

Let Your 'Yes' Be 'Yes'

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In the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord delivers a series of statements that challenge the observing Jew to take his obedience to another level. “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’... but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court...”

This “you have heard... but I say to you” rhythm repeats again and again until the end of chapter 5. Jesus challenges the believer to avoid even anger without cause, even lust that isn’t adultery, even hatred for an enemy. One segment, in verses 33-37, is particularly intriguing, challenging and useful.

“...you have heard that the ancients were told ‘You shall not make false vows...’ but I say to you, make no oath at all... but let your statement be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no...’”

As a child I had no idea what that meant. My brother and I grew up reading the New King James translation which says “do not swear at all...” so, of course, we ran around saying “I promise” instead of saying “I swear.” We assumed “swear” was a cuss word. I think we missed the point.

Jesus explains that among His disciples there is no need for oaths or promises. His followers don’t need to swear by heaven, or Earth or Jerusalem, nor should they. For a disciple of Christ, “yes” really means “yes” and “no” really means “no.” When Jesus told someone “yes,” you could rely on that word. There was no question that He would accomplish that task. He did not need to support His “yes” with any kind of extra assurance or swearing. Jesus never swore by God that He would heal someone or calm a storm. He simply said, “Yes,” and meant it. Truly, our Lord and Savior kept His word.

Mankind, on the other hand, notoriously breaks our word. We put our oaths on different levels. If I say, “yes” when you ask me to do something, I might do it, but I might not. If I say, “Yes, I promise,” then I probably will do it, but there’s a chance I won’t. If I say, “Yes, I swear on my mother’s grave,” that’s about as strong of an assurance as you can get that it’ll actually get done. Even then, there’s a chance I won’t come through for you.

When Jesus tell His audience “Let your statement be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’” He calls us to be more like Him. He wants our word to mean something. Disciples are the kind of people who keep their word.

Jesus’ disciples work with all their might to fulfill their “yes.” When they say “yes” they mean it. They will work hard to remember what they agreed to. They will overcome obstacles to accomplish what they promised. They will try to do it and get it done so long as it is within their power (and Jesus would point out that sometimes it is not in

verses 34-36). The same goes for a disciple's "no." Maybe that means I need to be careful not to over-promise and recognize that God may will something else, or maybe I need to be more serious about keeping my word when I am able.

I think we've become a little too loose with our yeses and nos. We agree to things that we honestly have no hope of accomplishing. We back out of our commitments with too much ease and too little guilt. We exonerate ourselves from keeping our word by simply saying, "I forgot" or "I just got busy." I don't know about you, but there have been times when my "yes" meant nothing to those closest to me. When that happens it makes life worse for everyone, but if we would listen to Jesus our daily lives would undoubtedly improve.

What would happen if your "yes" really meant "yes"? How would your prayer life change if you really prayed every prayer that you said you would pray? How would your marriage improve if you really controlled your temper or controlled your tongue or controlled your lust when you promised you would? How would your relationship with the kids grow if you did spend more time with them like you said you would? How much easier would it be spiritually focused if you attended services as faithfully as you told the elder you would attend? How much joy could you generate if you visited the sick and shut-ins like you've been telling yourself you would for years?

It is easy to say "Yes, yes!" when someone asks me for something. It is much harder to follow through and prove my word good. Yet, if I am to follow in the steps of my Savior my "yes" will truly be "yes," so long as the Lord wills.