

7. *Honesty*

Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Matthew 5:33-37

On my oath!

Telling the truth does not speak for itself among men. Whenever testimony has to be given, a judge wrings it out with an oath. Apparently man has to be placed outside of his normal way of speaking in order to ascertain the truth. Compelled by God he does so, but not on his own.

Even when God's name remains unmentioned, an oath in our society always reminds people of the existence of Someone above man to whom everyone is responsible. No one can mislead Him, and He hates the lie. Penalties for perjury betrays that man still has a notion of a world in which only the truth belongs.

In this way, too, it was impressed on the people of Israel that an oath must be kept. If promised under oath, it had to be fulfilled before God's eyes. Thus Israel learned that only truth can stand in front of God. Before Him the truth speaks for itself.

Yes, no, maybe

No one speaks under oath in ordinary conversation. Neither does this part of life appear to need an oath. It has its own rules of conduct and codes of communication. The stringent rules applied to an oath or perjury do not matter here. In fact, dishonest expressions or untrustworthy actions spring up all over: from the "white lie" to falsely filling in a form, and some forms of dishonesty are generally accepted. A weakened conscience can even make the black market white.

The Jews in Jesus' day had developed certain pseudo-oaths which were of lesser weight than the oath before God. They swore by heaven, by the earth, Jerusalem or by the hair on their head. While making some assertions more believable, oaths like that also lessened the risk of a subsequent accusation of perjury when things somehow went wrong. The result was differentiation in the quality of truth.

In this way words lose more and more of their power in our contact with one another. We say “yes” or “no” to our neighbor, but what is it worth? The quality of our speaking determines the value of our contact with one another. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands us to always let “yes” be “yes.” The commandment presupposes a great deficit in this regard.

Sometimes people replace “yes” or “no” with “maybe.” That is a vague word which keeps a person non-committal: “Maybe I’ll come by” (but do we ever intend to do it or do we already know that we are not going to come?). Young people use evasive answers to camouflage their actions from their parents, and by providing vague information a husband isolates himself from his wife. An air of reduced trust comes to hang in families and marriages as a result. The lack of clarity, an unreserved “yes” or “no” in daily contact, can finally result in the silence of negation, in concealment and suppression.

Sometimes, however, we hear solid, clear words. “Yes” and “no” are spoken aloud but later they appear not to have been meant. Just said in passing. Then a girl feels her trust in young men ebbing away because she discovered early on that “yes” does not necessarily mean “yes” at all, and once disillusioned, is twice apathetic or shy. A “yes” not a “yes” or a “no” not a “no” opens a larger wound than a dagger or a revolver: the soul rather than the body has been injured.

The father of lies

Jesus teaches that all of this comes from the evil one. Satan began his work amidst us with an insinuation in Paradise: he awakened the evil thought that God might be less good for man than it appeared, and the lie still characterizes Satan’s work. He also scatters the seeds of mistrust which quickly take root among people, and this seed is hidden in the words. Jesus attributes every form of dishonesty to Satan.

Many evasive words or dishonest acts have been placed in a kind of no-man’s land: Things taking place in the gray zone between oath and lie. Maybe it’s not right, but why should it be wrong? With His word Jesus sweeps this middle ground right off the map. It doesn’t exist. The world is situated in the line of fire between God and Satan, truth and lie. Whoever believes that there is a neutral zone outside of strict honesty is mistaken.

Whatever cannot bear the light of the oath, lies in the shadow of our enemy.

Drastic pronouncements like these shake us awake. Only a sincere “yes” or “no” is appropriate in God’s kingdom. Nothing is ambiguous in the kingdom of heaven. Everything is crystal-clear there. Surprising and unexpected perhaps, but never disappointing. We are allowed to orient ourselves to that kingdom: we have to be its citizens.

This means that we have to be upright in our contact with family and friends, and that we must be faithful to promises and honor them. Finally, that we are serious in our association with others. Upright, faithful and serious: anything else comes from the evil one!

Talking in God’s world

The oath brings us before God’s invisible throne. Our daily life may appear to be far removed from it. That, however, is an error. Jesus teaches us otherwise: we always stand right in front of God whenever we speak. We cannot keep Him at a distance by running away from an oath. He is there and close by.

Jesus reminds us that the world is His creation in which He lives. Heaven is the throne of God and earth the footstool for His feet. By looking up, we are staring at His palace. Although we cannot look inside, His eyes look down at us from it. Not in order to spy like satellites do. But to love and to save. The sun, moon and stars take turns as lamps always burning on the forecourt of the palace. God’s leading and power have complete control over everything which happens on that forecourt: the earth can only revolt underneath His feet! We need to realize where we are located whenever we speak with one another. With God we cannot just run outside and look for our own spot.

God not only rules here but He is also active in saving sinners. Jerusalem is built here, the city of the great king. In Jesus’ day there was no king in Jerusalem, but the great king was expected there. God sent that great king too: Jesus. God’s truth does not float above the earth but has become flesh in our midst. Whoever talks with his neighbor, speaks in the same world in which God’s Son died and was resurrected. We cannot equivocate with the truth in surroundings where He suffered for that truth. Peter wept bitter tears when he realized that he had lied in the

very place where the Master was being struck for his sins.

God's reality touches every man personally. Some young people have difficulty bridging the gap between church and their own room. The latter appears to be in a different world: your own room where you like to be yourself in between your own books and your own music. God's truth appears to be light years away from the surroundings in which we are primarily searching for our own identity and where we want to experience everything authentically. But Jesus then reminds us that we are still incapable of making one hair on our heads white or black. Some people appear to be able to color their hair a solid black, or red or purple. But that is an illusion, and that is man's strong point: giving another appearance to things and above all to himself. With what right do we do that now? Let everyone look in the mirror and ask who has in reality determined the color of his hair. Our identity is ultimately God's creation. He made the specific person that I am, with my facial expressions, posture and hair color. God is this intimate with each person. Our hands, formed by God right up to our very personal finger-tips, should begin to shake violently whenever our tongue derails and speaks dishonestly. Through God we live, move and exist. Every impure tone immediately sounds false in God's personal presence. Since we live from God's breath, we ought to do nothing other than deal honestly with one another. We live under oath!