

Introduction

Today I'm going to preach about one the greatest needs of human beings and the urgency of respecting it.

A pastor was asked to counsel a 16 year-old who had been arrested for shoplifting. The pastor asked him several questions one of which was this, **"Why in the world did you shoplift a pair of socks?"** To which he, without hesitating, replied, **"Because my friends said I was 'chicken' if I didn't."**

That little anecdote illustrates one of the fundamental truths of our existence. Human beings are born free and we need to respect it that they are. The two texts that we read teach us just that.

Born Free

Let's start with Genesis 2:15-17.

According to this narrative, God gave something to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that He didn't give to the animals, a command. He selected a tree and charged them not to eat its fruit. That necessarily meant of course that they could if they chose to.

That God gave Adam and Eve a command reveals a defining fact about human beings. We are born free. I had a dog named Job who got into the refrigerator, ate an 18 inch pizza, and almost died. He doing that demonstrates why God didn't give animals a command. It's because their behavior is largely a product of the inborn and incoming urges they have. But that isn't true of human beings. We're born free instead.

"Born free" means two things. First, we have the capacity to make decisions. We're able to gather information, connect it up with our values and beliefs, and conclude what is best. Second, we have the liberty to carry out decisions. God allows us to pursue what we conclude is best even if He wants us not to. So, a youth leader discovered that half the members of his youth group cheat on tests. They have the capacity to decide that is best and the liberty to do it.

Hope College professor Alan Rosenberg said something that sums up what those two things together mean. God has given human beings **“the leadership over their own lives.”** That’s the essence of being born free. God has given us the leadership over our lives – the capacity to decide what is best and the liberty to do it.

That quality of ours is one of the principal ways that we are in His image. And in Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus teaches us what we must do because it is. We must respect it.

No Oaths

In this text, Jesus discusses what he calls **“the making of oaths.”** Oaths are nothing more than statements that invoke curses on the ones making them. The most popular Jewish oaths in the first century were **“As I live,” “As the Lord lives,” “As you live,” “May the Lord witness against me,” “As heaven is my witness,”** and **“By my head.”** The oath maker said one of those things and then followed it with a statement. His meaning in doing so was this, **“May I be cursed if this statement isn’t true.”**

We ourselves have our own modern equivalents don’t we? When my cousin Robin and I were boys, I asked him to buy me a candy bar. I told him I’d pay him back the next day but discerning he wasn’t so sure I would, I added, **“Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”** That is an oath. Others we use are: **“I swear on my mother’s grave,” “I swear on a stack of Bibles,” “May God strike me dead,” “By God,” “As God is my witness,”** and more.

In verse 33, Jesus revealed what the spiritual leaders of the Jews, the Pharisees, taught them about oaths. They could use them. He also revealed the guidelines they gave them for doing so. If an oath invoked God, it did matter that what was said was false. The oath maker was unrighteous because it was. But if an oath did not invoke God, it did not matter that what was said was false. The oath maker was not unrighteous because it was.

Let me illustrate. Suppose a father, to cut costs, tells his engaged daughter, **“By God, Little Debbies are good enough to serve at your wedding reception.”** #1 – As much as it pains me to say it, his statement is false. And #2 - His oath invokes God. He’s unrighteous, therefore, for making the statement. But suppose he tells her instead, **“I swear on my mother’s grave, Little Debbies are good enough to serve at your wedding reception.”** #1 - His statement is false. And #2 - His oath doesn’t invoke God. He is not unrighteous, therefore, for making the statement. That’s what the Pharisees taught about oaths.

But notice what Jesus taught in contrast. Verses 34-35 – make no oaths that invoke God. Verse 36 – make no oaths that don’t invoke God. Or to say it more decisively, in verse 34, **“Make no oaths at all.”** Jesus’ little brother James learned that well from him. He wrote in 5:12 of his letter, **“But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.”**

Jesus and James meant that literally, whether it first or twenty-first century oaths. Back in 1998, I was looking for a good used car. So, a salesman at car lot showed me one, a 1992 Cavalier, and said it only had 31,000 miles on it. I was skeptical about the mileage though for several reasons and expressed that. To which the salesman replied, **“As God is my witness, this car only has 31,000 miles on it.”** Jesus and James taught that we shouldn’t do that. Make no oaths at all.

Not About Truth Telling

Now, because this teaching is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we know He considers making no oaths indispensable to kingdom living. But why is that? What is it about that makes it so important?

From the beginning of their movement, Quakers have contended that it’s about truth telling. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, explained it this way: **“People swear to the end they may speak truth; Christ would have them speak truth to the end they might not swear.”** The reasoning of Quakers is simple and clear. Making an

oath, which asserts that we're now telling the truth, implies that we sometimes don't tell the truth. That in turn is a bad testimony that taints our witness to the world.

That's how Quakers have always interpreted verses 33-37 and still do. Paragraphs 353-354 of our denomination's *Book of Discipline* are titled "Oaths" and say this: "**The New Testament (Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12) teaches that for Christians there is no need to swear to tell the truth but rather that speaking the truth should be their normal continuing practice.**" That is, by the way, why Quakers "affirm" instead of "swear" when they take judicial oaths in courts of law.

Many Christians interpret verses 33-37 the way Quakers do. They take them to mean that we should always tell the truth.

Not Respecting Leadership

But they're wrong. These verses aren't about telling the truth. They're about respecting the freedom with which people are born.

Let's analyze oath making. It has two nuances. First, a person states a point of information or knowledge and uses an oath to get someone to believe it and act on it. The car salesman stated, "**This Cavalier only has 31,000 miles on it.**" He also said, "**As God is my witness**" to get me to believe that and buy it. The second nuance is that a person declares a promise or intention and uses an oath to get someone to believe it and act on it. I declared to my cousin, "**I'll pay you back tomorrow.**" I also said, "**Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye**" to get him to believe that and buy me a candy bar.

Those two nuances show us what the specific aim of making oaths is. It's to get our own way. Oaths function to impress others with the sincerity and reliability of what we say. They lend weight to our words and us, which in turn gets others to conform to what we say. Making oaths, in other words, is a device for getting our way, for getting what we want.

That device, I admit, is effective. But it's also wrong. As Dallas

Willard says it, **“It is an inherently wrong approach to other human beings.”** That’s true and what we learned in Genesis 2:15-17 explains why it is. It’s because making oaths disrespects people’s leadership over their lives.

It disrespects that because it manipulates them. It overrides their judgment and will. It goes around their mental processes not through them. If we just inform people’s mental processes, they might not believe or do what we want. So we bypass those processes with an oath instead. The oath makes them quit thinking critically about what we state or declare. It compels them just to react to it instead. Making oaths disrespects people’s leadership over their lives. Why? It’s because it’s a method of manipulation.

Sadly though, it isn’t the only one. Remember the 16 year-old who shoplifted. His friends got him to do that by “dissing” him. The truth is there are many methods of manipulation: oaths, dissing, spin, criticism, anger, whining, hypocrisy, deceit, coercion, seduction, pushing people’s buttons, and more. I once counseled a perpetually angry husband, for instance, who candidly admitted it, **“I use anger to get my wife to do the things she needs to do.”**

Oaths and all those other methods of manipulation disrespect people’s leadership over their lives. They take away from people the freedom with which they’re born. They’re wrong, therefore. They’re evil and we must reject them as an approach to human beings.

Respecting Leadership

Now that we know what we shouldn’t do, verses 33-36, let’s look at what we should do, verse 37, **“Let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘no, no’”**. In this verse, Jesus calls us to respect people’s leadership over their lives. Respecting that leadership requires two things.

First, we must treasure it. We treasure it by understanding its value. That value is this. Exercising the leadership over their lives is a vital psychological and even biological need people have. Their mental

health and physical health depend on it. They can't thrive, their character can't develop well, and God can't achieve His primary purpose for making them (that they will reign with Him) unless their capacity to decide and liberty to do are respected.

Give thought to what I've just said and understand it. You will likely come to treasure people's leadership over their lives if you do.

The second thing that respecting their leadership requires flows from the first. Once we treasure it, we act to protect and promote it.

Jesus tells us how to do that in verse 37. It's by saying **"Yes, yes"** or **"No, no"** and nothing more. When we state points of information or knowledge to people or declare a promise or intention, we do so without oaths, spin, anger, coercion, pushing buttons or any other kind of manipulation. We go through their mental processes not around them by making them think critically. We know they make their decisions on the basis of information, values, and beliefs. So, we give them information and address their values and beliefs. If they then don't believe or do what we want, we honor and accept their God-given freedom not to.

The son of a Christian attorney decided not to go to college. But the attorney wanted him to and contemplated telling him, **"I'm going to take you out of my will if you don't."** He asked my opinion about that and I gave it: **"Respect your son's leadership over his life God has given him. He thinks it's best that he not go to college. Ask him why and listen attentively to his answers, identifying the information, values, and beliefs upon which they're based. Then address those as objectively and kindly as you can. But don't manipulate him by mentioning the will."**

Conclusion

That illustrates the right approach to human beings. First, treasure the leadership over their lives that God has given them. And second, protect and promote it as best as we can. People are born free and we need to respect it that they are. It's the way of Jesus!