



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Saying No, to Say Yes”

Matthew 5:33-37

Deacons Offering -- Mission/Ministry Fair

On this first Sunday in June, we are gathered here to hear from God, through the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Find Matthew’s gospel in your Bibles. Matthew is the first book of the New Testament. Then find chapter 5, and verse 33. We’re going to hear Jesus speak to the crowds—and to his disciples—about keeping your word. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;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 swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:33-37, NIV)

Jesus’ words here are the fourth paragraph in a series of passages where he is contrasting the common current understanding of God’s Law, with what God really intended from the start. Each of these pieces begins a bit like our focus passage today: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago. . .” With words like that, Jesus is referring to the commandments and ordinances God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai, the Law that would establish Israel as God’s people in the land God had promised. In the earlier 3 such passages, Jesus recites a direct quote from the Torah. In this one, on “oaths”, Jesus refers both to a scattering of quotes from around the Old Testament, and to a slough of Rabbinic teachings since then. The Old Testament passages would include Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; and Deuteronomy 23:21–23.

Then Jesus clearly departs from “the teaching of old”: “But **I** tell you. . .” When Jesus says that, he is speaking for God; he has authority. People hear it in his voice, in his words, and in the content. He is not quoting earlier rabbis for his authority; his authority rests in God.

The word Jesus, ἐπιτορκεῖν, can mean “break an oath”, and that’s the application here. It’s targeting the passages that say, “You shall fulfill your oaths as unto the Lord,” such as Numbers 30:2.

But I think it’s Exodus 20:7 that Jesus has in mind when he prohibits all these fancy phrases that people had been using. Exodus 20:7 is the “Third Commandment”: “**You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.**” (This is The New International Version of the passage. The King James renders it, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”)

The word the King James scholars translated as “in vain” is a word that means, “to make nothing”—insubstantial, trivial. You don’t treat the Name of God—a special gift given to Moses for the people—in a casual manner.

The Greek word Jesus used for “swear an oath”, originally meant just that—to promise, on oath. But apparently, over time, this “oath-ing” came to be seen as less and less dependable—even to the point where “oath-ing” had become a sign to prepare to be disappointed! Like the line in Shakespeare’s play (“Methinks thou doest protest too much”), in Jesus’ time, “oath-ing” had become a warning of a set-up. Like the husband who promises on a stack of Bibles (as we used to say in the Midwest) to stop spending money, but never does, or the employee who swears she’ll have the project done by Monday, but Monday never seems to come, such promises or oaths aren’t worth anything. Attaching God’s Name to such worthlessness is to debase God’s Name. And God won’t stand for it.

This seems to have been the corrupt state of things in Jesus’ time. And the Pharisees, who were so big on the ‘little details’ of the Law, had developed an additional set of childish distinctions that Jesus says were without a difference. Listen to Jesus in Matthew 23:16-23:

“Woe to you [Pharisees, you] blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.”

This “parsing” had become ridiculous, like when a recent U.S. President (another lawyer) was testifying on his truthfulness, and when seemingly caught in a lie, maintained his truthfulness by saying, “It depends on what your meaning of ‘is’ is.” I imagine Jesus’ line got a chuckle or even a belly laugh from the crowd that first heard it, too. Jesus can be funny!

Jesus says, “swearing ‘by heaven’ ‘by creation’, or ‘by Jerusalem,’”--each of these drags God into your oath. Even swearing by the hairs on your own head drags God into it—you can’t control the hairs on your head (obvious to anyone who looks at ME)--but God can, and so once again you’re dragging God into it. God has not spoken to you about this vow of yours. This is your promise, or your testimony, Jesus says. Bringing God into it is just your attempt to get people to believe you, to put their trust in you. Let your simple yes or no be enough, without seeming to give it weight with God’s Name, as if it was God’s job to guarantee your words.

In Twelve Step programs, they have a slogan, “Keep It Simple, Stupid”, or “KISS”. All this “God-talk” is unnecessary, and frankly, evil, Jesus says. Don’t try to impugn God’s character by your oaths and promises. Just say “yes”, and mean it, or “no”, and stand by what you say.

OK, we’re supposed to keep our word. But as I was reading this text, it occurred to me that we have another problem about saying yes and saying no. Sometimes, when we say “no”, we feel guilty. If we DON’T promise to do something, we run the risk of disapproval from

someone-or-other. And if we're not careful, we say "yes" so often, we become like the plate-spinner we used to watch on the Ed Sullivan Show, who starts plate after plate spinning on a pole, and then has to start tending to all those spinning plates lest one of them fall. That's a great picture of some of us. And if you remember, all the plates were alike. They were all treated the same. And if we're not careful, our sense of priorities, our sense of balance, gets lost. And then, when there are too many plates, one or several tumble and break, with a loud crash.

Sometimes we have to say, "no". Sometimes we'd better say "no", because after a while our "yesses" won't mean anything.

When people take our APC 101 class, there's no obligation to become a member of our church. Membership gets you very little you can't get without being a member. Why would anyone then, become a member? Because they've come to the point where they want anyone and everyone to know that they are committed to the same values and purposes as the other APC members. This is a step of spiritual growth. It means, "I'm IN! I am committed to Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I'll grow with you APC people, serve with You, listen to God with You, encourage you and get your encouragement, too. I'll participate and make ministry happen with you."

I make sure to say, at least twice, there is no obligation to join APC just because you've taken the APC 101 class. And when they're asked about joining the church, if they say "no", then I thank them for that. Because, as I tell them, I trust that "no"; I trust they've thought and prayed about it. And I look forward to the day when they may be led by God to say "Yes". I'll rejoice, because I know I can trust that "yes" as much as I've trusted that "no".

Today is our Mission and Ministry Fair. For a church of our size, we have a lot of things going on—to honor God and to serve the community within and beyond our Church Family. The "Fair" today gives us a snapshot of some of these ministries, and as you browse among the tents, you may be intrigued by something you see. Go ahead and ask questions.

But if you feel drawn to sign up, I need to ask you, "What are you going to drop from your plate, so that you can take on this new thing?" What are you going to drop from your plate, so that you don't drop the whole plate?

What are your priorities? Do you bring your decisions to God? What is God saying to you?

Before you can let your "yes" be yes, and your "no" be no, as someone who claims Jesus as your Lord (absolute ruler of your life), you have to know him, his values, God's priorities. Will this help bring people to Him? It doesn't have to be "front line" evangelism; baking cookies for our great hospitality time is also a contribution that helps people who come here have a good time. But God wants you to be one who gives them a reason to take a risk and make the time to get here. What reasons can you give them for visiting your Life Group, or spending valuable weekend time at worship, when they have so many other things they enjoy doing with that time? In your dealings with them, have you honored your promises? Are you a man or woman of your word, so when you say "yes" they can count on it, and when you say "no", they can count on that, too?

Recent example: last January, storms took down all our wooden fences. They were 20 years old, and it was going to happen sometime. My back-fence neighbor Robert wanted to get our common fence done, and I encouraged him. We consulted on a design, measurements, costs. I promised to pay ½ of our shared portion. So, Robert went ahead, and had to pay the contractor the whole amount on the spot when they finished. He called me, we worked out a time to get together, and he came over and I wrote him a check while standing on our front porch. We talked about a lot of things on the front porch, and I learned a lot about him. And as he was leaving, he turned to me and said, “It was great for you to give me the check as you promised.” In part, he was comparing me to another neighbor whom we can’t count on in part because he’s made too many financial commitments in his desire to make lots of money, and is hurting right now. But Robert was also acknowledging my truthfulness, and faithfulness. I didn’t say this to him but, if I represent a God who keeps promises—just as you do—then I’d better be one who keeps promises, too.

It’s a very freeing thing to deal with someone who keeps promises! When we can count on someone, then we don’t worry. We can use that energy to do what we need to do. Having “yes” means “yes”, and “no” mean “no” is a blessing.

Is your “yes” the truth, or just “truthiness”, as Stephen Colbert would say? When you say “no”, is it because you want to preserve your priorities that you have built at God’s direction? Let’s be people who listen to God and follow God’s priorities, to make a difference with God in the world God loves. Let’s give people a reason to feel safe and secure with us; they might feel drawn as well to our God who keeps promises. Let’s just say something simple like, “This is what God wants me to do,” as we follow through on our vows.

To God be the glory!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 1, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]