

Rightly Dividing the Gospels

—Installment 33—

The Sermon on the Mount

—Part 7—

The Distinctive Doctrines of Jesus:

Oaths

~ 28 A.D., after Passover

Near Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee

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I. Brief Review of Overview of the Sermon on the Mount

- A. We are treating Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount conjointly with Luke’s Sermon on the Plain
- B. Audience
 - 1. His disciples, whom he particularly addressed in a public setting among multitudes
 - a. That is, those whom he was preparing to receive and enter his kingdom
- C. Theme
 - 1. The kingdom and its distinctive qualities

II. Covered so far

- A. Beatitudes (Matt. 5: 3–12; Luke 6: 20–26)
- B. Salt and light..... (Matt. 5: 13–16)
- C. Relationship of Jesus’ Doctrine to OT and Traditional Doctrine (Matt. 5: 17–48; Luke 6: 27–36)
 - 1. We considered the meaning of Jesus’ declared purpose to fulfill the OT
 - a. Fulfillment of the OT means satisfying its objective—leading to Christ and the NT
 - 2. We showed that he meant for his commands in this sermon to be applied to Christians vv. 19–20
 - a. These commandments pertain to the subjects of the kingdom, i.e. Christians
 - b. Those given in this instructional phase could be obeyed without abrogating the OT law

III. The Distinctive Doctrines of Jesus..... Matt. 5: 21–48

- A. Murder 21–26
 - 1. Jesus took an existing OT law and greatly amplified it for the NT

- a. Not by adding detail and regulation
- b. Rather, he extended its scope and reach
 - i. He applies the law in the spiritual realm
 - ii. He identifies the sin at its lowest root; in that case, anger and contempt
 - iii. He declares that sin begins in the heart and is already sin before it is outwardly expressed
- 2. The NT law is harder to obey than the OT
- B. Adultery.....27–30
 - 1. Jesus again makes an existing OT law greater
 - a. He applies the law in the spiritual realm
 - b. He identifies the sin at its lowest root; in this case, sexual lust
 - c. He declares that adultery, too, begins in the heart and is already sin before it is outwardly expressed
 - 2. He gives a strong command by way of an illustrative example: If your eye or hand causes you to sin, remove it and cast it away
 - a. Jesus’ commands are spiritually focused, and the physical details he chooses for illustration do not restrict the scope of his principles and commands
 - 3. The NT law on adultery is very much harder to obey than the OT law
- C. Divorce and Remarriage.....31–32
 - 1. Jesus sharply restricts the permission of Moses by declaring that divorce is usually sinful even when legally obtained
 - 2. He establishes two related doctrines:
 - a. Causation of adultery
 - i. Divorcing one’s wife causes her to commit adultery
 - ii. Causing her to sin is itself sin
 - (i) Even if it is otherwise legal
 - (ii) Even if she does not succumb
 - b. Adultery of remarriage
 - i. Marrying a divorced woman is adultery
 - (i) Irrespective of the man’s own eligibility
 - c. The focus of these doctrines is on guilt associated with the causation of sin
 - i. The hard-hearted husband for tempting his wife to sin
 - ii. The second husband for enabling the wife to violate her marriage covenant
 - 3. The NT law is harder to obey than the OT
- D. Oaths.....33–37
 - 1. Definitions and meanings
 - a. Jesus refers here to the narrow meanings of oaths and swearing, not general vile speech

- i. Vile speech not included in this context:
 - (i) Cursing (imprecation)
 - 1. Calling or praying for evil or calamity
 - a. Go to ____
 - b. Go <injure> yourself
 - c. God <injure> you
 - (ii) Obscenity (vulgarity)
 - 1. Speech offensive to standards of decency
 - a. F-word
 - b. Words designed to shock or appall (usually related to sex or excrement)
 - (iii) Blasphemy (profanity)
 - 1. Speech that degrades the reputation of God or holy things
 - a. Man created God
 - b. Jesus was merely a good man
 - c. The Bible is false
 - 2. Taking the name of God in vain (in emptiness)
 - a. OMG
 - b. Jesus!
 - ii. These other forms of vile speech are usually sinful in their own right, but for reasons other than what Jesus discusses here
 - iii. There is overlap among the categories, and oaths can certainly contain elements of the others
- b. Oath
 - i. An assertion or promise strengthened by reference to some sacred witness
 - (i) The sacred witness is understood to reinforce the truth of the statement
 - 1. In the sense of providing a guarantee or bond
 - a. The oath-taker is understood to be at risk of wrath from the sacred witness
 - (ii) The sacred witness is most commonly God himself, but can be almost anything
 - 1. The Bible
 - 2. Heaven, saints, angels, ancestors, “all that is holy”, etc.
 - 3. Even things not generally considered sacred
 - a. The earth, one’s own head
 - (iii) The fully stated form is “I swear by God...”
 - 1. ...that something is true (sworn statement)
 - 2. ...to do something (sworn promise)
 - (iv) It can be abbreviated to just “By God”

1. This does not change the meaning, and the statement is still a sworn oath
- (v) Other variants include
 1. “With God as my witness”
 2. “So help me God”
- (vi) Sometimes the sacred witness is omitted
 1. Such an oath implicitly invokes the speaker’s own witness
 - a. Equivalent to Jesus’ example of swearing by one’s own head
- c. Vow
 - i. A special oath in which God is both the witness and the recipient of the oath
 - ii. Marriage vows are traditionally understood to be given to both one’s spouse and God
 - iii. Vow is also used more generally as a simple synonym for oath and swear
- d. Swear
 - i. To take an oath
 - (i) “Swear an oath” and “sworn oath” are technically redundant, but these expressions serve to limit the meaning to formal oaths, not vile speech
 - ii. To affirm with godlike confidence
- e. Forswear
 - i. To make a false oath; swear falsely; perjure oneself
 - ii. This can take three basic forms
 - (i) Asserting something with an oath you know to be false (lying under oath)
 - (ii) Promising something with an oath you do not intend to do (bad faith)
 - (iii) Failing to keep an oath made in good faith (foolish promise or change of heart)
2. OT doctrine
 - a. Do not forswear yourself..... Lev. 19: 12
 - b. Keep your vows to God.....Num. 30: 2; Deut. 23: 21–23
3. NT doctrine
 - a. Swear not at all
 - i. Taking this command without broad context requires a strict refusal of all oaths
 - (i) Including judicial and religious oaths
 - (ii) Some groups, notably the Quakers, refuse ever to swear
 1. Some were imprisoned in 17th c. England for, essentially, contempt of court
 - (iii) The influence of the Quakers in Colonial America led to the adoption of “swear or affirm” in judicial oaths, found in the Constitution and other documents
 1. The president, among other officers, may swear or affirm unto his duties
 2. The original Quaker affirmation, first allowed in England in 1695, seems functionally indistinguishable from an oath

a. “I <name> do declare in the Presence of Almighty God the Witness of the Truth of what I say.”

ii. But several points of scriptural context force us to recognize that Jesus must not have meant to utterly forbid all oaths

(i) If it were not for the remote context, I would take the Quakers’ strict view myself

iii. Translation

(i) “At all” is translated from ὅλως *holos*, which literally means “wholly” or “altogether”

1. But its idiomatic use includes a weaker sense that means “mostly” or “commonly”

a. “It is reported *commonly* that there is fornication among you...”..... I Cor. 5: 1

b. A modern equivalent would be, “Everyone says there is fornication among you.”

2. Other similar instances of idiomatic hyperbole can be found (cf. Installment 7)

a. “All (πᾶς *pas*) the land of Judea” came to John “and were all baptized”..... Mark 1: 5

i. KJV, NAS and NIV give subtly different accounts of “all” with respect to “Judea,” “Jerusalem” and “baptized”

ii. Luke tells of some who were not baptized..... Luke 7: 30

iii. Common sense says that Mark means “large majorities,” not “every last soul.”

b. We might say, “Everyone rallied behind the new president.”

i. Even new presidents don’t get literally everyone’s support, but the idiom means “large majorities”

3. It is a legitimate translation to say “Do not swear commonly”

a. None of the translations I have consulted vary from “at all”

b. I assert this simply to show that the language allows the weaker sense

c. It is the remote context that persuades me

iv. Remote context

(i) Rightly dividing the covenants

1. A few certain judicial oaths were required by OT law, which was still in force

a. Property disputes among neighbors Ex. 22: 11

b. Test for adultery Num. 5: 19

2. Jesus cannot have given any law prior to his crucifixion that would have required abrogating the OT, else he could not be said to have been without sin

(ii) Authoritative example

1. God himself swears

a. Promise to Abraham..... Gen 22: 16–18

b. Establishing the priesthood of Christ Heb. 7: 21

c. Impossible for him to lie Heb. 6: 13–18

- i. Swearing is not wrong for God, because he cannot forswear himself
 - ii. Much of Jesus' criticism of swearing has to do with arrogating God's prerogatives
2. Jesus answered the high priest under oath, although he did not himself swear
..... Matt. 26: 63–64
 - a. Again, it is difficult to extrapolate from this example to ourselves, for the same reason that Jesus, as God, cannot forswear himself
3. The apostle Paul swore repeatedly, in religious solemnity, throughout his epistles
 - a. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Rom. 1: 9
 - b. I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, Rom. 9: 1
 - c. Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth..... II Cor. 1: 23
 - d. As the truth of Christ is in me, no man shall stop me of this boasting in the regions of Achaia. II Cor. 11: 10
 - e. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not..... II Cor. 11: 31
 - f. Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.... Gal. 1: 20
 - g. For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ. Phil. 1: 8
 - h. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness: I Thess. 2: 5
 - i. Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: I Thess. 2: 10
 - j. Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity. I Tim. 2: 7
4. Angels swear by God..... Rev. 10: 5–6
5. Dozens of other biblical examples could be cited
 - a. Mostly in the OT, where it would take time to determine whether or not they comport with Jesus' new law
6. Paul's use of oaths forces us to one of two conclusions
 - a. Paul was ignorant or disobedient
 - i. We reject this possibility on the basis of his apostleship and the authority it conveys
 - b. Jesus' command was meant to be understood in a softer idiom
 - i. Do not swear commonly, profanely, or casually
 - ii. Appropriately solemn swearing is permitted
 - Judicial

- Religious (esp. wedding vows)
- b. He forbids four specific instances of common oaths
 - i. The Jews of the day, like worldly people of our day, were in the habit of making all manner of profane oaths
 - (i) Their traditions said that only certain oaths were binding, especially those referred to God, and that swearing by lesser things removed the possibility of forswearing oneself
 1. They had some bizarre traditions in this regard..... Matt. 23: 16–22
 - ii. The four instances
 - (i) By heaven
 1. It is the throne of God
 - (ii) By earth
 1. It is the footstool of God
 - (iii) By Jerusalem
 1. It is the city of God
 - (iv) By your own head
 1. It is made by God (implied)
 - a. You cannot control so much as the color of a single hair
 - iii. These instances are illustrative examples
 - (i) Just as he used in commanding the plucking out of the right eye
 - (ii) They do not limit the command to the specific cases
 1. Rather, they illustrate a great principle
 - a. All oaths are referable to God
 - b. Thus, all oaths are functionally vows unto God
 - i. And he has no pleasure in fools and their foolish vowsEcc. 5: 4–5
 - c. Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’, ‘no’
 - i. Speak simply, directly, and truthfully
 - (i) The Quakers hold that oaths imply a double standard of truthfulness
 - ii. “There is no reason to consider that solemn oaths in a court of justice, or on other proper occasions, are wrong, provided they are taken with due reverence. But all oaths taken without necessity, or in common conversation, must be sinful, as well as all those expressions which are appeals to God, though persons think thereby to evade the guilt of swearing. The worse men are, the less they are bound by oaths; the better they are, the less there is need for them. Our Lord does not enjoin the precise terms wherein we are to affirm or deny, but such a constant regard to truth as would render oaths unnecessary.”Matthew Henry
 - d. Whatsoever is more comes of evil
 - i. Swearing is a morally suspect condition, subject to judgmentJames 5: 12
 - ii. “If God wills”: the humble alternative to swearing James 4: 13–16

- E. Resisting Evil next installment
- F. Neighbors and Enemies