

A Word Concerning Character # 9

Matthew 5: 33-37

As I began to study this passage, initially it was one of the most difficult to discern that I have studied in quite some time. I realized that the reason for my difficulty was directly related to my approach. The majority of commentaries on this passage approach it from the angle of words we speak, our communication. That is clearly revealed in the text, but there is an application that goes much deeper than mere words we speak. I realized that the words men speak are actually a reflection of the heart. People eventually speak what they feel. [Luke 6:45 – A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.](#)

I had always considered this a passage that dealt with cursing and swearing, and I suppose there is application for that, but it really deals with the character of men, that inner being that eventually is revealed as we speak. In His continuation of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus deals with the motives of humanity. I want to examine those [motives](#) as we consider: [A Word Concerning Character](#).

I. The Perception of the Law (33) – [Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:](#) As with previous points of His message, Jesus immediately deals with that which they had been taught, that which had been handed down for generations. His emphasis here is in regard to the oaths that men take. This speaks of what we would expect: *a pledge or promise given in order to add emphasis and validity to words spoken or promises made.*

A. The Tradition of an Oath – This is something that they were all familiar with, and when handled properly, it was in order. In fact, the Lord established the oath. There are many references to an oath in Scripture. [Gen.21:23-24 – Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned. \[24\] And Abraham said, I will swear. 2 Chron.15:15 – And all Judah rejoiced at the oath: for they had sworn with all their heart, and sought him with their whole desire; and he was found of them: and the Lord gave them rest round about. Gal.1:20 – Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.](#) Jesus Himself used a form of an oath many times as He said, [Verily, verily.](#)

- Taking an oath is something we are all familiar with, even if we have never been called upon to actually take an oath. The oath is used as witnesses prepare to testify in court;

politicians place their hand upon the Bible as they take their oath of service. It began thousands of years ago, recorded in Scripture, and the oath remains today.

B. The Corruption of the Oath – **Thou shalt not forswear thyself.** Jesus speaks of their knowledge of the oath and the corruption that is often associated with an oath. They were not to forswear as they made an oath, literally *swear falsely, or tell a known lie under an oath*. There were those who used the oath in an effort to validate their claims, knowing what they were claiming was false. [Lev.19:12 – And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.](#)

- Sadly that continues today. Many will lie under oath. There are those who appear to be genuine and sincere, and yet they are just manipulative. A man's word used to be his bond. In days gone by, for the most part you could count on a promise to be fulfilled. Those days are no more. Now if you desire to borrow money or enter a contract, there is much more required than a promise of fulfilling your obligation.

C. The Obligation to the Oath – **but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:** Even those who were corrupt would admit that one was expected to keep his word and fulfill his obligations, particularly to the Lord. Many oaths in Jesus' day were made in the name of the Lord, and naturally the Lord took those oaths very seriously. He fully expected men to keep their promise unto Him. [Num.30:2 – 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.](#)

- Many today likely ignore the seriousness of a vow and the obligation to keep it, but it is a serious thing to make a commitment unto the Lord or to another in His name. We are obligated to fulfill our obligations. This has caused great damage to the modern church. Many who claim association to the church and a relationship with the Lord do not fulfill their obligations. [Eccles.5:4-5 – When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. \[5\] Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.](#)

I. The Perception of the Law (33)

II. The Proclamation of the Lord (34-36) – As He has done previously, Jesus offers wisdom and direction concerning that which they have heard and now practice. Consider:

A. The Caution (34a) – **But I say unto you, Swear not at all;** Jesus is not speaking contrary to Scripture or seeking to present the law of God in a negative or inferior light. We need to understand the context in which He spoke. In that day many were making vows and oaths, even though they had no intention of keeping them. In fact, as we will see in a moment, some regarded an oath in the name of the Lord a serious matter, so they began to swear in the name of other things. Jesus is revealing that this has gotten out of hand. They needed to be people of integrity and keep their word. If they had no intention of keeping their word, there was no need to take an oath.

- This truth has not changed. There is a great lack of integrity and accountability in our day. We need to sense the severity and accountability of our commitments and strive to keep them if we enter into that commitment. If we know we are unwilling or unable to keep our word, then there is no need to give it in the first place.

B. The Application (34b-36) – As I mentioned, they were guilty of making oaths in the name of other things rather than in the name of the Lord. They likely lacked genuine commitment, fearing to make an oath in the name of the Lord, but wanted to appear sincere. Jesus makes application to the other oaths and offers a reminder that regardless of the oath, it is in essence made unto the Lord. He speaks of:

1. A Moral Oath (34b) – **But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:** Some were unwilling to swear by the Lord, but they would swear by heaven. Apparently they wanted to appear spiritual, or in good moral standing. Jesus reminded them that there was really no difference because heaven contained God's throne.

- Have we not met those who seek to appear moral and upright, but really they are deceptive and manipulative. They seek to use the appearance of morality to further their greed and immoral desires.

2. A Material Oath (35a) – **Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool:** Some swore by the earth. This appears to make reference to their material goods and gain. They presented themselves as one who had the means to support their endeavor. They may have enjoyed great prosperity and used that as a means to get what they wanted, but in reality it all belonged to the Lord. The earth is His footstool. Whatever they enjoyed was a blessing from the Lord.

- Many seek to use their wealth and possessions as a means of influence and yet never give God the praise for His blessing in their life. **Rom.14:6 – He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth,**

eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

3. A Positional Oath (35b) – *neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.* Jesus warns of those who swear by Jerusalem. This appears to be in reference to the pride and arrogance of some. They seemed to believe that their position in Jerusalem ought to bear them special privilege. Yet again, whether they realized it or not, it all belonged to the Lord. Jerusalem was His city. All that the people who lived there enjoyed was a blessing from the good hand of God. Their dwelling in Jerusalem afforded them no special privilege in being deceptive in the eyes of God. They too were expected to live according to His Word.

- Have we not met those who feel they deserve special treatment or are above the law in some instances simply because of their heritage and social position? God is no respecter of persons and expects all to live holy and above reproach.

4. A Personal Oath (36) – *Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.* To me this is the most troubling and arrogant of all. Jesus speaks of those who swear, and even depend, solely upon themselves. They feel as if they have acquired all they possess by themselves and they don't need the help of another. They feel as if their ability and worth should be all that is needed.

- I am sure that we all know some like this. They refuse to acknowledge God, or anyone else, in regard to their lives and possessions. They assume they are their own man and have acquired it all by their own sweat, hard work, and wisdom. What they fail to realize is that God has given them all that ability. Without Him they could do nothing. They feel as if they are the one in control, but in reality they are no less dependent upon the Lord than any other.

I. The Perception of the Law (33)

II. The Proclamation of the Lord (34-36)

III. The Principle for Life (37) – As Jesus closes out His thoughts; He reveals the basis for life in regard to our communication which reveals our character. We find that it:

A. Involves Honesty – **But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.** Simply we are to be honest in our communication. We are to say what we mean and mean what we say. There should be no deception or dishonesty in our communication.

B. Involves Integrity – We must be willing to “call it like we see it.” We must be willing to stand for truth and oppose that which is not right. Once we have made a determination as to where we stand, based on the Word of God, we must continue to stand. Folks should know where we stand and know that we will continue to stand. We cannot stand for truth among the church and then be unwilling to stand when confronted among the world.

- That is a quality that I admire even in those with whom I disagree. I may not admire their stand or position, but I admire those who stand for what they believe wherever they are. There should be no question where we stand. Those who know us should have confidence in us to remain steadfast regarding our convictions.

C. Involves Purity (37b) – **for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.** Jesus offers a simple, profound truth that we need to be reminded of. When we stray from the will and ways of God, we have given in to the influence of evil. There is a great need for those who seek a pure and upright life. All of life should be based upon the Word of God and in accordance to it. If God commands us to do it, we should obey. If He warns us to avoid something, we must be willing to refrain from that. If we seek to live according to the Word and please Him in all we do, we will enjoy a life of victory and abundance!

Certainly we need to be people of honesty and integrity in regard to our words and commitment, but if we are to fulfill our obligations and make wise decisions, we must have our hearts right with God. As long as we are living in the will of God, seeking His wisdom in all we do, these things will take care of themselves.

As I pondered this passage, I had a humbling and convicting thought. What if the Lord were to reveal the inner most desires our heart for all to see? What if He were to display them upon the wall? What would our hearts reveal? Do we really desire to live for the Lord and seek to do right by all men? I am sure that we all could draw closer to the Lord and have more concern for those around us. If your life is not what it should be, Jesus is the only One who can make it what it should be. Come to Him for the need in your life.