

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – MATTHEW 5-7

Oaths, Truth-Telling, and the Promise-Keeping Father

Matthew 5:33–37

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on September 13, 2026

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you told a lie? Not a big fat one — just a little bitty one. A "fine, I'm fine." But you are not. A "no, I didn't mind waiting." An exaggerated excuse for why you were late, or why you didn't call back. Have you ever said something technically true, in a way you knew would leave someone believing something false? And your motive was selfish. Have you ever made a promise you weren't fully sure you'd keep, but said it anyway because it was easier in the moment?

If we're honest — and that's the subject this morning — none of us would get through that list clean.

There's an early scene in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) — set in a 1940s prison, where the warden, Samuel Norton, gives his orientation speech to the incoming inmates. He tells them he believes in two things: discipline and the Bible. Then he lays out his first rule. "No blasphemy," he says. "I will not permit God's name to be taken in vain in my institution." Over the course of the story, you find out exactly what kind of man he really is — a sneak, an embezzler, a man who allows beatings and abuse of the prisoners, and a liar who has another human being killed to protect himself. He keeps a Bible on his desk that hides his real ledger — a record of deceit and theft. A cross-stitch on his office wall reads, "His judgment cometh, and that right soon." He bears God's name constantly — quotes it, invokes it, even forbids blasphemy against it — and the entire time, by the way he lives a lie, he profanes and blasphemes that very name far worse than any curse word ever could. Which reminds us of a group of people that Jesus brings to our attention often — Pharisees and hypocrites.

Earlier this year we began in the Sermon on the Mount by walking through the Beatitudes — the blessings on God's people, the flourishing people of

God: those who are poor in spirit, meek, hungering for righteousness, pure in heart. This is the way of the cross, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit within a man. These are the people who characterize the kingdom of heaven. They have been saved by grace and have been united to Christ — and have been given Christ's righteousness, purchased by Him, and He has started to work it in them. They are salt of the earth and light of the world (vv. 13–16). And unless you think Jesus has come with some new version of the Bible, scrapping the Old Testament, He says plainly that He has not come to abolish it but to fulfill it (v. 17). Then come the startling words: unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 20). This exceeding righteousness is a wholehearted righteousness — hearts and motives that want God and all of His law. With new hearts made by God, we don't just do the bare minimum; we love the Lawmaker, and therefore we love His law. In contrast to the Pharisees, who focused on the letter and not the spirit, Jesus has been showing us — through six examples, three of which we've already seen (anger, lust, divorce) — how they twisted the law to minimize and excuse their own sin. And this morning we come to a great subject: oaths, and the propensity of every human being to be a liar, like the old Adam, and like the serpent before him — the devil who is the father of lies.

This is what this greater righteousness looks like. Because our Father is a faithful and trustworthy God, and because every word we speak is spoken in His presence, we are called to be — and we can be — honest and faithful in all our dealings.

Let me focus on that phrase - in His presence — it's so important. Every promise you've ever made, every hedge, every half-truth you've told yourself was harmless, was spoken directly in front of the God who cannot lie and who never once looked away. That's the reality Jesus is about to hold up against the Pharisees' entire system of loopholes.

Let me hold this out clearly: the only reason any of us can hope to become people like that is because we already have a Savior who was. Jesus never once spoke a false word — His yes was always yes, His no was always no, all the way to the cross. He is, as Paul says, the Yes to every promise God has

ever made (2 Corinthians 1:20) — proof, in a person, that our Father keeps His word. As we keep working through this sermon, and on into chapter 6, we're going to meet this same Father again and again — the Father who sent His Son to keep His promise, who feeds the birds and clothes the fields, and who is patiently building that same truthful character into us.

Let's read the text.

TEXT — MATTHEW 5:33–37 (ESV)

33 "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.' 34 But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

I want to walk through this in four parts: ***what they heard, what Jesus forbids, what Jesus demands, and what Jesus warns***. Then we'll land on three principles to carry out the door.

1. WHAT THEY HEARD (v. 33)

"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.'"

Jesus opens with a summary — not a direct quotation — of what the Old Testament actually taught about oaths and vows. He's pulling together several strands:

- *The third commandment: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7).*
- *"You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:12, ESV).*
- *"If a man vows a vow to the Lord... he shall not break his word" (Numbers 30:2).*

- *"You shall not delay fulfilling" a vow made to the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:21).*

The point of all of it was never complicated: God is a truth-telling God, and if you invoke His name in a promise, you are bound to keep it. The vow itself, and the necessity of keeping it — that has always been God's will. Truth-telling and keeping your word is virtuous because God has declared it.

But the Pharisees got to work on this like they did on divorce and many other matters of the law. And here's exactly what they did: they shifted people's attention away from the vow itself and the need to keep it, and onto the formula used in making it. They argued that what the law was really prohibiting wasn't dishonesty in general — it was a specifically profane use of the divine name. False swearing, they concluded, meant profanity, not perjury. Not the dishonest pledging of your word — just saying God's name the wrong way.

So they built an entire system on top of that misreading. They catalogued which formulas were binding and which weren't. Only vows that used the divine name directly counted as binding. Everything else? You didn't have to be so particular about keeping those.

It's like a person on a diet who seeks to keep the letter of the law but not the spirit. Maybe the diet allows three pieces of fruit a day, so you buy bananas the size of a forearm. Your parents say no phone at the table, so you keep it in your lap — it's not on the table. Find the letter, obey the letter, and let your heart do whatever it wants underneath the letter. The Pharisees did this with Sabbath-keeping and tithing. Here, they did it with truth itself.

2. WHAT JESUS FORBIDS (vv. 34–36)

"But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven... or by the earth... or by Jerusalem... And do not take an oath by your head..."

At first read, you could take this as a flat prohibition on all oaths and vows — no swearing in court, no vows of allegiance, no wedding vows, no church covenants. Some have taught it that way. But that's highly unlikely to be

what Jesus intended. When the high priest puts Jesus under oath at His trial — "I adjure you by the living God, tell us..." — Jesus does not refuse to answer (Matthew 26:63–64). God Himself swears oaths throughout the Old Testament. Paul calls on God as his witness more than once in his letters — 2 Corinthians 1:23: "But I call God to witness against me..." God swears oaths for us — "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this... I will surely bless you" (God to Abraham in Genesis 22). Or in the Psalms — "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek'" (Psalm 110:4). So this cannot be a universal ban on all oath-taking — courtroom testimony, marriage vows, oaths of office, or giving a solemn statement about something really important. Used rightly, on the right occasions, an oath emphasizes truthfulness and is consistent with biblical teaching and Christian practice.

So what is Jesus actually forbidding? Something much wider than courtroom procedure. Notice what He names: swearing by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by your own head. Why would anyone even do that in the first place? Because the Pharisees had built loopholes — an entire hierarchy of oaths, engineered so you could sound sincere while leaving yourself an exit — not fulfilling your difficult commitment. We see this laid out directly in Matthew 23: swear by the temple, and it's nothing; swear by the gold of the temple, and you're bound. Swear by the altar, and it's nothing; swear by the gift on the altar, and you're bound (Matthew 23:16–22). It's a system built entirely around the question, what can I get away with?

Jesus calls the whole thing what it is: stupid. He says you BLIND FOOLS. Heaven is God's throne. Earth is His footstool. Jerusalem is His city. You cannot even turn one hair on your own head white or black. There is no formula, no clever hedge, that gets you outside of God's presence and ownership. Every one of these supposedly "lesser" oaths still lands you right in front of Him.

What he forbids is living as though God isn't present when we speak or make promises.

What he forbids is acting as though we are not dependent on Him for everything and that everything doesn't relate to Him.

Hypocrisy ignores the reality that God sees and knows our hearts.

Sinclair Ferguson names two things happening at once here. It is utter **hypocrisy**. And it is **deep-seated dishonesty**. What masquerades as careful “law keeping” is actually rank untruth. To swear by these lesser things is to give the appearance of serious commitment — to suggest your word is your bond — while all the time, behind that appearance of integrity, your heart is full of duplicity.

And here's the deeper issue underneath the formulas: some of these Pharisees weren't just careless — they were intentionally deceptive. They used formulas designed to give the listener the impression a binding oath had been taken, while the speaker himself never regarded it as binding and felt free to lie. That's premeditated deception dressed up as devotion.

3. WHAT JESUS DEMANDS (v. 37a)

“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” (see James 5:12)

Here's the positive call underneath the prohibition: character so trustworthy that oaths become unnecessary.

This is exactly what we said at the outset: because our Father is a faithful and trustworthy God, and because every word we speak is spoken in His presence, we are called to be — and we can be — honest and faithful in all our dealings. Verse 37a puts that in five words.

Ferguson puts it this way — **no promise is ever made, no word is ever spoken, outside the presence of God**. He does not need to call on God to witness what he says, because God is already watching him and present as he speaks. So the real question isn't "did I swear an oath here." It's: would you say this if you remembered, right now, that He's listening? He is present at all times.

John Stott says that Jesus is giving a call to honesty, candor [frank, open, sincere, telling the truth even when it is tough], and faithfulness in our

words. Jesus wants His disciples to be people whose yes is trusted as yes and whose no is trusted as no — people of such integrity that they don't need to reinforce their words with an oath, because their word already is their bond. They are the kind of person that others have seen — that their word is so good!

Ephesians 4:25 — Let no falsehood be in you but speak the truth to one another. Psalm 15:4 — the man who is upright and dwells before God — who fears the Lord and swears to his own hurt and does not change.

This doesn't mean rude or blunt. This doesn't mean that you tell everyone everything. But it does mean that you don't hold back the truth because you want to deceive. Sometimes love recognizes that the other person doesn't need all of the information — but the well-being of the other person is in focus, not the maintaining of your reputation or selfish ambition.

I think about the vows Molly and I made to each other twenty-five years ago. We shouldn't need a formula with God's name attached to make it binding — we knew we were making it in front of Him whether we said His name or not. We ended with words borrowed from Ruth: "Where you dwell, I will dwell. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." That last line calls on God to judge me if I fail — not to dodge accountability, but to fully own it. And Jesus wants us to have a sense in which all our actions have such honesty and truthfulness in our words.

4. WHAT JESUS WARNS (v. 37b)

"Anything more than this comes from evil."

That phrase can also be translated — "from the evil one." Deceptive formulas to avoid truth-telling and faithfulness are evil and come from the evil one. This evasive way of speaking isn't a neutral cultural habit or a clever rhetorical skill. It has a source, and the source isn't good.

Jesus already told us where this comes from earlier in His ministry: "out of the heart come evil thoughts... false witness" (Mark 7:21–23). And Jesus tells us directly who stands behind it in its fullest form. In John 8:44, speaking to

religious men who thought themselves righteous, He says: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Satan does not stand in the truth. There is no truth in him at all. When he lies, he isn't performing an act against his nature — he's speaking exactly out of his own character, because lying is his nature. The elaborate oath system the Pharisees built wasn't clever scholarship. It was borrowed character — from the wrong father.

THREE PRINCIPLES

Beware. Beware of your own heart. We can be liars, and we are self-deceived — often the last ones to see it. Jesus calls the Pharisees "blind guides" (Matthew 23), and there is nothing worse than being blind and not knowing you're blind. And beware of more than just your own heart — remember what we just read in John 8:44. Satan does not stand in the truth; there is no truth in him; when he lies he speaks out of his own character, because he is the father of lies. He is active in exactly this territory — the territory of half-truths, hedges, and convenient formulas. Where have you built your own hierarchy of which words are binding and which aren't? Are you honest with your words?

Ask God to reveal where you do a form of this Pharisaic use of promises and words. We seek to protect our reputation or comfort, and we lie.

Revelation warns us — 21:8 — the lake of fire is preserved for all liars.

Be real. This starts with little things. It's telling someone on the phone "he's not here" when he is. It's the small, almost automatic dodges we don't even think twice about. We need to tell the truth, and we need candor — candor being the habit of speaking plainly and honestly, without spin, without hedging, without hiding what's actually going on. Don't over-commit. Keep what you say you'll do. Let your word be your bond. But notice — none of that is sustainable on its own. Candor like that requires something underneath it: we have to trust God with the truth. We have to believe that

He is safe, that telling the truth even when it costs us is safe in His hands, before we'll ever be willing to actually practice it.

Believe. This is where I want to go bigger, because everything above rests on this. Believe that you have a Father who keeps His word. Our heavenly Father, who rescued us through His own dear Son, is a truth-telling God, absolutely faithful in all His word and promises.

From my Psalm 12 sermon on the lies of the wicked and pure words of God:

“The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times... They are flawless, truthful, perfect, and absolutely trustworthy.” And: “He never makes a foolish promise... He never makes a promise He cannot keep... He never speaks a foul word... He never speaks a deceptive or flattering word — for He is completely true and right and He would have nothing to gain by deceiving us.”

We are called to be faithful as He is faithful, truthful as He is truthful, promise-keepers as He is a promise-keeping God.

And here's the only way that's actually possible: He kept His word first. He sent His Son, who gives us a righteousness we could never produce in our own strength — credited to us, so that the Father now sees us as His own children, righteous in Christ. And because of that, He has given us His Spirit, who is producing a true righteousness in us — as contrary as that is to our old nature, we are being made new. All God's promises are yes in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20) — this is what we pointed to at the start. Jesus Himself is the Father's Yes: perfectly truthful, perfectly trustworthy, and now living in us by His Spirit so that our yes can be yes too. Which means God's people become promise-keepers too — people whose yes is yes and whose no is no (James 5:12).

We're told later in this chapter to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48) — not a performance bar, but wholeness, completeness, an undivided nature. And that is exactly what our Father already is, and exactly what He is making of us. So let's first simply rejoice: our Father is perfect and He is for us! There's no crack in Him, no gap between what He says and

what He does, no hedge anywhere in His promises. That alone is good news. And it's equally good news that He hasn't left us as fractured, deceitful people — He is lovingly, patiently working to change us into people who look like Him.

We will want to lie to maintain our reputation — but we don't need to do that, for we are children of the light — poor in spirit and yet being made rich. We can confess our sins and lies and trust in His love! Believe this!

So the deepest answer to a lying tongue isn't willpower. It's a new Father. Truthfulness isn't a rule you grit your teeth to keep out of fear of getting caught — it's what starts to happen naturally in someone who belongs to a Father who has never once broken a promise, and who no longer needs to protect himself with words. Oh that you would know His love and care and provision — so you can reflect Him as a truth-telling person — a child of your Father! As we move into chapter 6, we'll see this same Father is the one who feeds the birds and clothes the fields — which is exactly why His children don't have to lie to survive.

Because our Father is a faithful and trustworthy God, and because every word you speak is spoken in His presence, you can be — you are being made — honest and faithful in all your dealings.

Which father do you resemble this morning — the Father who is Truth, or the father of lies?

Dear friend — let me invite you in the name of Jesus — who is the Truth and calls you to join a new family — to have a new Father.

Jesus gives us this passage not to climb the ladder of moral goodness so we can get to heaven — but to convict us, to bring us to confess our sins, and to depend on Him and His mercy. He shows us this to reveal to us God's character, and to show us what He is doing in us — turn to Him — turn to Christ today! Our Father commands His children — "you shall not take my name in vain..." you bear my name... I sent you my Son to change you by my love and forgiveness and to make you someone who trusts in me and bears my name to the world — showing my goodness and love.