

# Matthew 5:33-37

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-5/matthew-533-37/>

*Jesus demonstrates that righteousness and harmony is not a matter of oaths, but plain honesty and simple truth-telling.*

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus next moves to the subject of making promises or *vows*. He again addresses the matter at the heart level. *Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.'* The reference to *the ancients* could mean the time period of the Old Testament in general. It could also be a specific reference to the Exodus generation who had received the Law from Moses. The ninth commandment was “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20).

Regardless of which *ancients* Jesus has in view, it is clear that He is discussing a long-standing practice of making *vows*. To vow or *make an oath* by something was to say that your promise is as good or as lasting as the thing you are swearing by. If someone were to swear by this mountain, they are saying that “as long as this mountain is here so will I be or do what I am promising to you.” People typically swore by things that endured as a way of adding gravity to their oaths. The most permanent thing or person to swear by is of course *God*. Moses wrote in Psalm 90:2 of God that He is “from everlasting to everlasting.” To appeal to *God* by invoking the *Lord's* name when making an *oath* was to be absolutely bound to that *oath* in the strongest possible terms.

Here is what the Law of Moses said about making *vows to the Lord*.

“You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord”  
(Leviticus 19:12).

“If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth”  
(Numbers 30:2).

“When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you”  
(Deuteronomy 23:21).

Moses' admonition is echoed by Solomon:

“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay”  
(Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).

From these verses it is obvious that *God* takes His name very seriously. Anyone who violated an *oath* they made by invoking the *Lord* would face punishment from society, but also be accountable before *God*. Yet again, religious authorities created loopholes to “get away with” being deceitful and wiggle out of their promises while maintaining a facade of righteousness.

People would make *vows* not by *God’s* name but *by heaven*, or *by the earth*, or *by Jerusalem*, or some other thing. When they broke their promise or did not *fulfill* their *vows* they could set aside their feelings of guilt or dismiss their accusers with the thought that the vow did not have to be kept because it was not made *to the Lord* Himself.

With delicious irony, Jesus invokes His own divine name and authority—*I say to you*—in His next instruction. *But I say to you, make no oath at all* but rather simply *let your statements be, ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’* In other words, just tell the truth and stop deceiving one another by trying to wriggle out of your agreements. And quit trying to add more weight behind your words than what you can vouch for.

All authority ultimately derives from *God*—no authority rests solely with us. So do not swear by *heaven, for it is the throne of God*. Do not swear *by the earth, for it is God’s footstool*. Do not swear *by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King*. The phrase *the great King* could refer to Himself, the Messiah, the Son of David, or to King David, who conquered *Jerusalem* and made it his capital city (Matthew 1:1, 2 Samuel 5:6-10). Do not swear by anything, just tell the truth.

With humor Jesus adds that *you shall not even make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black*. There are precious few things we can control, and the natural color of our *hair* is not one of them. Everything ultimately comes back to *God*. What we can control is whether or not we will trust *God*, and strive to keep and fulfill our promises. This we should do.

Any oaths *beyond* the plain truth telling of ‘*Yes, yes*’ (doing what we say we will do) or ‘*No, no*’ (not doing what we say we will not do) *is of evil*. The kingdom of heaven is full of righteousness (social harmony); harmony between people cannot exist without people being truthful. Trust is the bond which ties together social groups and gives them strength.

### **Biblical Text**

**Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these**