

*As I mentioned in the sermon, even in trying to be economical with my speech, I wrote a great many more words this week than I chose to share. The words might not be essential for life, but the topic is the key to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:33-37, so I do not want us to ignore it. Thinking about oaths was not inconsequential to Jesus and so it should not be inconsequential to us. What follows is a discussion on taking or making oaths.*

A strange turn happens as we consider this teaching of Jesus. The last few weeks as we have looked at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' first three in his series of ethical and moral commands involved anger, lust, and divorce. These each have an impact on society but are, in the way we commonly conceive and teach on them, concerned with personal or family piety (although I have tried to get us to see the impact to society and the church). While they have implications for society, the root is often found in the individual heart or home. But with this command on oaths and the two commands that come after it (concerning retaliation and enemies), the focus on teaching is more outward and society-facing. They have implications for the individual and the household, but Christianity has generally focused on how these commands effect society. And here is the strange turn: the first three commands with their alleged primary focus on personal piety do not draw much controversy on what Jesus says. People tend to agree with what Jesus says and then struggle with living out Jesus' words or find ways to weasel out of applying Jesus' words. But with these latter three commands that are more public facing, more and more of Christianity debates, equivocates, and evades what Jesus says, not merely how to apply it. Basically, in this teaching where Jesus is telling us to be honest, forthright, and mean what we say and say what we mean, Christianity has struggled mightily with believing and living as if Jesus meant what he said when he said not to take oaths. Surely, he couldn't mean that we not swear and take oaths.

Why? Why would this be such a big deal? An oath involves using God's name or some substitute (Jerusalem, your own well-being, your grandmother's life) to guarantee the truth of your statements or actions. If Jesus says don't take oaths, why not just not take oaths? The main concern has been what it means to the nature of government. The number one demander of oaths for the past two thousand years have been governments. Governments demand oaths to testify in court, serve in an elective, appointed, or civic office or job, and to serve in the military. In the early days of the Church, when the Roman Empire was slaughtering thousands of Christians for entertainment, Christians had no trouble opposing oaths and avoiding the taking of oaths. Once the Roman Empire Christianized, the followers of Jesus in the western world have been more and more enthusiastic about oaths and about weaving God into their oaths – having worldly power tends to change how we see scripture. Indeed, now some folks believe it is anti-Christian to not take a government oath or any other oath that upholds what they believe is right. Christianity is still divided on whether it is a good idea to take a government oath and we sometimes tie ourselves in incredible knots to evade or condition the straightforward meaning of what Jesus says about taking oaths. As far as it concerns taking oaths that the government asks you to take, I would counsel that you consider the necessity and implications of the oath you are being asked to take. There is usually another formulation that can be used that does not require you to swear to things and you might find that preferable. As it has been a commitment of the Presbyterian church in this country from its foundations that God alone is lord of the conscience, I leave it to you to decide whether you can or should take government oaths should one become necessary. You may never have had to

take one and might never have to – but you should also not personally require anyone to take an oath to you to motivate them to be truthful.

Instead, it is more important to think about what is at the core of Jesus' motivation for commanding us not to take oaths. The government or courts or military or whoever, wants you to take an oath to demonstrate your commitment to fulfilling your obligations and being honest. Throughout history, and especially today, this has the implication that you don't really need to tell the truth the rest of the time, but you need to be really, really sure that you are telling the truth in taking these oaths. Essentially, oaths are telling us that we don't need to be truthful unless we are under oath ("Am I under oath?" "It's not like I'm under oath."). Jesus demands an integrity of speech as though every moment of life were under oath. For Jesus, taking an oath is redundant. The disciples of Jesus – us – should have such a reputation for honesty that our words can be believed without an oath.

*Do you have a reputation for honest, forthright speech?*

*In what situations do you use a thousand words when a few would do?*

*What do you think about taking oaths? Had you ever given such oaths any thought before? Christian scholarship is rich and diverse on the subject of taking oaths and Christians have different commitments regarding oaths. I would encourage you, whatever you decide for yourself with the guidance of the Holy Spirit about oaths for yourself, that you give wide latitude to other people and traditions concerning oaths.*

### **Praying for Cameroon**

The Islamic extremist group Boko Haram is active in northern Cameroon and has created a hostile environment for Christians. Christians have been kidnapped and killed, and churches were targeted and attacked. Because the government is often focused elsewhere, it's given an opening for Boko Haram to expand and continue attacks that target Christians. In Cameroon, it is also very difficult for Muslims who want to convert to Christianity.

- In the north of Cameroon, people's lives have been disrupted by Boko Haram violence that has spilled across the border from Nigeria. Pray for peace in the storm.
- Pray for converts from Islam, that they would be protected from violence.
- Pray God would protect Christian women in Cameroon, who are at constant risk of abduction, forced marriage and sexual violence at the hands of Boko Haram.