

The Swearing of Oaths

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2023

Preacher: Ray Kelly

[0 : 00] We're still in Matthew 5. Matthew 5 seems to be taking us a long time, but it is the longest recorded sermon of Jesus to his disciples, which means he actually wrote it to us.

And that should make us take particular note of it and it's why I'm not rushing through it, though I do suspect that next week we will complete it. And today we're going to deal with the whole subject of the swearing of oaths.

And I thought that will only take a few minutes to get through that and we'll move on. And then I got to grips with it and it turned out to be a lot more interesting than I first thought it would be. And one of the reasons for that is because in our society we have a very light hold on the idea of swearing an oath.

And we say you will find if you're in any workplace, particularly a workplace full of men, that they will swear oaths on a regular basis, on an endeavour to make you think they're telling you the truth.

And they will kind of go, I swear to God that's true, or I swear on my mother's life or whatever. And they'll say these things very, very lightly, not realising the depth of what they're saying, which is actually you're swearing to forfeit your own life or you're swearing to forfeit your mother's life or your child's life or whatever.

[1 : 27] However, and if God held us to account for all those oaths, as we have seen him do, there would be people dropping dead all over the place.

However, we will just quickly review, I'm not reviewing quite as much as I have done in previous times, but remember the saying that we said, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

In the whole of this chapter so far, Jesus has taken the law and said it's not good enough for it to be just law, a sort of clipboard with a tick sheet on it that you can tick out.

Well, I did that one, I did that one, I did that one. Oops, start again, I missed one. The whole, sorry, I'm standing in your way, but I've only got a short way I can go.

What Jesus was saying to them, this is not good enough to achieve the righteousness that would get you into heaven. You need to be more righteous than the Pharisees.

[2 : 24] And if you're going to be more righteous than the Pharisees, what needs to happen is Jeremiah 31, verse 31 needs to come to pass in your life, which is that the law of God becomes written on your heart so that everything that proceeds out of you, remember that other scripture that says it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but it's what comes out of a man's mouth that defiles him.

And so we need to pursue Jesus to the point where everything that comes out of our hearts is righteous. And of course, none of us are yet there, but he has promised us that eternally we will be there.

He is going to take this flesh, this corruption, and turn it into incorruption. He's going to take this mortality and turn it into immortality. So we looked at murder and Jesus said, just thinking about murder is wrong.

You're committing murder in your heart when you do that. Similarly with adultery. And he said it's better for you to be maimed than to be locked into this sin. Better that you lose your right hand or your eye.

He was, quite logically, he carried that through to the subject of divorce. And he said, you know, your hearts, you have this, we discussed this, didn't we?

[3 : 49] They have a very high view of the law and of marriage, but a very low view of women. And so there was this ridiculous embracing of the whole thing where it was a bit of a frippery.

If your wife failed to prepare you a nice meal or burnt your food or spoke discourteously to you, probably because you deserved it, you could divorce her. So Jesus sided completely with not the school of Hillel, which is where that came from, but the school of Shammai, which said marriage is for life.

And the only reason for divorce is marital unfaithfulness. So he struck a very hard line with them, not to make them strive to obey the law, but for them to seek the fruit of the spirit in their hearts.

And remember, I say we said, but I said, you don't see apple trees straining to produce apples. You know, they just produce apples because apples is in them somewhere.

Apples is, apples are in them somewhere. So what we're now going to see, he's going to continue this opposition to the religious leadership of the Jews when he takes on this subject of oaths.

[5 : 07] It was the religious Jews that had provided them with these dichotomies. You know, you can get divorced anytime you like. No, you can't, says Jesus. So it was Jesus that set himself against the teaching of the rabbis who had kind of manipulated the law to suit themselves.

And so we get to this verse 33, and we're only going to do verses 33 to 37. I've put it up on the screen if you want to read it from the screen. But it says this.

Again, let me just make sure I'm reading from the right chapter. No, I'm not. Yes, I am. Right. Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, you shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.

Right. That's what you've heard. But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

Nor shall you make no oath by your head, nor shall you make no oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or one black. But let your statement be yes, yes, or no, no.

[6 : 18] Anything beyond this is of evil. And actually, where it says it's of evil, it's of the evil one. In other words, it's Satan's influence over you.

So, this is, I thought this would be really quick to go through, and then I got somewhat entangled about just thinking along the lines of, I know a lot of Christians who won't take an oath.

Right? The Bible says you shouldn't take an oath. Jesus said, I say to you, don't take an oath. I'm going to venture to say, this does not mean that. There are lots of oaths that it's perfectly legitimate to take.

For instance, your oaths that you take at the marriage altar, when you vow to stay with your spouse for the whole of your life, in sickness and in health, in poverty and disaster and everything else, you're going to be there to the end, and the only thing that's going to separate you is death.

That's an oath. And it's a perfectly legitimate oath to take, as long as you keep it. But, of course, keeping oaths is where this society has kind of cast aside the importance of keeping oaths.

[7 : 38] If you say it, do it. So, there are legitimate oaths you can take. The Nazarite vow, which some Orthodox Jews will still take.

It's a legitimate oath. It's an oath to God that you will serve him for a period of time, and you won't cut your hair, and so on and so on. So, there are legitimate oaths that you can take.

If you turn to Leviticus 19. Now, Leviticus 19 is what's being quoted here.

And it's important for us to get the context of Leviticus 19 as it is given.

And this is one of the reasons I have confidence that Jesus is not talking about perfectly legitimate oaths that you can take. And we'll talk a little bit about why you take oaths in the first place.

[8 : 48] If you're in court, for instance, and you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God. How did that come in and why do we do that?

So, verse 19 says, I must have got the wrong verse here.

Sorry, it's verse 9. Chapter 19, verse 9. I said 19, didn't I? So, verse 19. Now, when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap every corner of the field, nor shall you gather...

No, I've got it wrong. So, let's read verse 11 because it's all connected with honesty.

You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie one to another. You shall not swear falsely by my name, so as to profane the name of your God, I am the Lord.

[9 : 54] Now, one of the places that Jesus goes further than this law goes, this law basically says don't swear falsely by my name.

What Jesus goes on to explain, and we'll cover it in a moment, is when you swear an oath, there's nothing you can swear on that's outside the reach of God anyway.

I'll just take one quick example, and we'll return to it in a moment. You can't even swear by the hairs on your own head, because they're not yours. He made them. And your life belongs to him.

It's one of the reasons Christians don't believe in suicide. No, it's not my life, this. It's his. And I walk this earth until he decides otherwise.

So, there's nothing you can swear on that's outside the reaches of God. God takes a deep interest in what we say and what we promise, and how we honour our words.

[10 : 59] Sharon and I, some few years back now, we had some very good friends. And one of the things that, in the end, broke the friendship, and certainly broke us, was that these good and trusted friends lied to us.

And in fairness to them, they were trying to spare our feelings. But when I later said, look, what you said on that day was not true. They erupted and got very indignant.

However, it was the truth. It was the truth that they didn't tell the truth. So, it is important. It's one of, we read in the Bible that God's word is truth.

We read in Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 1, be imitators of God. So, in imitating God, our word must also be truth.

And sometimes the truth is very hard to tell. Particularly as the Bible's instruction says, speak the truth in love. The truth is not a baseball bat to beat people over the head with.

[12 : 13] The truth is something that needs to be imparted with love. And that's sometimes, it's very hard sometimes to find the words. To say to somebody something that is honest and truthful, particularly if it's critical of something they've done.

And to do that in a loving way. It's quite easy to go, oh, well, you shouldn't be doing that anyway. But it's much harder to find the time to sit down and very gently say, what you're doing is going to put a wedge between you and God that you may not be able to climb out of.

And you really need to search your heart as to whether this is something you should be doing. And the Bible's quite clear, you shouldn't be doing it. But these things need to be dealt with in a loving way.

Now one of the reasons I'm convinced that there are legitimate oaths is, if you look at Numbers, and the notes have got another reference, but Numbers 30 verse 2.

Now, simply says, if a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word, he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

[13 : 43] Now, I'm going to venture to suggest that there are very few things that you can confidently make that kind of vow on, simply because you're not necessarily in control of all the outcomes.

You know, I promise you I'll be there at 10 o'clock. You don't know about the traffic, you don't know about the weather, you don't know if your car's going to break down. You can't vow to be somewhere when you're not in control of all the variables.

So it's far better not to vow. It's far better to say, I'll do my best. What we've just read, and you can read it also in Deuteronomy 23 verses 21 and 23, that if you're going to vow something, make sure it's something where you are in control.

Now, if you think of the Nazarite vow, for example, a man can make a Nazarite vow, which involves not cutting your hair, not drinking alcohol and doing a few other things. They're all things that are under your control.

You can do all of those things. So it's a safe vow to make as long as you intend to carry it through. But there are lots of vows people make that are not safe.

[15 : 02] But beyond all of this, this scripture goes deeper than that again. It's saying that you can't use a vow to somehow give yourself some credibility that you're honest.

You know, if I say, I'm going to give you 100 quid, that's one thing. If I say, look, I'm really serious about this.

I vow on my mother's life I'm going to give you 100 quid. You are not necessarily in full control of whether you'll still have 100 quid when it comes due. And you're making a vow based on something you don't really know for sure.

You're also making a vow that's completely unnecessary because your word should be the truth. I think we've covered that. Let's move on.

We've got this example of God swearing an oath. And because of Ephesians 5 and verse 1, I think we should take example from the way God swears an oath.

[16 : 16] And it's referred to in Hebrews chapter 6. If you want to turn there. Hebrews chapter 6.

And verse 13. The writer to Hebrews says, So when God swore, he swore by himself, saying, I will surely bless you and will surely multiply you.

And so having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. So when God swore, he swore by himself, because there was nothing greater to swear by.

And we can read that in Genesis 22, if you want to turn there. And we can see the occasion of this oath.

Now it's important to note that God had already had dealings with Abraham at this point. He'd had dealings with Abraham in chapter 15, where he had cut the covenant with Abraham.

[17 : 43] And in that covenant, he had sworn that Abraham would have a son. And so we rejoin the account in chapter 22, when he's had that son.

And so he's already had this experience of God honouring his word. Because when you think that when he was told he would have a son, I think it was about 15 or 20 years or something, before he actually had a son.

So he waited all that time, knowing that his wife was barren, tried to do God's work for him with Hagar. That was a catastrophe. But God came through in a way that you had to know that it must be God, because this barren woman conceived when she was almost 100 years old.

That must have caused a rumour locally. And so Abraham has already had these dealings with God, where he has seen God honour his word.

And then in chapter 22, I got so carried away I forgot to turn to the right page.

[18 : 59] Chapter 22, verses 16 and 17. Now the subject matter here is that Abraham is saying to God, how can I know that you'll give me this land?

How can I know that you'll carry through your promises? And so, verse 15, the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, by myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son.

Now, of course, he's just been through this. He's put his son on the table of sacrifice. He's just been about to ram home the dagger and light the fire. And God stops him and goes, whoa, don't touch the lad.

And then God swears this oath or reminds Abraham that this oath has been sworn. I have sworn by myself because you've not withheld your son from me.

Indeed, I will greatly bless you and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

[20 : 20] And it goes on. Now, what happens subsequent to this is Isaac, at some future point in time, goes and seeks a wife, gets a wife, who's barren.

And it's 20 years before God deals with her barrenness by a miraculous act and she conceives a child and therefore there is an ongoing bloodline beyond Isaac.

What is said, again in Hebrews, I can't remember the verse, is that Abraham, it's also said in Romans and I think in Galatians as well, that God believed, sorry, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

But if you're going to have to wait 20 years for something that couldn't possibly happen to happen, that takes faith. And you're therefore not surprised, I hope, to find that God would do something extreme to cause Abraham to keep faith for that 20 year period plus.

And so when God says, I have sworn by myself, in Abraham's heart and mind, it puts it beyond doubt. And so Abraham will cling on to the fact that God has promised and therefore he will carry it through.

[21 : 52] But note, God is swearing by himself. He has absolute authority. He is almighty, omniscient, omnipresent. And he's swearing by something he's perfectly capable of delivering.

It's entirely a matter of his choice whether he carries through that vow. And that's the example we should take. Right? It has to be a matter completely within our control if we're going to start swearing vows.

So when you turn up in court and they say, do you promise to tell the truth? That's in my control. I can tell the truth. It doesn't actually matter to me whether I vow or not because I'm going to tell the truth anyway.

Let's just deal with this thing. The whole idea of swearing oaths in court, and I'm going to get lost in my own notes here. When you go into court and you stand up in the witness box and you're going to give testimony that could either put someone in jail, in the old days it could result in execution, they have to be sure that you'll tell the truth.

And when the swearing of oaths started, it started when people feared God. And so whilst I might tell you a lie, if I've sworn before God to tell the truth, I would be too afraid to lie.

[23 : 12] Now of course we do not any longer have a God-fearing nation. A small anecdote, and you've got one like it in the Bible anyway, which we'll refer to.

But this, in Devizes, and I don't know where it is, but somewhere in Devizes there is a plaque apparently to this event where a woman was having an argument with another woman over a calf and they were both swearing that this calf belonged to them and one was trying to steal it off the other.

You know, she was trying to get the town elders to adjudicate and decide who they would give the calf to because these two women couldn't agree. And the woman, whose calf it wasn't, said, may God strike me dead if this is not my calf.

and she dropped dead on the spot. Now that's very like Ananias and Sapphira, isn't it?

Acts 5, quickly turned there. I think I'll have to get a Bible with smaller pages.

[24 : 47] Acts chapter 5. verses 1 to 11 gives us the account.

But a man named Ananias with his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property and kept back some of the price for himself and his wife. Sorry, and kept back some of the price for himself with his wife's full knowledge.

And bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?

While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart?

You have not lied to men, but to God. And I won't read the rest of the account just for the sake of time. But these two people had obviously vowed to sell this land and give the proceeds to God. And when it came to it, they only gave part of the proceeds.

[25 : 53] Having said to God, they would give the whole of the proceeds. And so they were struck dead. Now it's that kind of event and going right back in time, you'll find these, time is punctuated with these events where people make a promise, they break the promise, and therefore God takes away their life or brings them under some other judgment for breaking their vow.

Now it's because of that kind of thing that they ask you to swear an oath in court, or they used to. Nowadays you go into court, they say, would you swear an oath or will you affirm? Now I've yet to work out how a liar standing up in the witness box affirming that they're going to tell the truth is worth anything.

But you can these days, go into court, and affirm. And one of the reasons they brought that in is because people were starting to say, my Bible says I shouldn't swear an oath. Which is an incorrect interpretation of the scripture in my view.

However, in order to let people off that, they said, well you can just affirm. And you say, I affirm that I will tell the truth. I know a lot of liars who would affirm that they would tell the truth.

We called it, well my mother used to call it telling a barefaced lie. So, when one swears an oath as opposed to simply making a promise, affirmation is a promise, I promise to tell the truth.

[27 : 20] When you swear an oath with your hand on the Bible before God, it becomes absolutely essential that you do, but it's also a way of convincing others that you will be truthful.

Why do you need that? Well, because man is sinful. I've certainly, during my life, been lied to a few times.

Sometimes quite big lies too. If there is such a thing as big and little lies, which is very debatable. But, I've been told things by employers.

and gone out and worked my heart out on a particular matter only to find that they lied to me all along. And, when those things happen, it hurts.

But, you see, the promise they make to me in the boardroom or in the workplace is not considered as binding. Of course, it should be considered as binding.

[28 : 29] And, in fairness to them, I've never once had an employer say, I will swear to God that I will do this. Because, I haven't been fortunate enough to work for a God-fearing employer. But, when you swear before God, and it's, you're going to, you're going to realise now just how crazy and asinine the Jewish religious leaders were at the time.

The consideration is this, when you swear before God, you're calling God to witness to the truthfulness of what you're going to say. May God be my witness.

I swear to God is the same thing. Calling God, you're involving God in that transaction and saying, you know, before the God that I serve, the God that I fear, this is true.

And so, whatever is the subject of the oath, by swearing this oath, your, your intention is to add credibility to it.

This is a really dependable thing I'm promising you. Well, it should be dependable because I'm a man of my word, not because I swear anything. So, the passage is against swearing false oaths, not against swearing oaths altogether, but it's saying, why should you swear an oath?

[29 : 56] Because you should just tell the truth. I don't need to swear an oath. Now, in this room, that's true. I think if I said it was true, you'd believe me. And I wouldn't say it if it wasn't.

But in the courtroom, that's different. They've got no reason to believe me. And they've actually now engineered a situation in the courts where even if I go into court and affirm, they've still got no reason to believe me.

So, it's kind of undermined the purpose of a witness testimony. And the second paragraph on the board, as society just further away from God and the fear of the Lord, the expectation of consequences drift lower.

So, we're going to look at what the religious Jews had done with this. Because they believed that if you swore by God that you would do something, it was absolutely imperative that you carried it through.

There was no argument about that. What they then said was, if you want to swear an oath that's not binding, you could swear by the temple. Or you could swear by the earth.

[31 : 05] Or you could swear by your own head. because these aren't binding because they don't invoke the name of God. That was the, so they had created a ready-made opportunity to be dishonest if you so chose.

Whilst at the same time still sounding very righteous. I swear I'll do it. I swear by my own head I'll do it. I swear by the temple. And they got themselves tied in knots.

Turn to Matthew 23. They got themselves absolutely tied in knots with double standards when they did this.

And we're going to look at verses 15 to 22. Matthew 23, 15 to 22. And for once I'm there first.

which says this. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land and make one proselyte and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

[32 : 19] So he was obviously being very seeker friendly here. Woe to you blind guides who say whoever swears by the temple that is nothing. But whoever swears by the gold in the temple is obligated.

You fools and blind men. Which is more important the gold or the temple? Which is more important the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And whoever swears by the altar that is nothing.

But whoever swears by the offering on it is obliged. You blind men. Which is more important the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore whoever swears by the altar swears by both the altar and by everything on it and whoever swears by the temple swears both by the temple and by him who dwells within it and whoever swears by heaven swears by both the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Now this is the same message as being given in Matthew 5 which is you can't escape God when you swear oaths. So for the most part don't do it.

If we go back to Matthew 5 the mistake that they were making the people who were sitting at Jesus' feet on the Mount of Olives when this sermon was being preached the mistake that they were making because they'd been taught this by the religious Jews was to think that verse 34 but I say to you make no oath at all either by heaven for it is the throne of God.

[34 : 08] If you swear by heaven you have got no control you've got no authority to do that and you think you're escaping invoking God's name when in fact heaven's where he lives.

So what Jesus is saying is you swear these oaths thinking you're letting yourself off but naturally you're just digging yourself deeper because if I think that by leaving out God's name I can swear stuff and not be held accountable for it I might swear anything it will escalate what I'm prepared to swear.

What Jesus is saying is this is not what it's about because you're swearing by heaven and heaven is where God lives.

Reading on or by earth for it is the footstool of his feet and that again is you can read that in the Old Testament I didn't write down the reference if you swear by the temple it's God's house so the temple you can't swear by the temple and get God to stay out of it I mean God was the one in the form of Jesus who went into the temple and drove out all the corrupt money lenders and drove out all the cattle that was being traded in there corruptly so God's house doesn't leave God out of the equation if you take a quick look at Luke 12 and verse 7 and this is another passage where Jesus is speaking and he's letting people know the truth about things and where things stand and he says indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered so what's the point in me swearing by the you know may my head go grey if I don't deliver this promise or whatever

I don't have any control over that these hairs actually belong to God to the extent that he has each one of them numbered I've spent quite a few years making his job easier but but if he's got every hair on my head numbered how am I escaping God's attention by swearing on the hairs that are on my head in any way shape or form and what Jesus says is you haven't got you've got no authority to make one black or one grey what's the point more than that how do you think this gets you around God and the religious Jews were always trying to find ways around the law they did it with the laws of Corban basically said oh I've already I can't give it as Corban which is offering to God because I need it for my poorly father and mother or whatever so they were always trying to find ways to circumvent

[37 : 29] God's purposes even down to the fact that he has numbered the very hairs on your head so it's a very simple matter for a righteous man to tell the truth and there's nothing more needed it's perfectly okay for you to say what I've said is the truth and that's an end to it I don't need to swear an oath apart from those governmental situations where the government asks me to swear an oath to give some sort of credibility to what I'm going to say because they've got no reason to believe me but within Christians we shouldn't need to swear at all of course it becomes interesting when the truth that you need to tell doesn't show you in a good light and I've been in that situation a few times and I will tell you this it takes people aback and in my role when I was part of the directorship of

McCarthy and Stone and I'd made a pretty big mistake they were shocked because I had said to my boss when he first took over as my boss I said if I ever really mess up you'll hear it from me first you won't hear it through the rumour mill I will come to you and tell you if I've messed up and that's what I did I went to his office and I said sorry to tell you this but I've just messed up and I've messed up fairly big and he was completely taken aback because he was so unfamiliar with the territory of somebody just being honest about their mistakes and not trying to hide them and not only was he very forgiving about my mistake but he helped me find a solution to it but it gave a witness to righteousness that you normally don't get outside Christian circles and unfortunately quite a lot of the time you don't even get it within Christian circles if somebody has to say something about themselves that isn't flattering that shows you in a bad light and you still tell the truth it takes guts and courage but God will always back that and I'm not saying they will always have the easy ride that

I had but God will always vindicate his own if they operate according to his purposes so the application of all of this for us is just tell the truth how much time did I oh we're five minutes early finishing any questions or points about that because as I say when I started to study it I thought this would be ten minutes and move on but I think you'll agree it was worth the thing