

AS GOOD AS YOUR WORD

MATTHEW 5:33-37

A car accident occurred in a small town. A crowd surrounded the victim so that a newspaper reporter couldn't manage to get close enough to see him. He hit upon an idea. "I'm the father of the victim!" he cried. "Please let me through." The crowd let him pass so he was able to get right up to the scene of the accident and discover, to his embarrassment, that the victim was a donkey.

Our culture seems to have trouble telling the truth. We seem to be willing to lie in order to get what works to our advantage.

The Scripture passage today reminds Christians that we are only as good as our word. When you tell someone you will do something, you do it. If you make a promise, you keep it.

Remember that Jesus said that Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13-16). That includes even our words. He also said that a Christian's righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

That's amazing when we think that the Pharisees considered themselves to be the most righteous of all people. In fact, from all outward appearances, they were. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were highly respected and looked up to as models of religiosity.

But Jesus wasn't talking only about conduct, even though that's what the Pharisees based everything on. And our conduct is very important. Jesus is emphasizing that our conduct comes from what we are on the inside—on whose we are in our hearts.

We all know what an oxymoron is—it's a contradiction in terms. For instance: parting is such sweet sorrow; she's pretty ugly; he's being deliberately thoughtless; or, I'm on a working vacation.

Let me add another—that person is a bad Christian. I know we sometimes use an oxymoron to make a point—but in terms of a Christian's character, we must avoid such a contradiction as, "He's a bad Christian."

To be a Christian means that all times our conduct reflects Jesus Christ, and that in every situation and transaction our word is true.

In the character and conduct of a Christian Jesus said that murder always begins with anger in the heart. And that the act of adultery had its beginning with lust in the heart.

It's what we are inside that directs our thoughts and actions. Jesus, responding to divorce practices of His day, called on Christians to have a higher standard than the worlds.

We catalog sins—murder, adultery and divorce, these are serious sins. So now why is Jesus talking about something not as serious? The answer, of course, is that everything that a Christian does is important because of how it affects others.

If everyone in the world were a Christian, then most of the problems we struggle with would simply disappear. No wars or poverty; we'd all get along with our neighbors, and so on. But the fact is most of the world is not Christian. So how are people supposed to become Christian? One of the ways is that they observe us. In fact the most potent evangelistic tool we have today is the Christian lives we live. We are being watched; therefore everything we do is very important

If there is anything that stands out in Jesus' teachings, it is that Christians are different from the rest of the world—not different looking, but different acting.

When other people see how we act toward one another, how we treat our neighbors, how we respond to different situations, how we drive our cars, treat our bosses, put in an honest day's work, go the second mile, honor our government, and on and on—it should be obvious that we are different.

But be careful about becoming legalistic about your goodness. We tend to catalog sin, don't we! "This is holy and that's worldly." The problem is that our definition of holiness and worldliness are far removed from what the Bible says.

For instance—some Christians wouldn't be caught dead going to a casino to play a slot machine. And I agree with that, I don't think we Christians need to be supporting the gambling industry.

And I certainly don't think it helps our Christian witness when non-Christians observe Christians going into a casino. But does the passive act of not going to a casino make someone holy?

You may think so. But what if that same Christian is filled with pride because of it. What if he feels superior because he is so holy. What if he has lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, or he's a gossip or is filled with envy or covetousness?

Jesus has already made it clear that God's standard is absolute holiness. Today's text is about

promises. Do you keep all your promises? Of course not! Even this simple task is impossible.

If we could keep our promises, wouldn't we have done so by now? We kick ourself whenever we've told someone something, but don't do it, and promise ourselves to do better. Only to do it again! In ourselves, absolute holiness is impossible!

The point Jesus is making throughout His sermon is that He makes us holy. And to be effective Christians we must surrender ourselves completely to Him. We must allow Him to express His life through us.

You can know that you are trying to be holy if you ever say something like this, or even think it, "I go to church, I tithe, and I try to live a good life. So why is this happening to me?"

We can become pretty puffed up thinking we're living a really good life so we must be holy. Today Jesus is emphasizing the importance of keeping our word. For a Christian, we are only as good as our word.

1. The times in which we live.

Matthew 5:33 - 37 (NIV) 33"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' 34But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; (v. 37). That sounds pretty basic and simple. But the fact is, it's difficult!

We live in a deceitful society. It seems our whole society is largely built on lies and manufactured "truth." We shade the truth. We cheat. We exaggerate. We misrepresent tax deductions. We make promises we have no intention of keeping.

We make up excuses. We betray confidences. And it is all just a matter of normal, everyday living. We tell 'little white lies' which are really black. A 'half truth' is a whole lie.

Leonard Sweet, in his Soul Cafe newsletter, included this list of "Top 10 Liars' Lies":

10. We'll stay only five minutes.
9. This will be a short meeting.
8. I'll respect you in the morning.
7. The check is in the mail.

6. I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you.
5. This hurts me more than it hurts you.
4. Your money will be cheerfully refunded.
3. We service what we sell.
2. Your table will be ready in just a minute.
1. I'll start exercising (dieting, forgiving...) tomorrow.

This is who we are today, and really don't think anything of it. It was the same in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day promises were made with an oath.

"I swear on my mother's grave to repay you 20 chickens for the 1 lamb." The Jews divided oaths into two classes—those that were absolutely binding and those that were not (read 23:16-22).

According to their traditions, when making an oath, God's name, or certain other things were sacred, therefore were binding, and God was a partner in the transaction.

So you could make a promise by heaven, by the earth, by the Temple or the altar in the Temple, by the hairs on your head, or by anything else you thought would impress those you wanted to take advantage of. If you reneged, it was okay because you didn't make an oath on a sacred thing.

Historically, Quakers have resisted being sworn in before testifying in court. Their rationale is simple. If they have to promise to be honest for the next few minutes, the obvious implication is that they are dishonest the rest of the time. And if such is the case, why should anyone trust the oath they make?

But Jesus is not prohibiting those. God himself made oaths to the Israelites. Paul also bound his word with oaths. Jesus is saying, "Christian . . .

2. Your word is your bond.

The word "oath" seems rather out of date today. We just don't talk that way. We think of an oath as something done in a courtroom or when someone is sworn into office, as Paul Kirk Jr. was this last week to take the place of Sen. Edward Kennedy.

God never had any standard lower than absolute truthfulness—whether it's in a business dealing or a simple promise between friends. Actually, to make a promise and not keep it is lying. "I'll call you right back." "I'll stop by tomorrow," but don't. The religious leaders considered it completely acceptable as long as the promise wasn't in the name of a sacred thing. But no matter what you call it, or the words you use, Jesus says that God is always a partner in any and every transaction. We can't keep Him out of it. He is already there (vv. 34-35).

Heaven is God's throne; the earth is His footstool; Jerusalem is the city of God; and even the real color of the hair on your head is determined by God, not you.

You cannot divide your life into compartments—some of which God is involved and not in others.

There cannot be a “holy” language in the church and another kind at the bank, the factory, the garage, or wherever. There cannot be one standard of conduct in the church and another kind in the business world.

The fact is that God doesn't have to be invited into certain aspects of our lives—He is just there. You cannot keep Him out of those parts of your life that you'd rather keep secret. God is everywhere, and in every activity.

For a Christian it boils down to this, “Simply let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no,’ ‘no.” (v. 37). Everything we say in the course of our daily lives should be truthful, unadorned, and unqualified as to its truthfulness.

A young Christian woman was looking for summer employment. She had two job possibilities. One she wanted very much and the other she didn't, but would take it as a second choice.

As you probably figured out, the second-choice job came up first, and she was offered that job. She wanted to hold out for the other, but she didn't know if the other was going to come. So she went ahead and accepted it for her summer employment.

A few days later, as you would also expect, the other job became available to her. She wanted to quit the first job very much and go to the second. So she went to her father for advice.

She said, “Dad, I have a problem.” And she told him her dilemma. He looked her in the eye and said, “Did you take the first job?” She said, “Yes.” “Did you promise you would work there this summer?” She said, “Yes.” He then said, “Then why are we having this conversation?”

That father helped his daughter to learn that a Christian lives a life of integrity. God hears not only the words we speak in His name, He hears all our words.

There is no such thing as a kind of speech that evades God. God considers every promise you make as sacred, whether or not His name is used as part of the promise.

Application:

To live in this world means you are going to have to sign contracts—credit cards, buy a house, a car—it's good business sense. But much more than that, a Christian is going to be true to his word no matter what. That you are a Christian is the real guarantee—and your witness.

When we allow Christ to live through us, it can then be said of us what Jesus said about Nathanael in John 1:47: “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”