

Series: From Israel to Everyone: Disciples who Demonstrate God's Presence (a study of Matthew).
Sermon Text: 5:33-37 Integrity (See App for lesson, slides, and to ask questions)

Let's start with a question to help us grasp the weight of what we're talking about today. How were the heavens and earth created in the beginning? God spoke things into existence. This, consequently, elevates the value and importance of words. And in a world where words seem more plentiful than ever, I think this is an immensely important and relevant topic for us. And kids, I'm going to say a few things that I wouldn't recommend you repeat. They're bad examples of things to say. Got it? When I was growing up, we often tried to boost our credibility with a "pinky swear" or saying "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye" or other dramatic nonsense. Adults also use extreme and insincere words to garner attention such as "Can I be honest with you?" (have you not been?) or "I'll be damned if this or that..." (has Jesus not saved you from damnation?). Sometimes we also hedge instead of asking our real question. And this [1993 country song](#) captured another way we exaggerate for effect: "*I see the questions in your eyes; And though I'll make mistakes, I'll never break your heart; I swear, by the moon and the stars in the sky; I'll be there.*" Perhaps it never occurred to you that this stuff displeases God, but one must wonder: "What drives us to pretty up our promises with cosmic guarantees, instead of just giving a simple YES? And why must courts force us to swear on a Bible to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God?" Truth is our instinct to over-promise is often an admission of our insecurity. While we pad our pledges to force belief in a world saturated with deception and deep fakes, Jesus calls us back to a quiet character that needs no theatrical reinforcement. As the embodiment of truth, His arrival and authenticity challenged our verbal games, exposing our exaggerated oaths for what they are: legal loopholes, disguised like digital terms and conditions that are far too convoluted to ever be trusted. His Spirit can relieve us from the exhausting work of managing perceptions by restoring us to a simple kingdom integrity that requires no filler words, dramatic vows, or cheap guarantees like "I swear...to God or on my mother's grave." His kingdom frees us from the pressure to manipulate trust, anchoring us instead in this foundational...

BIG IDEA: Grace empowers us to trade padded promises for unvarnished integrity.

The Sermon on the Mount systematically confronts how human traditions dilute Old Testament laws. In Judaism, for example, they created clever legal loopholes to dodge God's intent if His ways opposed their desires. Notice Christ's pattern of examples: In **verses 21-26**, He explained the 6th commandment isn't just trying to stop murder but to extinguish embers of rage in our hearts. In **verses 27-32**, He

explained the 7th commandment isn't about filing technically compliant divorce papers but resolving lust and objectification in our hearts. In **verses 33-37**, we'll see how He explained the 3rd commandment (not taking the Lord's name in vain), isn't necessarily about tacking on "*damn*" or saying "*Jesus Christ*" with an exclamation point. The command is fundamentally about integrity and promises.

Look how Jesus clarified the 3rd commandment in **verses 33-36**: *"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.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* 1st century folks tried to bolster their credibility like how we add dramatic guarantees to pledges such as swearing to something in heaven or on earth. Christ saw this as a distinction without a difference. **Swearing** on things in either realm doesn't make us an ounce more honest since it all belongs to an attentive Creator. As we've seen, their inflated vows were just clever cover stories to worm out of promises that became inconvenient. Consider these examples Jesus raised later in Matthew 23:16-22: *"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So, whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."* Elaborately crafted formulas, equations and technicalities were piled on to pledges so they could wiggle out of commitments when it suited their selfishness. They claimed that not explicitly using God's name let them off the hook, but our Heavenly Father isn't fooled by legalistic word games and loopholes.

As the original Lawgiver, Jesus exposed their deeply flawed reasoning and a way for us to love God and one another better in **verse 37**: *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.* This made me curious: "Was God's Old Testament standard unclear?" Leviticus 19:12 says, *"You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God."* Numbers 30:2 says, *"If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."* And Deuteronomy 23:21 says, *"If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your*

God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.” God’s intent seems clear--breaking vows dishonors Him and devalues those made in His image. Being known as truth tellers is one way we can display the character of our Father’s family. Think about it...when Christians don’t “say what we mean and mean what we say”, people will doubt the God we claim to represent. Inflated promises and filler words are tools scammers use to sound legit, like those phishing emails that drop famous names and brands to lure us into traps. These methods should never come from the lips of Christ’s ambassadors!

Jesus’ half-brother summarized what God is after in James 5:12, “*But above all, my brothers, 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.*” His advice can obviously preserve our relationships by helping us keep commitments. But when we are insecure in our gospel identity, simple honesty can feel far too risky. The fear of rejection and the urge to manage how people perceive us turns our speech into a performance where we inflate promises, stack oaths, and slide into people-pleasing. Fearing we might disappoint others can lead to over-the-top promises we know deep down we can’t keep: “*I’d absolutely love to help you this week! I’ll definitely be there!*” Or, if we are addicted to approval, we pad our pledges with emotional hyperbole for instant validation: “*I swear I’ll come through, I’m the most trustworthy person you know, right? Say it!*” Those who know me well know that living in one area my entire life has been a blessing and a curse from having deep ties across a wide variety of relationships. I regularly filter requests for my time through the grid of my identity, pastoral role and primary covenants to family and friends. My eyes are constantly being opened to how I’m not always the best person to meet a given need, even if someone believes otherwise. If saying “Yes” keeps me from serving them well and being dependable to my closest people, then loving them well means offering a gracious, direct “No” without elaborate excuses and steering them to someone who can offer more of themselves. But what if we’ve already made too many commitments and realize we can’t deliver? There is grace for that, too! We don’t need to craft a dramatic story to cover our tracks—just simply admit it, apologize and seek forgiveness without making excuses.

Hebrews 6:13 precisely highlights the heart issue Jesus went after: “*For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself.*” If God Himself swore oaths, then making solemn vows are fine. Historically, groups like [the Quakers and Anabaptists have argued](#) against Christians taking a courtroom oath or swearing on a Bible. But theologian John Stott resolved that tension brilliantly (p.102): “*What Jesus emphasized in his teaching was that honest people do not need to resort to oaths; it was not that they should refuse to take an oath if required by some*

external authority to do so.” Just as divorce is sometimes a cover for selfishness, elaborate ***oaths*** can be a form of masking our own dishonesty. In summary, the problem is not making promises, it’s how we: 1) Vainly drag God's name into vows when our character feels too shaky for people to believe us. 2) Say more than “yes” or “no.” 3) Secretly add technicalities to wiggle out of commitments. Now, if this standard of integrity feels a bit daunting or impossible, just wait until we cover Christ’s next invitation to love and bless those who hate us! But remember, we’re not left to obey God’s high standards on our own. His Spirit has been placed within us and in helpers around us! If you're struggling to walk in truth or carry a heavy burden today, please reach out so that we can seek His grace together.

Sunday to Monday Connection: We don't have to make big promises to prove that we're people of integrity. We don't need to swear by heaven, earth, our reputation, or anything else. And that's good news, because God knows we're not going to get it right every time. We will overpromise. We'll say yes when we should have said no. We'll fall short of commitments we've made. But the gospel reminds us that our failures don't have the final word, Jesus does. His grace meets us in our shortcomings, and His Spirit gives us the strength to grow into people whose lives and words can be trusted.

- **Question:** As you step into Monday, take a moment to ask: “Do the people closest to me experience my words as trustworthy? Do I say what I mean and mean what I say?” Maybe there’s a promise you’ve made that needs to be kept, or a commitment you need to honestly revisit.
- **Next Step:** This week, think of one commitment you need to keep, one “yes” you need to honor, or one “no” you need to graciously say. Then, by God's grace, do it. No excuses. No elaborate explanations. Just simple, honest integrity.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to explore what all this might mean for you, please speak with someone you know here or one of our church leaders.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Why do you think people feel the need to use big promises, oaths, or “I swear on/by...” to validate their words? Why are we so frequently tempted to hedge our language, exaggerate details, or add qualifiers (e.g., “To be completely honest...”) when making promises? What fear or insecurity drives that impulse? How might it look to live as one who’s simple “Yes” or “No” is completely trusted?
2. How does a lack of simple truth-telling show up in people-pleasing, such as saying “Yes” to commitments we know we cannot fulfill rather than giving a clean, gracious “No”?
3. Jesus suggests that needing elaborate promises reveals an underlying culture of dishonesty. Where have you seen subtle, culturally accepted half-truths slowly erode trust in families, workplaces, or church communities?
4. This week, pay close attention to what you say and remove phrases designed to artificially inflate your credibility (e.g., “I promise,” “Swear to God,” “If I’m being honest”). Let your statements stand on simple, plain accuracy.
5. Identify one promise you made, no matter how small, that you have been delaying, hedging on or quietly hoping the other person forgets. Fulfill it completely this week or contact them to offer an honest, unvarnished resolution.

6. The next time you are asked to take on a task or obligation you cannot faithfully fulfill, give a direct, polite, and honest “No” without manufacturing elaborate excuses or white lies to protect your image.

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [Article](#): Failure Happens Slowly Before It Happens Suddenly
- Bible Project - Gospel of the Kingdom [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Heaven and Earth [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Temple [Videos](#).
- Bible Project – Day of the Lord [Podcast episodes](#).

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Summary:** “Jesus’ comments about speech and swearing appear to be a deepening of the third commandment, not to take the Lord’s name in vain. Most things people regularly swore by in the casual speech of his day could be traced back to God. Better think before you speak, mean what you say, and learn the lesson that, in speaking, less is often more. Extra words, especially ‘strong’ ones, call into question the speaker’s basic truthfulness. If you need to add them, maybe we can’t trust you at all. Throughout this chapter, Jesus is not just giving moral commands. He is unveiling a whole new way of being human. No wonder it looks strange. But Jesus himself pioneered it and invites us to follow.” (Wright, 49)
- **Oaths in Jewish History:** “Jesus addresses a popular abuse of oaths in his day. To protect the sanctity of the divine name against inadvertent oath-breaking, common Jewish practice introduced kinnuyim, surrogate objects by which to swear (Vermes 1993: 34–35). Some people apparently thought it harmless to deceive if they swore oaths by something like their right hand (t. Ned. 1:1; cf. its use in agreements, e.g., Jos. War 2.451). Others took all oaths more seriously, but specifically warned against using God’s name lest if one break the oath one profane God’s name (Philo Spec. 2.4–5; cf. 1 Enoch 69:13–16; Pesiq. R. 22:6); sometimes vows could not be fulfilled (m. Ned. 3:1). Jewish teachers had to arbitrate which oaths were actually binding as allusions to God’s name (m. Shebu. 4:13; cf. CD 15.1–5; Smith 1951: 136). The further removed the oath was from the actual name of God, the less danger they faced for violating it (Schiffman 1983: 137–38; Sanders 1990: 53–54). Some later teachers had to insist that all roundabout substitutes for vows were equivalent to vows (m. Ned. 1:1; Nazir 1:1). Sages undoubtedly had to evaluate vows’ validity frequently because they had acquired the role of canceling bad vows (e.g., t. Pisha 2:16), extending an Old Testament privilege accorded male guardians of unattached women (Num 30:3–15). Thus people swore by heaven and earth (many cite Philo Spec. 2.5; m. Shebu. 4:13), Jerusalem (many cite m. Ned. 1:3; others in Lachs 1987: 102), one’s head (m. Sanh. 3:2), God’s throne (Apoc. Mos. 19.2) and the temple service (Sifre Deut. 1.3.2). Jesus teaches

that all oaths invoke God's witness equally. Just as heaven, earth (Is 66:1–2), and Jerusalem (Ps 48:2; Mt 4:5; 27:53) belong to God (5:34–35), so do the hairs on one's head (5:36; cf. 10:30); one has no genuine control over their aging (cf. 6:27; Pub. Syr. 215). (The assumption would have been that hair was black and turned white with age)." (Keener, 194-195)

- **Oaths are unnecessary:** "Later, Jesus will return to the topic of oaths and clarify that certain practices of taking oaths border on the arbitrary (23:16–22). Philo, a Jewish contemporary, illuminates this tendency when he speaks of the 'evil habit of swearing incessantly and thoughtlessly about ordinary matters where there is nothing at all in dispute' (Decalogue 92). In 5:33–37 Jesus narrows his teaching from addressing the importance of fulfilling vows made to God to prohibiting oaths entirely. This may seem to contradict the Old Testament, but since making oaths to the Lord was a voluntary practice, Jesus is not contravening Old Testament teaching. Instead, he likely addresses current excesses in oath making by calling his followers to a stricter practice of the Torah." (Brown, 60)
- **Truth telling, not oath avoiding:** "Avoiding oaths is thus inadequate; the issue is telling the truth because God witnesses every word one speaks. Human cultures developed oaths because people could not trust their neighbors without calling an avenging deity to witness; but those who recognize that God witnesses every word must speak and act from integrity of heart that transcends such formalities. Herod Antipas trapped himself by a foolish oath (14:7), people cheat their parents by wrongful vows of dedication (15:5), and Peter betrayed Jesus with false oaths (26:72, 74). Jesus, however, avoided formal oaths. Even when he made a vow of abstinence (26:29)—vows were normally confirmed with an appeal to the deity—he swore only by affirming, 'I tell you.' When the high priest 'adjured' him, that is, put him under oath, he responded, 'You said it' (26:64; see Gundry 1982: 93; Brant 1996: 19). Although his followers continued to call on God to witness the truth of some of their statements, apparently taking his words as rhetorical overstatement (e.g., Rom 1:9; 9:1; Gal 1:20), they seem to have refrained from more overt oaths (2 Cor 1:17, whose 'yes, yes ... no, no' probably reflects this Jesus tradition; Jas 5:12, also reflecting this Jesus tradition). Oaths that invite penalties on oneself for violating them (cf. today's 'Cross my heart and hope to die') are not necessary for people of truth." (Keener, 195)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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