

Straight Talking

Matthew 5:33-37

In 1992, the Conservative MP and former minister Alan Clark was questioned as a witness during the 'Arms to Iraq' trial. When asked to clarify discrepancies between his testimony and previous statements he had made, Clark famously explained that he may have been "economical with the *actualité*." This famous response is often held up as a classic example of the sort of language used by politicians to gloss over occasions when they have concealed the truth. Most of us will be aware of other euphemisms used at times like this, hearing phrases such as 'gilding the lily,' 'stretching a point to make it' or having people tell us that they 'may have misspoken.'

Jesus addresses this issue of truthfulness in our speech in this week's section of the Sermon on the Mount. A number of commentators have pointed out that the approach he takes to speech in verses 33 to 37 is similar to that outlined with regard to divorce in verses 31 to 32. In both instances, provisions have been made which make allowance for our fallen human condition and the inevitability of things sometimes going wrong. As Dick France points out, 'In each case the laws quoted may still have a trouble-shooting function, but they are being misused if they are made the basis for ethical thinking. The kingdom of heaven operates on a more radical level of essential righteousness.'¹

Two issues are addressed here by Jesus: **oaths**, an occasion where someone calls upon God or some other sacred object as a way of undergirding a promise or commitment they are making; and **vows**, a promise to God of an action to be performed if he acts in a certain way. In verse 33, Jesus introduces this theme by saying, 'you have heard that it was said to the people long ago...' However, he doesn't then quote one precise commandment from the Law. Instead, he sums up the overall message of several passages which stipulate the need for oaths and/or vows to be taken seriously. "You shall not swear falsely" probably represents the prohibition on false swearing in Lev 19:12 (cf. Lev 6:3-5; Ps 24:4) while the command to "repay" your oaths reflects a recurrent OT theme that vows must be carried out, exemplified in Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-23; Ps 50:14; Eccl. 5:4. Vows were undertaken voluntarily, but once undertaken they were binding.'²

Oath taking would have been a practice familiar to the disciples of Jesus. Craig Keener notes 'the practice was surely common in the market place among other places.'³ To avoid the disrespect for God's name which would have arisen in

¹ RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 213

² RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 214

³ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1999, 193

regularly invoking it in vows, people often called upon surrogate objects instead, hence Jesus' reference to swearing by the earth or Jerusalem.

Jesus' response to these issues is not to introduce more regulation, but simply to encourage people to be more honest in the first place: 'All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one' (v37). Many of us will be aware of the old expression which tells us 'a gentleman's word is his bond.' Jesus clearly expects the same thing to apply to his disciples. We won't need to protest that we mean what we say if we're being honest in the first place.

For discussion

1. One response which some Christians make to these verses is to refuse to swear on the Bible when giving evidence in court. Do you believe this literal interpretation is the right one? What complications or misunderstandings could arise from interpreting these verses in this way?
2. 'I'm only passing this on for prayer.' 'A number of people have told me they're worried about this, but they wouldn't want their names known.' This is language familiar to any of us who have spent any time in a church. Can you think of any other similar phrases we use which might actually be preventing a more honest and transparent atmosphere in our church? What is the best way of dealing with this issue in our church?
3. How would you respond to someone who objected to these verses on the basis that there are some situations it would be hurtful to someone to be completely honest with them?
4. In January 2016 *The Independent* newspaper reported, 'Once-respected institutions such as the Church now enjoy less trust among the general public than professions including hairdressing. According to pollsters Ipsos Mori, 69 percent of people trust their hairdresser to tell them the truth compared to slightly fewer - 67 per cent - who trust the clergy. This contrasts sharply with the respect afforded to priests three decades ago, when some 85 per cent of people saw the Church as trustworthy.'⁴ What steps could we take as individual believers to restore trust in the church as a whole?
5. Facebook... Twitter... fake news... the internet presents all of us with new challenges with regard to trustfulness and truthfulness. What might Jesus' words here have to teach us about our behaviour online, the sources we turn to for information and also the image we present of ourselves?

⁴ For the full story see: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/church-sees-largest-drop-in-public-trust-as-hairdressers-deemed-more-truthful-a6826871.html>