites, "spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah" (Judg. 11:11). These words were probably promises of exploits which he swore to carry out on behalf of the people, and it is likely that both parties sealed their agreement with oaths. The old sanctuaries at Gilgal and Beth-aven were places where oaths were administered and taken (Hos. 4:15). At the time of the composition of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple, oaths were administered before the temple altar I Kings 8:31-32; II Chr. 6:22-23).

The oath is validated by the invocation of a deity, which for the Israelite should be none other than "the Lord, the God of heaven and earth." The Third Commandment (Exod. 20:7) forbids the invocation of the Lord's name for evil intent, which would include a false oath, black magic, or the like. The psalmist (Ps. 16:4) declares that he will not take the name of another god on his lips. Oaths by the god Ashimah of Samaria, and heathen gods at the shrines of Dan and Beer-sheba, are condemned by Amos (8:14). The Jews of Elephantine in Egypt took oaths by the deities Anathyahu, Harambethel, and the Egyptian goddess Sati. In later time one swore by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, or one's own head. The oath by one's head, common in Arabic, was also apparently frequent in Jesus' day (Matt. 5:36). In I Chr. 12:19 the Philistines swear by their heads.

The oath is accompanied by symbolic acts. The gesture of the oath was to raise the hand toward heaven (Gen. 14:22; Deut. 32:4; Dan. 12:7[both hands]; Rev. 10:5-6 [the right hand]). To lift the hand, therefore, means to swear, and even God swears thus (Exod. 6:8; Ezek. 20:5). It is by his right hand that the Lord swears (Isa. 62:8; cf. the Arabic oath by the right hand of Allah and the meaning "oath" for the word *yami n*, "right hand"). In Ps. 144:8, "whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood" refers to those who swear falsely.

The swearer may lay hold of some sacred and potent object, as the genitals of the patriarch (Gen. 24:2; 47:29). The rabbis understood the placing of the hand under the thigh as an oath by Abraham's circumcision (cf. Midrash Rabba, Palestinian Targum, and Rashi); but in view of the importance of the divine gift and attribute of fertility which the male organ symbolized, it seems unlikely that this form of oath had originally anything to do with circumcision. The later Jewish custom of taking hold of the Scriptures or phylacteries in a judicial oath furnished the model for the present-day procedure of swearing on the Bible.

Sacrifices accompanied the oath in connection with a covenant. The Hebrew idiom for making a covenant is "to cut a covenant with" someone. In Arabic the verb *qasama*, "cut," in the causative stem, *aqsama*, means "to swear," and the noun *qasam* means "oath." In the sacrifices of the covenant the animals were cut in two, and one or both parties passed between the pieces (Gen. 15:10, 17). In Jer. 34:18 those who break the covenant with the Lord are told that they will be made like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts. This suggests that the oath which bound the parties to a covenant may have stipulated in the conditional curse that the violator should be treated like the sacrificial animal. The Lord's covenant with Israel was conceived

⁹ iPreach > Biblical Reference > Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible > THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY of the BIBLE > DICTIONARY ENTRIES > O > OATHS.

as having been sealed by mutual oaths, so that the promises of the covenant are referred to as things that the Lord swore to do (Gen. 24:7; 26:3; 50:24; Exod. 13:5, 11; 33:1; Num. 14:16, 30; 32:11; Deut. 1:8, 35; 6:10; etc.).

Among the Essenes at the time of Jesus, a similar negative view to that of Jesus can be documented.¹⁰ Various strands of Jewish wisdom teaching also took a similar stand. For example, note Sirach 23:9-11: 9 Do not accustom your mouth to oaths, nor habitually utter the name of the Holy One; 10 for as a servant who is constantly under scrutiny will not lack bruises, so also the person who always swears and utters the Name will never be cleansed from sin. 11 The one who swears many oaths is full of iniquity, and the scourge will not leave his house. If he swears in error, his sin remains on him, and if he disregards it, he sins doubly; if he swears a false oath, he will not be justified, for his house will be filled with calamities.

By the beginning of the Christian era, the abuse of oaths in everyday life was rampant. Many inside Judaism were warning against this destructive practice. The invoking of religious reference to the oath was where the abuse centered. Through clever indirect and direct reference the oath became a way to lie and deceive. It was this aspect that Jesus condemned among the religious leaders of His day.¹¹ Thus Jesus added His perspective but with a focus on disciples in the Kingdom of God. His followers were to be dramatically different than the society around them.

Literary Aspects:

Once more, consideration of the literary aspects plays an important role in proper understanding of the text.

Literary Form:

The pattern here in vv. 33-37 follows the five other similar texts in vv. 21-48. First comes a premise / antithesis declaration (vv. 33-34a). Then a set of expansion elements in vv. 34b-37 extend and amplify Jesus' contrastive declaration. The introductory formula in v. 33a reaches back to the first one in v. 21a to follow the same wording: Πάλιν ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις,... ("Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times...").¹² The only difference is the addition of 'Again' (Πάλιν) in v. 33a.

The premise declaration, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." (Οὐκ ἐπιορκήσεις, ἀποδώσεις δὲ τῷ κυρίῳ τοὺς ὅρκους σου.), comes as a summation of Old Testament teaching regarding oath making, and in particular the making of false oaths. See passages such as Lev. 19:12,¹³ Num. 30:2,¹⁴ Deut. 23:21-23,¹⁵ Zech. 8:17¹⁶ for the particulars.

¹⁰Bousset-Gressm., 464 and Schürer, II⁴, 658. Jos. Bell., 2, 135 declares: "The given word had for them (the Essenes) more validity than an oath; indeed, they renounced swearing because they regarded it as worse than perjury. He who finds no credence without calling on the Godhead is, they say, already judged." Cf. also Jos. Ant., 15, 371 f." [as quoted in footnote 29 in J. Schneider, "ὄμνῶ, ὄρκος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 5:176-185.]

¹¹Mt. 23:16-22 (NRSV): 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it."

¹²Note the pattern in 5:21a: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ..." (ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις,...).

¹³Lev. 19:12 (NRSV): "And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord."

¹⁴Num. 30:12 (NRSV): "9 (But every vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall be binding upon her.) 10 And if she made a vow in her husband's house, or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, 11 and her husband heard it and said nothing to her, and did not express disapproval to her, then all her vows shall stand, and any pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. 12 **But if her husband nullifies them at the time that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows, or concerning her pledge of herself, shall not stand. Her husband has nullified them, and the Lord will forgive her.** 13 Any vow or any binding oath to deny herself, her husband may allow to stand, or her husband may nullify."

¹⁵Deut. 23:21-23 (NRSV): "21 If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. 22 But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. 23 Whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth."

¹⁶Zech. 8:17 (NRSV): "do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord."

Jesus' contrastive declaration again departs from the outward action / inner attitude contrast typical in four of the six passages. Here the contrast is between oral declaration (falsely made) and no oral declaration. That is, between oaths and no oaths. The same objective -- integrity in speech -- is sought by both the Law and by Jesus. But by different means. Additionally for the first time, Jesus' contrastive statement is formulated as a prohibition, 'don't say anything.' Once again the use of hyperbole to make a point dramatically is in play with the denial of oath making by Jesus. He moved beyond denying perjury,¹⁷ which was the point of the Old Testament Law, to a denial of oath making period. Yet, His willingness to enter into oaths, i.e., to swear, strongly suggests the hyperbole intention behind these words here in v. 34a.

Literary Setting:

As the chart on the right illustrates, 5:33-37 stands as the fourth pericope in this series in vv. 21-48. At first glance, no logical sequence of these six pericopes seems to be in place; instead, they appear to be randomly selected and inserted. Clearly the use of 'again' (Πάλιν) to introduce this fourth pericope signals the beginning of a second set of three passages.

But this adverb may very well have served memorization purposes rather than information expression. The relationship between oaths and marriage (3rd pericope), as a legal contract sworn to by the two families involved, has been sometimes suggested. But nothing in either passage clearly signals such a connection. The more general understanding of perjury as the topic of vv. 33-37 is the better approach.

Literary Structure:

The thought flow of ideas in the passage can be charted out in a block diagram of an English translation of the Greek text and thus be easier to follow.

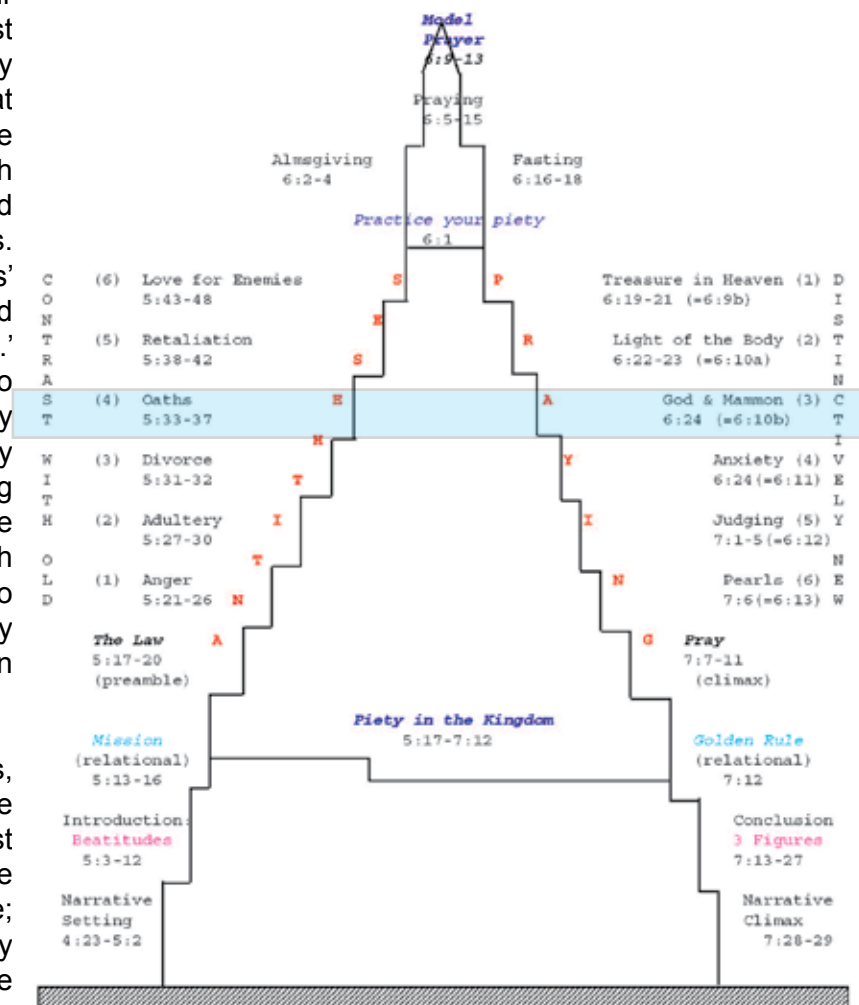
5:33 Again

48 **You have heard that** it was said to the ancient ones,
 /-----|
 You shall not swear falsely,
 and
 you must carry out your oaths to the Lord.

5:34 But

49 **I say to you,** do not swear at all,
 neither

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount Mathew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lerin L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

¹⁷Perjury: "the voluntary violation of an oath or vow either by swearing to what is untrue or by omission to do what has been promised under oath : false swearing" ("Perjury," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online).

5:35 by Heaven
 because it is God's throne,
 nor

 by the earth,
 because it is God's footstool,
 nor

 in regard to Jerusalem
 because it is the city of the great King,
 5:36 nor
 by your head
 you shall not swear
 because you are not able to make one hair
 white
 or
 black.

5:37 Instead,
 50 **let your word 'yes' be 'yes', your 'no' be 'no.'**
 and
 from the Evil One
 51 **anything beyond this...is.**

The premise declaration (# 48) is placed in contrast to the antithesis (#49a). The core expression, “do not swear at all” (μη ὀμόσαι ὅλως), is then expanded by way of ellipsis in four expressions that elaborate specific oaths common in Jesus’ day: Heaven, earth, Jerusalem, head. These make clear what was implied in the adverb, ‘at all’ (ὅλως). Further expansion comes in statements #s 50-51 providing the alternative to swearing (#50) with a reason (#51).

Exegesis of the Text:

Premise (v. 33): “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord’” (Πάλιν ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, Οὐκ ἐπιορκήσεις, ἀποδώσεις δὲ τῷ κυρίῳ τοὺς ὅρκους σου).

The introductory formula refers to not a particular Old Testament text but instead to a summation of the concept of oath making contained in numerous regulations in the Law of Moses. Note the observation of Donald Hagner (Word Biblical Commentary):

33 After the full introductory formula (cf. v 21), the evangelist presents not a quotation from the OT, as in the first two antitheses, but a crystallization of the OT teaching on the subject (cf. Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-23; cf. Zech 8:17). The OT clearly emphasizes that oaths have a binding character. The verb ἐπιορκεῖν, “swear falsely,” can also mean “break an oath” (cf. Did. 2:3). The more clearly promissory oath is in view in the sentence: “you shall fulfill your oaths as unto the Lord.” Exod 20:7 may also lie behind these imperatives.

As discussed above under **Literary Form**, the premise statement in two parts (negative/positive) addresses the issue of perjury in oath making, either at the point of falsely swearing or of breaking an oath. And then of asserting the importance of keeping one’s vows made to the Lord. With this combination, Jesus addresses both oaths and vows, something carefully distinguished from each other by scribes of His time. Particularly important in both the Old Testament and in the later Judaism of Jesus’ time was a concern to protect the sacredness of God’s name in connection to the Decalogue commandment against taking God’s name in vain.¹⁸ Many in first century Judaism had become alarmed at the frivolous manner in which God was being invoked in endless oaths.¹⁹ Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in

¹⁸Exodus 20:7 (NRSV): “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”

¹⁹“Prophetic (e.g., Hos 4:2) and wisdom (Sir 23:9-11) criticism of much swearing had an effect on rabbinic Judaism. One built a ‘fence around the Torah’ by trying by means of legal regulations and penalties to prevent the misuse of the divine name with false or superfluous oaths, but also by emphatically warning in parenthesis against frivolous swearing. The third (second) commandment of the Decalogue is understood as a prohibition of false and unnecessary oaths. There are only isolated statements that draw the “fence” around the Torah so tightly that they completely reject swearing. [Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 260]

Matthew 23:16-22²⁰ reveals a major problem that was rampant even among Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' day. By carefully distancing the religious reference in the oath from direct reference to God, one became less obligated to be truthful in oath making. The motivation was not so much a concern to be truthful as it was to avoid the assumed curse from God²¹ if His name were used directly in a falsely made or broken oath.

Antithesis (v. 34a): "But I say to you, Do not swear at all" (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ὀμόσαι ὅλως).

Jesus' core reaction to the premise statement is to blanketly prohibit oath making completely. As noted above this was done by employing hyperbole in this emphatic disavowal of any oath. The unevenness of the OT premise to the contrastive word of Jesus has bothered many commentators.²² But Jesus' point is to grab His listener's attention with His extreme reaction against oath making. This serves to set up even more dramatically the positive demand for truthfulness in verse 37. James 5:12 follows the same pattern: "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation" (Πρὸ πάντων δέ, ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ὀμνύετε μήτε τὸν οὐρανὸν μήτε τὴν γῆν μήτε ἄλλον τινα ὄρκον· ἦτω δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ Ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ Οὐ οὐ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπὸ κρίσιν πέσητε.).

Expansion of Antithesis (vv. 34b-37): "either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one." (μήτε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὅτι θρόνος ἐστὶν τοῦ θεοῦ, μήτε ἐν τῇ γῇ, ὅτι ὑποπόδιόν ἐστιν τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ, μήτε εἰς Ἱερουσόλυμα, ὅτι πόλις ἐστὶν τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως, μήτε ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ σου ὀμόσης, ὅτι οὐ δύνασαι μίαν τρίχα λευκὴν ποιῆσαι ἢ μέλαιναν. ἔστω δὲ ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν ναὶ ναί, οὐ οὐ· τὸ δὲ περισσὸν τούτων ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἐστίν.).

The elaboration of the core antithesis in v. 34a takes two directions. First comes an amplification of specifically denied oaths in vv. 34b-36. This is in turn followed by the positive alternative set forth in v. 37a with a warning to follow in v. 37b.

Amplification of the prohibition (vv. 34b-36).

Four separate oaths are prohibited as illustrations of the sorts of things Jesus intended in the core prohibition. By illipsis the prohibition is extended but with the religious reference in the oath specified. Additionally a reason for prohibiting the oath is provided in the causal expression:

- 1) either by heaven,
for it is the throne of God,
- 2) or by the earth,
for it is his footstool,
- 3) or by Jerusalem,
for it is the city of the great King.
- 4) And do not swear by your head,
for you cannot make one hair white or black.

The first two are commonly used oath formulas for everyday oath making. Swearing by Jerusalem or by one's head were less common, and thus less documented in the ancient literature. The four causal expressions uniformly pull the focus back to God, and thus reject any thought that distancing the reference from the direct naming of God could somehow involve less risk of violating the second commandment to not use God's name lightly. All four references allude back to God and thus bring Him into the oath, thus invoking the second Decalogue commandment with its warning.

One clear implication is that in Jesus' mind all promises, whether oaths or vows, have their origin in God for the disciple of Christ. Even deeper truthfulness in speech grows out of one's relationship to God and thus stands as integral to his spiritual existence.

²⁰Mt. 23:16-22 (NRSV): 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath." 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it."

²¹Exodus 20:7 (NRSV): "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name."

²²OT: don't swear falsely; keep your vows to the Lord. Jesus' response: don't make oaths at all.

Alternative demand (v. 37).

The full intention of Jesus' words become clear at this point: "Let your word be "Yes, Yes' or "No, No"" (ἔστω δὲ ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν ναὶ ναί, οὐ οὐ). Some unclarify about the translation of the Greek text is present. Should these words be translated as the NRSV above?²³ Or, should they be taken with the same understanding found in James 5:12,²⁴ as in the HSCB: "But let your word 'yes' be 'yes,' and your 'no' be 'no'?" In ancient Greek, as well as in Hebrew and Aramaic, a doubling of a word simply place emphasis on the word. Whichever translation path is taken, the point is that our 'yes' should be a genuine 'yes' etc.

The basis for Jesus' declaration about genuine responses is that if our promise has to be buttressed by some oath formula this excess means the Devil is playing a role in the making of the promise, rather than God. Human fallenness is driving the promise, more than commitment to God.

Paul's word to the Ephesians is important:

13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and **fasten the belt of truth around your waist**, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. [Eph. 6:13-17, NRSV]

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) How easily does truthfulness come to you?

2) Do you always keep your promises? Especially, those make to God?

3) What would happen in our society if truthfulness began characterizing everyone's speech?

4) What is the impact when a believer in Jesus is not truthful?

²³Even clearer is the NLT: "Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Your word is enough."

²⁴James 5:12 (NRSV): "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but **let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.**" (Πρὸ πάντων δέ, ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ὀμνύετε μήτε τὸν οὐρανὸν μήτε τὴν γῆν μήτε ἄλλον τινα ὄρκον· **ἦτω δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ Ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ Οὐ οὐ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπὸ κρίσιν πέσητε.**)