

ST. SIMEON ANGLICAN CHURCH, OFF FUTA ROAD, AKURE

BIBLE STUDY, 08/10/2008

STUDY 18

TRUTHFULNESS AND HONESTY

Matthew 5:33 – 37

In this study, Christ further proceeds to correct another false interpretation of the law. First, He mentions the pharisaic corruption of the Divine Law, and then sets forth the character of that righteousness which He requires from the citizens of His kingdom.

The basis of Old Testament swearing, or oath-taking, is found in Leviticus 19:12; Deuteronomy 23:21; and Exodus 20:7. An oath is a solemn affirmation or declaration, made with an appeal to God for the truth of what is affirmed, and imprecating his vengeance, and renouncing his favour if what is affirmed is false. A false oath is called perjury or forswearing. Oaths taken in the name of the Lord were looked upon as binding and perjury of such oaths was strongly condemned by the law. Such phrases like "as the Lord liveth" or "by the name of the Lord" emphasize the sanctity of such oaths. By the time of Christ, Jews had introduced a number of oaths in common conversation, and oaths which they by no means considered to be binding. For example, they would swear by the temple, by the head, by heaven, or by the earth to swear by these things, therefore, was to treat irreverently objects created by God, and could not be without guilt.

Christians are not to take an oath by heaven, earth, nor the city of Jerusalem. We are not to swear on the basis of our own heads or any other physical feature. We are to speak the truth in such a way that his "yes" means yes and his "no" means no in *every* utterance of our lips. Our character and conduct are to be such that all acquainted with us have the assurance that our word is our bond. If our communications are "yea" in the promise and "yea" in the performance, then there will be no need for us to appeal to God in witness of our veracity. Anything that is more than a simple affirmation of the truth *cometh of evil*. When we add an oath to our regular affirmation of the truth, we either admit that our normal conversation cannot be trusted, or that we are lowering ourselves to the level of a world which normally does not tell the truth.

1. The original and fundamental law concerning oaths

Matthew 5:33; Exodus 22:11, 12; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 5:19–21; Deuteronomy 5:11

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7) is the original and fundamental law concerning oaths, which may be also linked with *"Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve Him, and shalt swear by His name"* (Deuteronomy 6:13). Thus an oath was a solemn appeal to the dread name of Jehovah, which, by awaking the spirit of the swearer to a consciousness of the awe-inspiring presence and cognisance of the Most High, gave all its sanctity and power to it. And then, when anyone *had* so sworn, there was the solemn warning that the Lord would not hold him guiltless that took His name in vain. Thus it is quite clear that Israelites were permitted to swear by the name of the Lord, but having once done so they must not change their minds nor in any way fail to keep their promises.

It is striking to note that when the Psalmist delineated the character of him who was fitted to "abide in the Lord's tabernacle" and "dwell in His holy hill" (that is,

commune with God and enjoy His presence for ever), one of the marks specified was "*He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not*" (Psalm 15:1, 4): that is, who at no cost will go back upon his sworn word. It is therefore obvious from these passages that the Mosaic law had a strong tendency to check the practice of oath-taking and to restrict the same unto solemn occasions.

2. Pharisaic corruption of the Divine precepts

Matthew 5:34–36; Isaiah 66:1; Matthew 23:16–22; Psalm 24:1; 48:2; 46:6; Revelation 21:2

The Jewish doctors had found ways of perverting the Divine statutes, and the Pharisees had perpetuated and added to their corruptions. The nature of their errors and evil practices is that they had unwarrantably *restricted* the Mosaic precepts upon oaths to the single prohibition against perjury, that there was no evil in any oath, at any time, provided a man did not forswear himself. Not only was perjury severely condemned by the Mosaic law, but any vain and *needless* use of the name of God in our ordinary communications was strictly prohibited. No man ought voluntarily to take an oath unless it be a matter of controversy and the contention cannot be settled without it: "*For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife*" (Hebrews 6:16). In order for an oath to be lawful, it requires not only that the affirmation be true and the vows performed, but that such a mode of affirmation or vowing be *necessary*.

The Jews had equally wrested the third commandment by inventing the idea of swearing *by the creature*. The law was very definite, "*Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve Him, and shalt swear by His name*" (Deuteronomy 6:13). To swear in the name of the Lord was ordained not only for the placing of a solemn bridle upon fallen man's proneness to lying, but also to restrain the act itself unto serious matters and important occasions. Christ forbids swearing by some inanimate object (Matthew 5:34) and shows that there is nothing we can swear by, but it is some way or other related to God, who is the Fountain of all beings, and therefore that it is as dangerous to swear by them, as it is to swear by God himself. *Swear not by the heaven; for it is God's throne*, where He resides, and in a particular manner manifests His glory.

Nor by the earth, for it is his footstool. He governs the motions and rules over the earth; and though under his feet, yet it is also under his eye and care. *The earth is the Lord's*; so that in swearing by it, we swear by its Owner. *Neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King* (Psalm 48:2), *the city of God* (Psalm 46:4), He is therefore interested in it, and in every oath taken by it. "*Neither shalt thou swear by the head*"; man's inability really to change the colour of his hair demonstrates that he has no power over his head (Psalm 3:3). If man has no power over the least creature (a hair); then how unlawful and ridiculous it is for him to swear by any creature.

3. Truthfulness and honesty in all manner of our conversations

Matthew 5:37; 5:19; II Corinthians 1:17–20; James 5:12

Within the old covenant, God's character of truthfulness and honesty had been emphasized by repeated inculcations. "*And ye shall not swear by My name falsely*" (Leviticus 19:12). "*If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth*" (Numbers 30:2). "*When thou shalt vow a vow unto the*

*LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee" (Deuteronomy 23:21–23). "Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5). Over the centuries the Jewish religionists had developed all sorts of regulations about oath-taking which were but convenient loopholes and evasive justifications for lying and deceit. Jesus reamed the scribes and Pharisees for their lack of integrity in "swearing by the gold of the temple" (Matt. 23:16–22). In like manner religion through the subsequent centuries has allowed for "little white lies" to be regarded as venial violations which are excusable. Jesus told the Pharisees that they were identified with the devil, who is "the father of lies" (John 8:44), and explained that if we cannot answer a straightforward "Yes" or "No," then *whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil*, it comes from the corruption of men's nature, from passion and vehemence; from a reigning vanity in the mind, and a contempt of sacred things: it comes from that deceitfulness which is in men, *all men are liars*; therefore men use these protestations, because they are distrustful one of another, and think they cannot be believed without them. Christians should, for the credit of their religion, avoid not only that which is in itself evil, but *that which cometh of evil*, and has *the appearance of it*. Within the kingdom of God Jesus Christ is the indwelling Truth (John 14:6), and such Truth sets us free (John 8:32, 36) to manifest the integrity, the honesty, and the reliability of the character of God in our behaviour.*