

Deeper Discoveries

Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 8: Matthew 5:33–37



Literary Design

We are in the middle of the study, so now is a good time to review the Sermon on the Mount's structure.

Any piece of writing needs to be understood and interpreted based on the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are expressed through different forms of writing. These forms include genres, concrete descriptions of human experience, writing styles and patterns, and artistry.

These literary features are not extra parts of the text—not optional matters to consider if we have time or interest after we have understood the message or content of a passage. Instead, they are the forms through which the content is communicated. If the writing of the Bible is the product of divine inspiration—if it represents what the Holy Spirit guided the authors to write as they were carried along (2 Peter 1:21)—then the literary forms of the Bible were also inspired by God and need to be given an importance that matches that inspiration. [1]

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount employs a deliberate structural pattern built around groupings of three or multiples of three items [according to one of Pastor Mark's professors, Dr. Craig Blomberg]. [2] The discourse unfolds in several distinct, carefully organized sections.

The opening moves from nine beatitudes plus salt and light sayings into a thesis statement about "greater righteousness," followed by six contrasting illustrations between the Law and Jesus' ethic. Three examples of avoiding public piety then lead to three teachings on wealth and worry, with three sections on how to treat others, culminating in the Golden Rule. The conclusion uses three illustrations to present two fundamental responses: acceptance or rejection. [2] An alternative approach identifies three main divisions: the relationship between old and new righteousness, true versus false piety, and social ethics. [3] Literary beauty mattered to God when he inspired the biblical authors, and it should matter equally to contemporary readers. [4]

As you ponder this section on oaths, take time to reflect on how this teaching fits into the carefully designed pattern preserved for us in Matthew's gospel. How is truth-telling related to those who are blessed? How is it related to being salt and light? What is the connection to the Lord's Prayer? What do oaths have to do with fasting in secret or storing up treasure in heaven?

[1] Crossway Bibles, *ESV Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), xii. Edited.

[2] Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 287. Edited.

[3] Jason C. Kuo, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Edited.

[4] Leland Ryken, "Why We Need to Read and Interpret the Bible as Literature," in *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, ed. Douglas Mangum, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). Edited.

Old Testament Connections and Themes

In the Hebrew Scriptures, oaths were meant to encourage truthfulness, to make one's words more serious and certain. Sometimes this is even spelled out for us. For example, we read that, "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an

oath” (Heb. 6:17). For the same reason, the Mosaic law forbade only false or disrespectful oaths, which must be seen as dishonoring God’s name. Taking an oath is never a problem for the LORD: he never lies.

Unfortunately, however, by Jesus’ time the Jews had built up an entire system of strict rules around the Old Testament teaching. In the Jewish code of law called the Mishnah, one section is devoted to oaths, including detailed discussion of when they are binding and when they are not. For example, one rabbi says that if you swear *by* Jerusalem, you are not bound by your vow; but if you swear *toward* Jerusalem, then you are bound by your vow. The use of oaths thus turns into terrible rules that tell you when you can get away with lying and deception, and when you cannot. These oaths no longer encourage truthfulness; instead, they weaken the truth and make deception easier through careful (and sinful) wording.

Jesus will not allow such oath games among his followers. If people play such games, Jesus will simply do away with oaths. He demands truthfulness from those who would be his disciples. [1] Deceit is of the evil one.

[1] D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 50–51. Edited.

Commentary (Michael Green, Daniel Doriani)

[Green]: Now Jesus turns to oaths (5:33–37). Time and again in the Old Testament, God insisted that oaths be honored. The scribes devised a variety of escape clauses from binding oaths. Any oath which succeeded in avoiding the name of God was not absolutely binding: one could swear by one’s head, by Jerusalem, by heaven, by earth, and so on. People did not think of God as a partner in such a transaction, so they did not take breaking carefully worded oaths seriously.

Jesus shows how frivolous and essentially sinful this attitude is. Our words should be trustworthy, as citizens of the kingdom. Oaths are required only because people are so often liars. Let them not be required among disciples. ‘*Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes”, and your “No”, “No”*’ (37). Jesus maintains that our speech should be trustworthy and true. Since he himself responded to the oath of testimony at his trial, it is apparent that we are not meant to take this saying so literally as to preclude an oath in a court of law. It ought not to be necessary because *we* might otherwise perjure ourselves, however, but only because so many others do. Even God frequently bound himself by an oath in the Scriptures, not because he was untrustworthy but in condescension to our unbelief. That consideration alone should justify oaths on the lips of disciples. [1]

[Doriani]: In Christ, we are a new creation, yet we await a wholly new creation. The disciple has a future, and that future draws us forward. We lean toward that future, and it both beckons us and spurs us onward. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount has many promises about the future of a disciple: We shall inherit the earth (5:5). We shall receive mercy (5:7). We shall see God (5:8). We shall be called sons of God (5:9). We shall be perfect (5:48). God is in heaven, so his moral excellence vastly exceeds our pitiful attempts at holiness. Yet he is our Father. He has come near to love us and to bring us to maturity.

So let us hear Jesus’ call to truthfulness. Let us measure our words and speak carefully, so that “Yes” means “Yes.” Let us describe events without the distortions, theatrics, embellishments, and exaggerations that mislead our neighbors. Let us not claim to know what we do not know. Let us measure each promise so that we mean what we say. Our families, our churches, our society, will be stronger for it.

Yet let us also admit that, strive as we will, we will never master the tongue. The tongue is too loose; the heart is too wild. So after we hear the law of Christ, let us plead for the grace of Christ. May he forgive our sins. [2]

[1] Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 95–96. Edited.

[2] Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 83. Edited.