

Matthew 5:33-37

- Be honest -

Author: Evert Jan Hempenius

© 2015

www.christianstudylibrary.org

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

Introduction

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological notes, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlaps somewhat with other sermon outlines taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand alone”.
- ❖ “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’” (Mt. 5:37); the best advice for politicians, employers, employees, husbands, wives and all other people who want to live a trustworthy life.

Context

- ❖ To understand the teachings of Jesus a brief summary of the background is necessary.
- ❖ The baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:13-17):
 - Before Jesus was baptised by John, he said: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this **to fulfill all righteousness.**”
 - And after: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw **the Spirit of God** descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”
 - The Sermon on the Mount teaches this **fulfilment of all righteousness**. <> “For I tell you that unless **your righteousness surpasses** that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law...” (Mt. 5:20).
- ❖ The preaching of Jesus:

- Jesus had already been preaching in the synagogues in Galilee for some time before he delivered his sermon on the mount. Matthew summarized these sermons as follows:
 - “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near**’” (Mt. 4:17).
 - Jesus continued and took over the ministry of John the Baptist:
 - “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near**’” (Mt. 3:1–2).
 - And later on, when Jesus sent out his twelve disciples:
 - “As you go, preach this message: ‘**The kingdom of heaven is near**’” (Mt. 10:7).
 - These two aspects, repentance and the kingdom, are prominent in the Sermon on the Mount.
- ❖ The life of Jesus Christ:
- Jesus taught the Law and the Prophets; and he lived according to the Law and the Prophets. The Sermon on the Mount reflects his life. He lived according to his own teachings and by doing so set an example for his followers, the disciples. A clear example is found in Matthew 5:39: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” When Jesus was arrested, he didn’t strike back.
- ❖ The future of the Kingdom:
- After his resurrection, Jesus summoned his eleven disciples to go back to the mount: “**All authority in heaven and on earth** has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (...) and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**” (Mt. 28:18-20).
 - This authority is reflected in expressions like: “**But I tell you** that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Mt. 5:22).
 - And in: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘**Lord, Lord,**’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but...” (Mt. 7:20).

Form and structure

- ❖ The Sermon on the Mount consists of five main parts:
- 1. General calling to repentance and the promise of the Kingdom: Matthew 5:3-10, characterized by: “Blessed are...”
 - 2. Then Jesus turns to his disciples and all who want to learn from him: “Blessed are **you**...” The main theme is “**the prophets**” (Mt. 5:11-16).

- 3. The central part is an exposition of the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 5:17-7:12):
 - “Do not think that I have come to abolish **the Law or the Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfil** them” (Mt. 5:17)...
 - The Lord’s Prayer is found at the very centre of the sermon!
 - “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the **Law and the Prophets**” (Mt. 7:12).
 - 4. After his exposition of the Law and the Prophets, he returns to the theme of the Prophets, and warns against “**the false prophets**” (Mt. 7:13-23). This contrasts with the second part of the sermon.
 - 5. He concludes his sermon again with a general call to choose: “**Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine...**”(Mt. 7:24-27).

❖ Let us turn to the structure of Matthew 5:33-37:

<i>Introduction</i>	“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago,		
<i>General rule according to the teaching of the Pharisees</i>	‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’		
<i>General rule of Jesus (1)</i>	But I tell you, ‘Do not swear at all		
		either by heaven,	for it is God’s throne;
		or by the earth,	for it is his footstool;
		or by Jerusalem,	for it is the city of the Great King.
<i>Emphasis ></i>	And do not swear	by your head,	for you cannot make even one hair white or black.
<i>General rule of Jesus (2)</i>	Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’;	anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”	

Technical and hermeneutical notes

- ❖ It is important to realise that Jesus preached his sermon around 30 AD in Galilee.
 - To Jews living in a country,

- which was part of the Roman Empire;
- who had contact with the Hellenistic (Greek) and Roman culture; this culture was prominent in a city like Tiberias (Lake of Tiberias = Sea of Galilee) and the Decapolis, nowadays Jordan.
- To Jews,
 - who frequented the synagogues and were used to listening to the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes, their spiritual leaders at that time;
 - who were expecting the promised One (according to Dt. 18:15-18; Mal. 4:4-5; Mt. 11:3);
 - who were longing for the restoration of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 11:12), the main theme of the teaching of Jesus.
- ❖ This background is needed to understand some passages of the sermon, especially those that speak of persecution (Mt. 5:10-12), pagans (Mt. 6:7, 32) and of hypocrites.
 - The selection of topics found within the Sermon on the Mount reflects some debated issues among first century Jews such as (Mt. 5:31-32; Mt. 19:3-9). Jesus doesn't cover all aspects of the Law, for instance the fourth commandment (Sabbath Day) is not found here, although it was hotly debated between the Pharisees and Jesus (Mt. 12:1-8). Neither does he refer to the greatest commandment (Mt. 22:37-40).
 - He especially confronts the teaching of the Pharisees and Scribes. Some of the topics found in the sermon are also found in Matthew 23, where he condemns them for their hypocritical stance.
 - Jesus doesn't give a new set of rules or applications, but proposes a different mindset. This mindset is governed by (see application):
 - the blessings of the Kingdom (Mt. 5:3-10);
 - the Lord's prayer (Mt. 6:9-13), the central part of the sermon.

Exposition

Verse 33

- ❖ **“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago...”**
 - **“Again.”** This is the fourth example in which Jesus teaches the Law and the Prophets.
 - **“You have heard.”** You are the disciples, the people standing on the slope of the mount listening to Jesus. Jesus refers to the teaching of the Scribes and the Pharisees, which

they (= you) had heard in their synagogues. He does not refer to the teaching of the Old Testament, nor is he quoting the Old Testament.

- **“that it was said.”** The Scribes and Pharisees read, explained and applied the words of God, which he had given to the people of Israel by his servant Moses. “That is was said” refers to authority of Moses (and God), which doesn’t mean that these words were exactly taken from the Old Testament.
- **“to the people long ago.”** This refers to the ancient people of Israel.
- **“Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.”** This is in line with the teaching of Lev. 19:12, Dt. 23:21 and Num. 30:2:
 - **“When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.”**

Verse 34-36

- ❖ **“But I tell you.”** This is in contrast with the teaching of the Pharisees. Matthew 23:16-22 is important. Jesus is not contradicting or supplementing Moses, he is fulfilling Moses (Mt. 5:17-20), which means that his teachings are in accordance with Moses, the Law and the Prophets. This statement is not the problem, but rather the practice of swearing. People were swearing by the heaven, the earth, Jerusalem and their own head.
 - While using these different oaths, they didn’t use the NAME of the Lord, trying to avoid any misuse of this NAME in accordance with the third commandment: **“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”** (Ex. 20:7). But they are misleading themselves. And when these oaths were used deliberately, it was an example of hypocrisy and of legalism.
- ❖ The order **heaven > earth > Jerusalem** suggests an existing practice of greater and lesser oaths. Using a lesser oath probably gives room for breaking a promise or word more easily. Using such an oath is misleading as it suggests trustworthiness while the person who swears has reservations or a hidden agenda.
 - **“And do not swear by your head.”** This oath suggests reliability and trustworthiness which in the end is empty, **“for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”**
- ❖ Jesus teaches the people that they live in the world of God > the heaven is God’s throne; the earth is his footstool; Jerusalem is his city; and only God can change one of your hairs to white or black. Compare Mt. 10:30: **“And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”** He refers implicitly to Isaiah 66:1,2:
 - “This is what the LORD says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the one

I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” (See also Ps. 99:5.)

- ❖ In these words we discover the wisdom of the Lord, his trustworthiness, his purity of heart, his deep longing for righteousness.

Verse 37

- In the Kingdom of God a simple yes or no is the rule. A disciple of Christ doesn't need an oath to guarantee his promise. If he does need one, it might be because he wants to cover up a hidden agenda. But, **“anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”** Compare Dt. 23:21-23; James 5:12. The evil one is the father of lies, deceit (Jn. 8:44).

Application

- ❖ **Important.** There is a difference between swearing and taking an oath in the public domain, where a government or official institutions might require an oath for service in the military, the government, the courts of justice or medical institutions. And under compelling circumstances a solemn pledge might be required from individuals.¹ In both the Old and the New Testament examples can be found.
 - Abraham confirmed his promises (Gen. 14:14-22; 21:23-24) with an oath.
 - God himself confirmed his promises with an oath (Gen. 22;16; 26: 3; Heb. 6:16), to endorse his truthfulness.
- ❖ **“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’”** is a very simple rule that even a child can understand. It is applicable in all circumstances of life. Be honest, be pure in heart. An interesting use of these words is found in 2 Corinthians 1:17-20.
 - This should never become a new kind of legalism.
- ❖ At the same time Jesus confronts the world with this simple rule. How often do people make promises which they can't fulfil, especially in the world of politics and in business? He condemns all kinds of hypocrisy.
- ❖ The following connections between the beatitudes and the **Simply...** can be noted (examples):

Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-10):	Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’,
6 “Blessed are those who hunger and	Only when you hunger and thirst for

¹ The Anabaptists and Quakers today decline to swear. For more information about the Reformed Doctrines: [Westminster Confession of Faith XXII](#) and [The Heidelberg Catechism](#) (Lord's Day 37)

thirst for righteousness,”	righteousness will you strive for honesty, trustworthiness, an open agenda. It requires wisdom to know when to say yes or no, or to refrain from a promise for good reasons.
8 “Blessed are the pure in heart,”	When your yes is yes, you are pure in heart, and other people will trust you and can rely upon you. ²
9 “Blessed are the peacemakers,”	And when they trust you, you can make peace.

❖ The following connections between the Lord’s prayer and the **Simply...** can be noted (examples):

The Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13):	Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’
9 “Our Father in heaven,”	I am aware of the fact that I live in the world of God, OUR Father. He is our Father, my Father and the Father of the one to whom I give my promise, my wife, my husband, my brother and sister, and the one to whom I might have to say “no”.
“hallowed be your name,”	When my yes is a simple yes, I am honouring God and hallowing his name. I don’t need an oath.
10 “your kingdom come, your will be done”	When I listen to Jesus, his kingdom has come over me. His will be done!
11 “Give us today our daily bread.”	He will give me the strength, the daily bread, the faith, hope and love, to fulfil my promises, and the wisdom how and when to say yes or no.
13 “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”	Compare: “ anything beyond this comes from the evil one. ”

² Mt. 15:19: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. 20 These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”

Bibliography

Hagner, D. (1993). *Word biblical commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Dallas: Word Books.

Hendriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.

Stott, J. (1992). *The message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian counter-culture*. (2nd ed.). Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.