Introduction

As a people we are drawn to exaggeration, hyperbole, and, sometimes, outright lies. Bill Cosby tells the story of people and the way we exaggerate (as read in your best Bill Cosby voice):

God created so forth and so on and “Boom”. When God creates there always needs to be a sound effect and “boom” is it. And God said…Let there be ‘something’ and God said it was good, saw it was good, and called it good.

God said for example let there be trees and God saw them and said “Good”. God was satisfied. Man invents a car and God creates a tree. Man calls the car “FANTASTIC” and God says “good”. Man does a refrigerator and says “AMAZING”. God created a rabbit and said “Good”. The wheels fell off the car and the refrigerator broke down. The tree is still up and the rabbit is still running. Man says “awesome” and God says “good”.

Our lives are filled with words, so many in fact that we have trouble sometimes remembering what we have said. They can hurt people we love, cause confusion when clarity is needed, and be destructive when loving words would soothe hurt. Jesus knew the importance of them and now, as He is establishing the foundations of His message to His disciples, He addresses the words they use and this is more important than just the small talk they use. He is talking about their character.

Matthew 5:33-37 (NIV)

33 Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ 34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 35 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 36 Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.
Character is one of the things that so many today seem to lack. Our politicians are stereotyped as liars; commercials make claims impossible to support; greed and bribery are seen at the highest levels in multinational companies; and “it won’t hurt to tell a little white lie” becomes all the justification needed for our lack of character and integrity. Society is so accustomed to lies that we don’t even blink when someone is caught is a lie. But the damage is done.

The words we use are seldom the correct ones when we speak to one another. Attorneys make billions of dollars every year writing and reviewing contracts just to get the words absolutely correct so there can be no doubt as to the meaning. But regardless of whose names appear on the dotted line, one or the other party is always looking for the “loophole” to hide, cover, or remove whatever liability they might have when they decide to break the contract. Would people of character be so callous?

But Jesus said this should not be the case. He wanted us to be in a place where contracts were unnecessary, where oaths were superfluous, truth was valued. He wanted us to be trustworthy; known by our integrity. “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.”

**Study**

Companion text: Chapter 15: Jesus on Integrity

It wasn’t really a lie. He really believed it was true. He had been with Him for three years and now he was being challenged. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And all the other disciples said the same.” (Matthew 26: 35).” But Jesus knew it wasn’t true and, while Peter and the rest probably did believe what each said, it took less than twelve (12) hours for the prophecy to be fulfilled. An oath was broken.

The people of Israel had been told solemnly not to make false oaths. Numbers 30 describes several vows and oaths by the people and discusses their impact on the Israelites. These people knew that God, himself, had made oaths to their ancestors. The difference was – God never broke His oaths.

“Do not lie. “Do not deceive one another. 12“Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD (Leviticus 19: 11-12)

1Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: “This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said. Numbers 30: 1-2)
But here was Jesus and with a nod to their history saying “Again, you have heard it said to the people long ago”. But as in each of the other statements which he made saying either “you have heard it said” he is about to change the perception each of these people had regarding making oaths. Instead of making it a serious issue such as before God or the authorities, Jesus says we should not even deceive each other, possibly giving more credence to Leviticus 19:11 (Do not lie. “Do not deceive one another”) than what the people would. By saying more than “do not swear falsely by my name”, Jesus is calling each of the people to deal in complete openness and honesty with one another.

Just as Peter made a completely hollow oath so too has every man or every woman who has ever lived. We make them to our children when we say “Yes, we can do that someday”, never meaning to follow through on our shallow promises. Mary Poppins called it a “pie crust promise; easily made, easily broken”. But they so define us.

Let’s look at some of the concepts Jesus addressed in these short verses.

1. Don’t make oaths (v. 33). Warren Wiesbe notes that the early misconception was that the swearing could be profanity, however, he then states

   This is not the sin of “cursing,” but the sin of using oaths to affirm that what is said is true. The Pharisees used all kinds of tricks to sidestep the truth, and oaths were among them. They would avoid using the holy name of God, but they would come close by using the city of Jerusalem, heaven, earth, or some part of the body. Jesus taught that our conversation should be so honest, and our character so true, that we would not need “crutches” to get people to believe us. Words depend on character, and oaths cannot compensate for a poor character. “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.” (Prov. 10:19). The more words a man uses to convince us, the more suspicious we should be.
2. Most people today have no problem “swearing to #*&^%$^” or anything else for that matter. But Jesus calls his disciples to a behavior that is beyond the worlds’ (v. 35).

The Pharisees were notorious for their oaths, which were made on the least provocation. Yet they made allowances for mental reservations within their oaths. If they wanted to be relieved of oaths they had made by heaven... by the earth... by Jerusalem, or by one’s own head, they could argue that since God Himself had not been involved their oaths were not binding. But Jesus said oaths should not even be necessary: **Do not swear at all.** The fact that oaths were used at all emphasized the wickedness of man’s heart. Furthermore, swearing “by heaven,” “by the earth,” or “by Jerusalem” is binding, since they are God’s throne... footstool, and city, respectively. Even the color of the hair on their heads was determined by God (Matt. 5:36). However, Jesus later in His life responded to an oath (Matthew 26:63-64), as did Paul (2 Cor. 1:23).

3. Your integrity should be adequate to confirm your words (v 37).

The Lord was saying one’s life should be sufficient to back up one’s words. A **yes** always ought to mean **yes**, and a **no** should mean **no**. James seems to have picked up these words of the Lord in his epistle (James 5:12 14Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.). (The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament)

Complete honesty should be typical of the kingdom citizen, so that no oath is necessary to guarantee trustworthiness for one’s “yes” or “no.” The law regarding oaths was based upon the third Commandment. False testimony resulted in severe consequences, since it consisted of taking God’s name in vain (Ex 20:7; Lev 19:11, 12; Num 30:2; Deut 19:16-20). The rabbis taught that oaths which omitted God’s name could be broken and were not binding. Jesus maintains that God is involved in heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and all things. Hence, all oaths are binding, and any attempt to avoid an oath while pretending to keep it profanes the divine name. The reference is neither to taking oaths in court nor to profanity. When Jesus first revealed his “blessings” to the people that Matthew records in 5: 1-11, he was restating several of the commandments and Levitical laws that were so well known that the people were living in the ruts or habitual worship. Jesus, however, wanted them to see His Father, and He chose these examples to open their eyes. (The Believer’s Study Bible)

**Discussion**

1) Think of the many things you have been promised and the people who have made the promises. Are there some people whom you just can’t or won’t trust?
2) Make a list of the “oaths” we make one to another. For example, “Lord willing and the creek don’t rise.” Is there a potential danger in using “colorful language” like this?
3) Why is the statement so adamant “Let your yes be yes and your no be no”?  
4) Do you think you are a trustworthy person? Does your speech convey what the Lord wants for us?
5) How many times a day do you hear a phrase like “I swear to #^%#%#”? Do you say it?

**References**
8. The Believer’s Study Bible. Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1991

**My Time:** *(make a list of the important concepts you discussed today that you want to pray about and turn over to God this week)*