

MATTHEW·DISTILLED (extract the essential elements or most important aspects of)



CHAPTER (5) SYNOPSIS = Jesus' Sermon On The Mount Address.

[1.- 8.] DISCUSSED

9. Consistent with His stated intention of upholding the Law (17-20), Jesus reveals that the customary understanding of six biblical injunctions is inadequate or false and seeks to correct them¹:

9.1. Murder Includes Unrighteous And Unresolved Displays Of Anger Toward A Covenant Brother Or Sister (21-26)

The capital crime of murder is to also be applied to those who are found guilty of displaying unresolved, unrighteous forms of anger (incl. unwarranted/abusive speech) in relation to their covenant brothers/sisters.

9.2. Adultery Includes Sexual Acts Expressed By Those Married/Betrothed Toward Someone Other Than Their Spouse (27-30)

The capital crime of adultery is to also be applied to those who are found guilty of looking upon the nakedness (i.e. naked breast[female], buttocks and genitals) of someone other than their spouse for sexual gratification² or have sexually gratified themselves (masturbated) in relation to that individual.

9.3. Divorce Is Permissible Only In Cases Of Sexual Immorality (31-32)

God no longer recognizes as legitimate any divorce which does not have as its reason, "sexual immorality" (πορνεία [porneia]= a term used in the first century to refer to any/all extra-marital sexual activity -e.g. kissing, fondling, masturbation, oral sex, intercourse, viewing pornography, illicit nakedness, illicit sexual conversations³, etc.). Any marriage dissolved w/o this as its grounds, is therefore seen by God as still intact. In other words, though they may be viewed as divorced by society, God still views them as husband and wife. As such, their marital union to somebody else makes them guilty of "adultery". ***These rules would apply equally to couples who are betrothed since God views this as the beginning of marriage (inchoate; e.g. Mat 1:18-19).

9.4. All Oaths Include The Judgment Of God (33-37)

9.4.1. **Injunction #4: (33) "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old" =** (As discussed), this phrase represents the beginning of an ancient rabbinic formula used to signal that the customary view (regarding a particular law/injunction) was about to be challenged as false or deficient. In this case, the injunction under question is **"You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn."** = Though not an exact rendering of any one text, many places in the OT contain similar language (ml a combination of Lev 19:12 and Deu 23:21). At face value (then) this longstanding saying (i.e. "said to those of old") not only serves as an accurate summary of what God had said to His people regarding vows/oaths but also the way to avoid breaking the 3rd commandment (Exo 20:7 - "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain"). In other words, to swear falsely (i.e. fail to keep an oath/promise) to the Lord is the way a person becomes guilty of profaning the Lord's name/breaking the 3rd commandment. Not a capital crime, but a sin which carried both penalty and Divine curse (Consider again Exo 20:7 - "For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."; Deu 23:21 - "For the Lord will surely require it of you, you will be guilty of sin"). Such consequences are by nature, built in to the concept of oath-taking - especially as it relates to invoking the name of the Lord⁴. Into this light then, comes the customary view. According to its proponents, such foreboding consequences applied only to those oaths/vows that were directly "sworn...to the Lord". In such cases, the obligation to "perform to the Lord what you have sworn (to the Lord)" must be strictly and stringently followed. When however, someone/something else was substituted in the place of the Lord, not only were those persons exempt from such penalties, but also any obligation. A promise in someone/something else's name was not truly binding⁵. So then, when the Jews of Jesus' day (and even "those of old") heard the injunction to "not swear falsely", they understood it as exclusive to those vows taken in God's name. The sincerity or commitment to fulfillment in relation to all other oaths/vows/promises was completely optional - and therefore never open to the charge of swearing falsely (Mat 23:16-18)⁶.

¹ "In Matthew, in the sermon on the mount, we find a series of injunctions intended to illustrate the position of Jesus as upholder, not destroyer of the Law." - David Daube (*The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, p.55); "When he says, 'But I say unto you...,' Jesus is seeking to restore the real meaning of the moral law." - Ernest Reisinger (*The Law and the Gospel*)

² "Not surprising, disrobing also conveyed erotic intent. To 'see' someone in biblical tales was often tantamount to 'knowing' them sexually and often illicitly." - Eric Silverman (*A Cultural History Of Jewish Dress*, p.8). In this respect consider that in passages such as Eze 16:36; Jer 13:26; Gen 2:25 w/Gen 3:7 uncovered nakedness functions as a euphemism for adultery/sexual immorality. Consider also the fact that rabbis exempted women from stoning for fear that their nakedness would show through their torn garment and men become guilty of adultery (B. Sanhedrin, 44b-45a). Could this be why it is suggested that Tamar be burned instead of stoned (Gen 38:24)?

³ Porneia would not include illicit sexual thoughts. Such "mental" sins would be categorized as covetousness (Exo 20:17). To assume that one's thoughts might also be grounds for divorce would mean that Jesus is not limiting the permissible scope but expanding it.

⁴ Invoking the name of someone or something in ancient oaths was always necessary since all such swearing functioned as a form of prayer. In the words of Alan Sommerstein (*Oaths and Swearing In Ancient Greece*), "An oath is a special kind of prayer, conditionally requesting harm [from the aforementioned deity] rather than good for oneself" should they fail to keep it (e.g. Mat 26:73-74). Even in cases where no one or nothing is named, it was assumed to be God. As we shall see, the way we are expected to understand oaths/promises today, is no different.

⁵ According to Josephus, some Jews saw such oaths as the proper way to deceive the enemy, "Metellius, who was the Roman general sent to Eleazar, and desired that they would give him security to spare their lives. [He also] agreed to deliver up their arms and what else they had with them. [The Jews] readily complied with their petition [giving them] the security of their right hands in oath. But, as soon as [the Romans] had laid down their shields and swords, Eleazar's men attacked them in a violent manner...and slew them while they neither defended themselves nor entreated for mercy, but only cried out upon the breach [of trust] and their oaths." (*Wars*, 2.451)

⁶ "A sophisticated casuistry judged how binding an oath really was by examining how closely it was in relation to Yahweh's name." - Don Carson (*Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew*, p.153).

9.4.2. **Jesus' response: (34) "But I say to you (that)"** = More than a simple adversative, this too was a key piece of the rabbinic formula of challenge/correction ("You have heard it said" followed by "But I say to you"). More importantly however, it signaled that the one speaking was doing so from a place of divine authority. Not in the sense – that they themselves were divine (though in this case that would also be true), but rather by proxy. In other words, that the authority on which such corrections were being made was the Word of God itself. As such, they came with the purpose of restoring (not destroying) the Law. This (then) was also the purpose of Jesus - restoring the Law to its original intent or ideal design (consistent w/His declaration in Mat 5:17-20).

9.4.3. **His corrective (and restorative) instruction: (34) "Do not take an oath at all"** = Though at first glance, it seems as if Jesus is prohibiting oaths altogether, this proves false based on the following:

9.4.3.1. God required oaths in relation to certain things (e.g. Exo 22:10-11; Num 5:12-22)

9.4.3.2. Paul is frequently found taking oaths in his letters (e.g. Rom 1:9; 2Co 1:16-23; Gal 1:20; Phi 1:8; 1Th 2:5, 5:27)

9.4.3.3. Jesus prescribes an oath as His final instruction in this text (Mat 5:37 – **"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' [ναὶ ναὶ = Lit. 'yes-yes'] or 'No' [οὐ οὐ = Lit. 'no-no']"** = Repeat affirmation/denial was considered swearing/taking an oath in the ancient world⁷)

9.4.3.4. Jesus frequently swears/takes an oath before teaching/revealing certain important truths ("Truly, truly I say to you" = 25 times in John's Gospel – Joh 1:51, 3:3,5,11, 5:19, 24-25, 6:26, 32, 47, 53, 8:34, 51, 58, 10:1, 7, 12:24, 13:16, 20-21, 38, 14:12, 16:20, 23, 21:18)⁸.

What (then) Jesus is condemning are the current (and long-standing) practices of swearing **(34) "either by heaven... (35) or by earth...or by Jerusalem"** or taking **(37) "an oath by your head"** as a means of getting around/avoiding the curse and commitment associated w/swearing/taking oaths in relation to God.

9.5. Why Jesus condemns these forms of oaths:

9.5.1. B/C God is implicated in all oaths whether His name is invoked (or not).

(34) "Do not take an oath...either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by 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." = The common denominator in Jesus' responses to the different types of oaths (heaven, earth, Jerusalem and your head), is God Himself. Heaven and earth are His dwelling place and possession (an allusion to Isa 66:1). The same is true in relation to the city of Jerusalem (an allusion to Psa 48:1-2 – "Great King" = God). Though not God's dwelling place, the hairs on our head are also the property of His sovereign control – including their change in color (Isa 46:3-4; Mat 10:29-30). Jesus' point (then) is simple: there is nothing we can swear by/take an oath in relation to, that does not ultimately implicate God since He is the Owner and Determiner of all things. Hence why (as His people) we are commanded to swear by Him and Him alone. Oaths are actually one of the ways we acknowledge this truth and our allegiance to Him (Deu 6:13, 10:20; Jer 12:14-16; Mat 23:19-22).

9.5.2. B/C invoking something/someone else implies evil intent.

(37) ""Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No' (i.e. invoking God's is not necessary since He is implicated in all oaths/vows/promises); anything more than this comes from evil = All mention of other things (beside God) suggests that we have unrighteous motives (i.e. intent not to keep the promises we have made; Zec 8:17)

9.5.3. B/C God expects all oaths/vows/promises to be kept (versus being optional).

Jesus' command in (37 – "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'") is meant to cause us to see the larger picture of what the OT is teaching on this subject: that God expects us to be a people of our word – our "simple yes and no" will always carry the force of a binding oath (i.e. our word w/our bond; Psa 15:1-5).

9.6. Closing Thoughts:

9.6.1. Every agreement/contract we sign or activate in relation to a particular service or product is an oath to God (e.g. Bank mortgages, Rental agreements, Bank loans, Car financing, Electric service, Garbage, Water/Sewer, Phone contract, Credit cards). Bad Credit therefore w/ a good indication that you have been disobedient in respect to Jesus' teaching re: oaths.

9.6.2. Marriage, becoming a parent, a Christian and part of Christ's Church include taking oaths (to God) even if nothing was ever spoken/agreed upon since it is intrinsic to their design (Mat 19:10-12; Eph 6:4 w/Eph 6:7; 1Pe 1:1-2 Exo 24:7-8).

9.6.3. Our tithe also involves taking a vow before God (Gen 28:20-22).

9.6.4. God still punishes/curses those who fail to keep their oaths/vows/promises. It's a big reason many struggle to get ahead in this life (Ecc 5:4-6; Jam 5:12).

9.6.5. The way to keep from swearing falsely/breaking our oath is to not promise what we can't keep/afford by (first) counting the cost (Deu 23:21-23; Luk 14:25-35).

9.6.6. It is impossible to never make promises/take vows and hardly Jesus' point. The point (again) is, realize all oaths implicate God and will bring a curse if we fail to keep them.

⁷ E.G. Jewish Tractate, *Shebu*, 36a

⁸ The case could be made that even when the other Gospel writers use the singular "amen" structure, it too is communicating oath (consider Joh 13:21 w/Mat 26:21).