

Intro

In December 2018, Gallup randomly polled 1025 adults 18 and over, with every state represented, to determine how certain professions were perceived in terms of honesty and ethical standards. Respondents had four options: they could rate the honesty of the profession as high/very high, average, low/very low, or no opinion. Which professions do you think were considered least honest?

In first place was Congress with 58% of the opinion that their honesty was low and only 8% considering them highly trustworthy. Because of ties to special interest groups and lobbyists, as well as their commitment to party lines, people don't trust the Congress. Their perceived allegiances render them unreliable in the court of public opinion.

Second were telemarketers with 56% of respondents having low trust and only 9% having high confidence. Because of a massive increase in fraudulent telemarketers recently, people don't trust what they're saying. Deceptive scams perpetrated over the phone have killed their credibility.

Third were car salespeople with 44% believing their honesty and ethics were low while only 8% trusted their honesty to be at a high level. The stereotype of the sleazy car salesman lingers on because of known tricks like the hard sell, the bait and switch, and high-balling on prices. The ethical car salesman has a lot to overcome because of how they're perceived.

Fourth, advertisers lack credibility since 37% gave them a low trust rating and only 13% considered them highly reliable. Advertisers aren't considered dependable because sometimes their claims are outright fraudulent, and sometimes their claims stretch the truth. The very phrase stretching the truth should trouble us. How can the truth be stretched? A claim is either true or it isn't. Someone's word is either dependable or it isn't.

We live in a world where trust is lacking. Whether it's in the form of conspiracy theories that question authority or products that seem to be too good to be true, our culture has a hard time trusting what it's told. Public revelations of dishonesty and fraud has made trusting the word of another hard. Does that car have hidden problems? Where does that charity's money go? Am I putting myself at risk using Zoom meetings? Cynicism is sometimes the result of irrational fears, but often it's justified. Brought down to the individual level, do people trust the words that came out of our mouths? Today we examine the importance of dependable speech. Today we learn that...

BIG IDEA: People should trust our words without needing an oath.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Jesus continues criticizing the manner in which the scribes and Pharisees interpreted and applied the OT. This time he takes on their use of oaths.

Point 1: Don't make promises you don't intend to keep (5:33-36)

Explanation

Jesus begins by stating what was taught in the OT. Those of old were the Israelites who received the law through Moses. The content, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn,' doesn't come from one OT verse. It is a summation from several passages in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (Exod 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-23). Jesus appears to be contradicting the OT by opposing oaths, but in reality he is again enforcing the intent of the OT: that we can't make oaths we don't intend to keep. We must be people who keep our word.

Why the discussion of heaven, earth, and Jerusalem? In each case, the scribes and Pharisees created loopholes that enabled them to get away with not keeping their word. If they swore by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem they didn't have to keep promises. But if they swore by God, then they had to do what they said. Matthew 23:16-22 spells this out:

Matthew 23:16-22 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."

The blind guides were the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:13, 15). What is Jesus criticizing? They swore by the temple and felt no need to keep their oaths, but when they swore by the gold of the temple they were bound to keep their word (23:16). If they swore by the altar and didn't do as promised that was okay, but if they swore by the gift on the altar they were bound to keep their word (23:18). In other words, they made artificial distinctions about when it was appropriate to keep one's word and when it wasn't required. Jesus points out the absurdity by highlighting the fact that swearing by the temple requires swearing by God who dwells in the temple, and swearing by heaven requires swearing by God who dwells in heaven (23:21-22).

This is what's happening in Matthew 5. Jesus is saying don't take an oath at all if you are not planning to keep it (5:34). Don't make an oath by heaven you don't intend to keep, because God dwells in heaven. Don't make an oath by earth you don't intend to keep, because God dwells in earth. Don't make an oath by Jerusalem you don't intend to keep, because God dwells in Jerusalem. In other words, qualifying an oath by swearing by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem doesn't get you out of keeping your word because God dwells in each location. God is everywhere and sees everything. Every oath is before God.

This is the doctrine of God's omnipresence:

"The fact that God is everywhere present and has access to all portions of reality." – John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue

In 5:36 we learn that people even qualified their oaths by their head. But our head lies in God's jurisdiction too. After all, God is the one who determines the color of our hair. Since God is the one who actually rules over our head, oaths qualified by the head are oaths before God.

Application

An oath is an oath regardless of how it is qualified. Because every oath is made in the presence of God. To keep us honest, Jesus reminds us that God sees all. If we believe in God's omnipresence, we believe that God sees every word that comes out of our mouths. Including every lie and deception we utter. In this life, we open ourselves up to God's displeasure and discipline when we are untruthful. In the next life, we will stand before God at the judgment seat to give account for the words we failed to keep. God's omnipresence should motivate us to be promise keepers. It's better to be under God's approval than his displeasure.

So oaths are designed to communicate truth, not clever lies. Well, I'm guessing most of us don't qualify our promises by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or our head. And I'm assuming most of us don't have a cleverly devised system where we use certain phrases to signal that we don't intend to follow through on our promises. So how does this rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees relate to us?

Simply put, do we make promises we have no intention of keeping? Like telling your boss you'll get right on something when you're really going to work on something else first. In movies a common plot is the workaholic father who promises they'll make it on time for their son's basketball game. Or their daughter's ballet recital. But what actually happens? They get caught up at work, take too long, rush to make it to their child's event, and it's already over. Everyone has gone home. The father gets home and the wife lets them have it for disappointing their child. The father tries to apologize, but the kid isn't having it. Because it's a repeated pattern. The child is always disappointed by their father's promises. The father never keeps his word.

Do we make promises that we view as optional? Like a promise to do something around the house. This happens when we promise to do something, but in our head we really mean I will do that if I have time for it. But if my wife is counting on me to fulfill my promise, and failure to do as promised will affect her plans, there will be friction when I don't do what I said I would do. Repeated failure to keep our promises creates friction in our relationships. Whether at church, with family, or at work.

Another question arises: is Jesus forbidding all oaths? Is it sin to make a wedding vow, recite the pledge of allegiance, or vow to tell the truth in court? Some traditions, like the Quakers, take Jesus literally. Are they right? This case illustrates the problem with proof-texting, the practice of taking one verse in isolation from the rest of the Bible to establish a unique doctrine. Some use Matthew 5:34 to teach that the Bible forbids every type of oath. If Jesus isn't forbidding us from using oaths, what is he saying?

In short, Jesus isn't forbidding oaths in general. He's forbidding a certain type of oath: the oath that's qualified in order to make it less binding. But he isn't forbidding us from vowing to tell the truth in a court of law. After all, God made oaths:

Hebrews 6:17-18 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

Two things are unchangeable: God's promise and his oath. Why? Because God's purpose doesn't change and because God's nature is such that it is impossible for him to lie. So when God makes promises we can

bank on them. Because he is truthful by nature and that will never change. As God's image bearers our duty is to reflect his character. This includes keeping our promises.

In sum, misleading oaths are forbidden, not oaths in general. But he's also saying something else: better than making oaths is simply keeping the promises you make. Better than having to assure people your word is trustworthy is being a person who's reliable. This is what Jesus is getting at.

Point 2: Better than making promises is keeping promises (5:37)

Explanation

5:37 explains 5:34a. Instead of making slippery oaths, let your word be meaningful. We shouldn't have to swear by God. We shouldn't have to bring in God's name to convince people that our promises are credible. The intent, or spirit of the law, is truthfulness. Kingdom citizens should be a truthful people. And if we're truthful, oaths are unnecessary. We shouldn't have to convince people we'll do what we say.

Anything other than keeping our promises "comes from evil." This reveals the source of dishonesty and deception. Ultimately lies come from Satan. Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus said this:

John 8:44 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 has nothing to do with 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 deceived Eve, Adam followed Eve, and sin came into the world. As a result, our hearts were corrupted, leading to defiled speech. And Jesus reveals that our deceptive words come from our corrupted hearts:

Matthew 15:18-19 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.
¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Ultimately our sinful tendency towards unkept promises comes from Satan. But, after the fall, any failure and struggle to keep our word comes from sin inside us. But the hope of the gospel is this: Jesus died as a substitute for sinners, both to grant forgiveness of sins and to grant new power through the Spirit to fight sin. Jesus died to change our desires so that we would be zealous for kingdom righteousness. So that we would be zealous for keeping our word.

Application

Ultimately we have to ask ourselves, is my word credible? Am I trustworthy? Do people trust what comes out of my mouth? And if this is a struggle, the problem lies in our heart. When Jesus speaks of the heart, he's not talking about a physical organ. He's talking about our inner life. Our thoughts, desires, and emotions. In order to correct deceptive speech, or stretching the truth, our hearts need to be shaped by truth. As we saturate our minds with Scripture, we become convinced that being truthful matters to God. As we become convinced that being truthful matters to God, we desire to be truthful. As we begin to desire being truthful, we take pleasure in keeping our word and being reliable.

Is truth-telling, or keeping your promises a problem? Confess it to God. Confess it to those you've disappointed. Ponder the consequences of failing to keep your word. Ponder the consequences of being

trustworthy. Ask God to show you why honoring your word matters. Ask God to help you desire honesty. Ask God to give you delight in being truthful.

The practical consequences of being untruthful are many. When we don't keep our promises, our relationships suffer. People become frustrated with us, they don't trust us, and conflict ensues. In the workplace, we lose our credibility, we disqualify ourselves from promotions, and even risk being fired. If we own a business, customers stop using us, we get a bad reputation, and our finances suffer. Keep our word matters in the real world. The fallout of broken promises impacts us on many levels.

Back to the Gallup poll. Well, what occupation was the highest rated in terms of honesty and ethical standards? Nurses. 84% of respondents rated their honesty high while only 1% rated their honesty low. So what's better, to be like the politician that has to go out of their way to convince people that they really have our best interests in mind? Or to be like the nurse who already has the people's trust and doesn't have to prove that they care?

The perceived allegiances of the Congress, special interest groups, lobbyists, and their political party, render them unreliable in the court of public opinion. If that's so, shouldn't our perceived allegiance to Christ render us trustworthy in the court of public opinion? After all, Jesus, God the Son, is by nature truthful and reliable. Shouldn't we his followers be the same? Jesus is raising the standard for us today: kingdom citizens should be characterized by keeping their word. We shouldn't have to convince people we're not deceiving them.

Conclusion

People should trust our words without needing an oath. Jesus teaches us, **Don't make promises you don't intend to keep.** And, **Better than making promises is keeping promises.** We need to ask ourselves, how am I perceived? Am I the nurse? Or am I the Congress? The root of unkept promises is sin. But the gospel promises us power to fight sin. So bring your struggle to Jesus, and enlist his grace to help you in the battle.