

“People of Our Word”

Introduction: Recently in the news—I’m sure you’ve seen it—is a report that various hosts for the Fox News networks endorsed what they knew to be false claims asserting that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen. The chairman of the board of the media empire that owns Fox, Rupert Murdoch, acknowledged this past week that he knew that lying by these hosts had been going on but that he did nothing to stop it. What caught my attention as I read this report was that Murdoch made his acknowledgement “under oath.” Which means that he had to vow to be telling the truth in order to prove that there were those who had lied. It kind of makes your head spin!

Oath making is not just a modern concept but was a significant part the world in which Jesus lived. Oaths were made in order to ensure honesty, to guard against making a vow and then breaking it, to protect the culture from descending into chaos. But there were many who, as Scott McKnight puts it, were “fiddling with honesty,” who were trying to come up with various ways to get around vows and oaths they had made. There is no place, Jesus asserts, for such fiddling! For those who hear his call in the Sermon on the Mount to be salt and light in our world, honesty—being people of our word—is the next virtue he has us consider.

I. You have heard it said...

A. Again, in this section of the Sermon, Jesus begins discussion of his topic of choice by setting up a contrast between what was being taught by the religious leaders, and what he had come to teach:

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.”

This statement by Jesus is actually a summary of a number of OT texts on the topic of oath making. God allowed his people to make vows using his name as a way to reinforce the commitment they were making, but once vows were made, they needed to be kept. This was codified in the third commandment: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Ex. 20:7). We “misuse” the name of God when we don’t keep our word, when we break a promise after using his name to affirm: “of course we’ll keep that promise.”

B. Here are a few more:

“When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said” (Nu. 31:3).

“Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth” (Deut. 23:23).

C. What had happened over time, and it probably shouldn’t surprise us, was a search for loopholes, for a way to let people off the hook once a vow had been made. To that end, the rabbis actually developed a highly structured hierarchy of oaths, ultimately declaring that in the end, what the Mosaic Law really meant was that only oaths made in God’s name were binding. So, a person could swear by what were thought to be less sacred things than God’s name, like heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or even one’s head (vv. 34-36), making people believe you were going to do something, and

then backing out without repercussions. It was kind of like making a promise with your fingers crossed behind your back.

II. But I tell you...

A. Jesus confronts this fiddling with oath-making, and takes it deeper, going right to the heart of the matter, the heart that reveals God is involved and present in everything:

But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King [Jesus]. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

In other words, whether or not God is named in an oath is irrelevant, for God is everywhere. All promises are sacred since they're all made in his presence. And then Jesus serves up the clincher: "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one," who, elsewhere, Jesus identifies, not surprisingly, as "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44).

B. At its core, such verbal trickery, such fiddling with honesty, is an attempt to manipulate another person through deception, which is evil. Instead, urges Jesus, simply be a people who speak the truth and keep your word.

Illustration: Nicky Gumbel tells the story of a young clerk in a department store in London called Selfridges. One day, when the owner of the store, Gordon Selfridge, was there the phone rang and the clerk answered it. The caller wanted to speak with Selfridge but he told the clerk to tell the caller that he was out. Instead, the clerk handed the phone to Selfridge and said, "Tell him yourself!" Selfridge took the call but was later furious at his clerk. In response, the clerk said, "If I can lie for you, I can lie to you." From that point on, the clerk became one of Selfridge's most trusted employees.

I was also reminded of a conversation I had with Jud Reis about the agreement his employer at the time, Gorton's, has with McDonalds. Beginning back in the 1960's, Gorton's, with the exception of just a few years, has supplied McDonalds with the fish for all of its fish sandwiches. More remarkable is that there was never a contract drawn up, only a handshake. Rather than trying to take advantage of such a seemingly loose arrangement, each company goes the extra mile to make sure the needs of the other are being met.

C. A couple more issues:

1. Should we not place our hand on a Bible and take an oath when appearing as a witness in a court of law? Some Christian traditions hold that we shouldn't. But, while Jesus is saying that we shouldn't need to resort to oaths, it doesn't mean we can't choose to make them when required by an external authority or the law of the land. Jesus himself responded to the high priest when put under oath at his trial (Ma. 26:63f).

2. We also hear that God makes oaths. As we read in Hebrews: "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath." This oath takes us back to God's promise to Abraham to bless him and his descendants, blessing all nations of the earth through his offspring (Jesus; Heb. 6:17; Ge. 22:16-18). God's making an oath was not because *he* lacked credibility; it was to help establish and confirm *our* faith in his trustworthiness.

III. Truth on the Cross

A. I don't have to tell you that we live in a world filled with deception and dishonesty. I was speaking to a young woman this past week who is pursuing her law degree and focusing on corporate litigation. I asked her why and she explained that so many contracts are being broken these days that it should provide her with an endless supply of work! So, how do we get to a place where we can live more and more as people of our word, where our yes can be yes, and our no can be no?

B. It begins with the cross, where the truth about us is revealed and where our truth telling begins. We tell the truth by being honest about who we are, not hiding "among the trees of the garden" like our ancestors did (Ge. 3:8). We tell the truth by confessing our sin, by continuing to identify the various idols in our lives, and by receiving the gift of forgiveness and new life that God has for us. The more our hearts are softened by, and live within, the love Jesus has for us, the less we will feel a need to get our own way, to deceive or manipulate others, or to break our promises, and the more we will seek to live honestly, as people of our word, who desire to reveal and reflect the goodness and beauty of our faithful and promise-keeping God.