



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from May 16 afternoon through May 23 morning

The Sermon on the Mount, Week 5

Matthew 5:33–37

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

Jesus continued to connect his teaching to the Old Testament Law, as he used the phrase “you have heard it said ... But I say to you.” In this section of his sermon, he focused on the importance of keeping one’s word; of following through with something to which one has committed. Below are Scriptures from the Old Testament that must be considered:

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:12)

If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:2)

“If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. (Deuteronomy 23:21)

According to the Mosaic Law, it was permissible for a person to make a vow. However, it was imperative that this individual followed through and kept that vow. Vows could be made directly to God, or could be made in the name of God. Breaking such a vow was considered a sin.

Some background about oaths is helpful in understanding why Jesus may have chosen to address this in his sermon. The Pharisees were known for making oaths, and for debating about which oaths were binding and which were not.

A sophisticated casuistry judged how binding an oath really was by examining how closely it was related to Yahweh’s name. Incredible distinctions proliferate under such an approach. Swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing by

Jerusalem, though swearing toward Jerusalem was. That an entire mishnaic tract ... is given over to the subject ... shows that such distinctions became important and were widely discussed.

D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 153.

These men were known for their attempts to get out of the oaths they had made:

If they wanted to be relieved of oaths they had made by heaven ... by the earth ... by Jerusalem, or by one's own head, they could argue that since God Himself had not been involved their oaths were not binding.

Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 31.

Jesus refuted this idea that these oaths were not binding as he taught that heaven, earth and Jerusalem were all creations and possessions of God; all were directly connected to Him. Even a person's body was a creation of God and a vessel through which He could work, and therefore swearing by one's own head was an oath that was binding.

Rather than making an oath, Jesus taught that a person should simply say "yes" or "no." The underlying truths in this section of the sermon are those of honesty and integrity. A follower of Jesus should be known as someone who keeps his or her word. Those who consistently honor a simple "yes" or "no" have no need for vows; they have no need to swear by anything. Jesus taught that anything more than a simple "yes" or "no" has an origin of evil, and therefore a person who swears as a way of declaring they will do something is someone who is less likely to keep a promise. They may be overcompensating for not keeping their word in the past.

Additional Scriptures in this week's reading:

- Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 (Solomon teaches that vows should not be made in haste and they must be kept)
- James 5:12 (James repeats Jesus' teaching that "yes" and "no" are sufficient answers)
- Isaiah 66:1-2 (God declares that heaven is his throne and earth is His footstool, and a humble person is blessed by Him)
- Acts 7:44-50 (Stephen shares a brief history of the tabernacle and temple and reminds his audience that God does not dwell in structures made by people)
- Psalm 48 (this psalm focuses on Jerusalem as the city of God)
- Matthew 23:16-22 (Jesus confronts the religious leaders about their error in debating which vows must be kept)
- Colossians 3:16-17 (Paul writes that believers should honor the name of Jesus with their words and actions)

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever dealt with someone who did not keep their word? How did that affect the way you viewed them?
2. Do you think other people see you as someone who keeps your word? Why or why not?
3. In your own experience, can trust be regained once it has been broken? Explain your answer.
4. This week's reading included verses that showed how God is connected to His creation, and the structures that have been used in worshiping Him. What does it mean to you to know that as believers, we are the temple of God? How is this connected to the importance of keeping our word?
5. Do you have a hard time saying "no" when someone asks you to do something? How does Jesus' teaching of using a simple "yes" or "no" help you see the value of saying "no" to people?
6. Why are the values of honesty and integrity so important within the body of Christ?