A few years ago, when Christy finished her Master’s Degree and I graduated from seminary, our parents gave us what has to be one of the all-time best graduation gifts. They took us to Hawaii on a family vacation. The two of us, her parents, my parents, and my brother, Josh, all spent a week on Maui. And Maui is one of those great places in the world that looks even better in person than it does in pictures. It really is paradise. Well, Christy and I wanted to see as much of the island as we could, and we wanted to snorkel everywhere we went. So we rented snorkel gear for the week, and we snorkeled on every beach we visited. There were all kinds of coral and colorful fish and strange little creatures that you don’t see anywhere else. And one day I decided I was going to dive down to the bottom of the ocean to get a look around. So I gauged the distance, took a deep breath, and plunged under… And I didn’t even get close to the bottom. The water was so clear that I had no idea how deep it really was. I mean, I grew up in Kentucky, and all my life, we vacationed on the east coast of Florida… And don’t get me wrong, I love the beaches in Florida, but the water’s so cloudy there that as soon as it’s up to your knees you can’t see your feet anymore. So the crystal-clear water of Hawaii was a new experience for me. And it was deceptively deep. I could see the bottom so easily that I didn’t realize how deep it was until I dove in. And I’ve found the same thing to be true of our text today. We’re in Matthew 5:33-37. And at least for me, this is one of those texts where, as soon as I read it, it looks like the meaning is pretty clear. But then when I dive into it, I find that the truth of the text is way deeper than I originally realized. And that’s always an exciting thing. So read with me, Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus says, *"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.' 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. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”*

Now like I said, there is a surface-level meaning that is fairly easy to see right off the bat. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not break the oaths you make to God,’ but I’m taking it a step farther and telling you do not swear at all.” So the surface-level meaning is that we don’t need to swear. But if we stop there, we really aren’t getting the full depth of Jesus’ teaching. There’s a lot more going on in this text. So let’s dive in and make sure we get the full depth of what Jesus is saying.

The first thing we need to do is we need to make sure we’re clear on what Jesus means when He talks about swearing, because this is one of those concepts that might get a little confused as we translate from Jesus’ culture to our culture. For us, sometimes the word “swear” refers to profanity or curse words, but that’s not what Jesus is talking about here. He’s talking about taking a vow that binds you to your word. He’s talking about taking an oath and swearing that you’ll do what you say you’ll do. One of the ways that you’ve probably heard this in our day is that people will swear to God or swear by the Bible or swear on their mother’s grave. That’s the type of swearing that Jesus is talking about here. It’s taking a vow or an oath to guarantee that what you’re saying is true. But it’s also important to realize that there are a lot of other versions of oaths or vows that we take in our day. For example, a lot of us will say, “I promise…” and that’s supposed to make the statement more truthful than if I didn’t promise. If I promise, I’ve gotta do it. If I don’t promise, it’s still up in the air. That’s a type of modern-day oath. Another way that we swear in our day is that we sign contracts. A contract is a legal oath that’s supposed to bind us to our word. And then another very common example is that we make marriage vows to our spouse. We are swearing or promising or taking an oath before God to honor our marriage by keeping our vows.

Now, this raises a really important question for us: Is it wrong for us to do this? Is it wrong to make promises and sign contracts and make marriage vows? When Jesus says, *“Do not swear at all,”* does He mean we shouldn’t do those things? The answer is no. That’s not what He means. And this is where it’s important for us to honor the Bible by diving into the depth of Jesus’ teaching. There are at least three reasons why we would be missing the depth of biblical teaching here if we simply say, “Jesus says, ‘Don’t ever swear.’”

The first reason is because there are examples in the Bible of people swearing and it not being a bad thing. For example, even after Jesus gives this teaching, you can turn to Galatians 1:20 and Paul says, *“I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.”* Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul takes an oath before God to assure the Galatians that his teaching about the gospel is true. Now, if the Holy Spirit led Paul to take that type of oath, certainly it was right for him to do so. And if that’s not enough to convince you, you need to realize that even God Himself takes oaths in the Bible. For example, Genesis 15 tells us that God took an oath and entered into a covenant with Abraham. And then Hebrews 6 tells us that that oath is for everyone who believes in God like Abraham did. God has given us His oath and His promise to assure us that He will love us and save us and take care of us if we trust Him. So clearly, taking an oath or swearing, in and of itself, is not a bad thing.

The second reason it would be incorrect to think Jesus is simply saying, “Just don’t ever swear,” is because of what He says in verses 34-37. He says, “Don’t swear by heaven. Don’t swear by earth. Don’t swear by Jerusalem. Don’t swear by your head. Just let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’” And what we need to realize is that Jesus is addressing a very specific issue in His day. You see, the religious leaders had developed this huge system of religious rules, and they had found all of these sneaky ways to keep the rules on the outside while they rotted away on the inside. And the oaths they took were a perfect example of that. They said that if you swore by God, you had to keep your oath. You had to do what you said. But if you only swore by heaven, that was less binding. And if you only swore by earth, that was even less binding. And so on and so forth. So what happened was that instead of the oath guaranteeing their honesty, they started using the oaths to trick people and deceive people. I take an oath and convince you to trust me, but then I double cross you and say, “Oh sorry, I only swore by heaven, not by God. And since this is a really important issue, swearing by heaven isn’t a big enough deal to bind me. Only God would have bound me.” And in response to that, Jesus says, “If you’re going to use your oaths for dishonesty instead of honesty, then just don’t swear at all. Don’t take a good thing and manipulate it for your evil, lying purposes.”

And that is directly connected to the third reason why it’s important for us to realize that Jesus is saying a lot more than just, “Make sure you don’t ever swear.” Remember, in this whole section of teaching, Jesus is emphasizing that who you become on the inside is even more important than what you do on the outside. So if all we see here is a command not to swear, then we’ve just reduced Jesus’ teaching to another command about an external behavior, and we’ve missed His real point. Jesus is not just replacing one command with one another. He’s not just substituting one behavior for another. Jesus wants to change the heart behind the behavior. He doesn’t just want to change what you do. He wants to change who you are. He wants to change your very heart and make you righteous like Him. So Jesus is after something much bigger than you just keeping a few rules. His purpose here is to do a whole lot more than just tell you not swear. His purpose is to teach you about the type of person He wants to make you.

So, it’s not enough to read these verses and just say, “Okay, I’m not supposed to swear. I’m not supposed to take oaths.” If you do that, you’re selling Jesus short by missing the depth of His teaching. Instead, you need to ask, “How is this command related to who I am on the inside? Who does Jesus want me to be, and what does that have to do with swearing?”

And when we start to look at our text in that way, there are two great truths about who Jesus wants us to be. And these truths are at the heart of Jesus’ teaching about swearing. The first truth is in verse 37. Jesus tells us that one of the reasons for you not to swear is because you should be so honest that you don’t need to. Look at verse 37. Jesus says, *“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No;’ anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”* Basically, there shouldn’t be any need for you to swear. When you say yes, you should mean it. And when you say no, you should mean it. And that should be enough. You shouldn’t have to swear in order to increase your truthfulness, because you should already be 100% honest and truthful.

You see, with the way that we often use promises and oaths and vows, we imply, “This promise somehow makes it more likely that you can trust me. Just my word by itself isn’t enough. But you can trust my promise more than you can trust my word.” And Jesus says, “No, you need to be such a trustworthy person that if you just say something, people know you will keep your word. You do what you say you will do, and therefore you don’t have to swear, because your word is already 100% dependable. Swearing doesn’t make you any more likely to keep your word, because you’re already going to keep it. And not swearing doesn’t make you any less likely to keep your word, because you’re so honest that you’re going to keep it even without swearing.”

So, the heart of this command is not just, “Don’t swear.” The heart of this command is, “Be an honest person. Be the type of person who is honest and trustworthy at your very core. Be so honest that you don’t need to swear.”

And very practically speaking, there are two ways I want us to apply this first truth. First, when we think of examples in our day, such as signing contracts and making promises and taking wedding vows, the point is not that we can’t ever do those things. The point is simply that we shouldn’t *have* to do those things. A company may require you to sign a contract. That’s fine. Sign it. But signing it shouldn’t make you one iota more honest, because you should keep your word whether there’s a contract or not. A court may ask you to swear to tell the truth. That’s fine. What really matters is that you should tell the truth even if they don’t make you swear. Be so honest that you don’t need to swear.

The other practical application is that we need to be careful not to be like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day when it comes to honesty and truthfulness. How many of us learned by the age of five that if you said something and then didn’t want to do it later on, you could just say, “Well, I didn’t promise”… as if as long as you don’t promise you don’t have to keep your word. Or even better yet, how many of us learned, “My fingers were crossed. It didn’t really count.” That’s almost exactly like, “I only swore by heaven. I didn’t swear by God.” And then how many of us have carried those types of excuses and loopholes on into life? “Well, if the cashier gives you too much change, that’s their fault. You’re not obligated to give it back.” “It’s not my fault I could see her answer sheet so easily. And besides, it’s only cheating if you get caught.” “Yeah, I copied that paper straight off the internet, but that’s what I would have said if I wrote it.” “Now, I said that I wouldn’t tell, but as long as you don’t tell anybody else, I’ll tell you.” “Hey, everybody fudges numbers in the business world. Everybody underestimates and overcharges. That’s not dishonesty. That’s just part of the game.” And our focus is more on the technicalities of legalism than it is on the purity of our hearts. So, Church, I want to challenge you: We bear the name of Jesus, so should be people of such honesty and integrity that our lives are worthy of our Lord Jesus Christ. We should live out Jesus’ teaching and represent Him to the world. In business, in academics, in our relationships, in our conversations, in every area of our lives, we should be people of truth, honesty, and integrity, because we are followers of Jesus. Be so honest that you don’t need to swear.

The second truth about who Jesus wants us to be is found in verses 34-36. Jesus tells us that another reason for you not to swear is because you should be so humble that you don’t presume to. And Jesus explains this truth in two different ways. One explanation is in verse 36. Jesus says, *“And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”* Now think about what Jesus is saying here. When you swear, you swear by something that will guarantee your word. For example, when we sign a contract, we often guarantee a certain amount of money if we break the contract. We’re basically saying, “My word may not be enough to make me keep my promise, but this money is. So I’ll guarantee my word with this money.” It’s a terrible statement about the value of our honesty, but that’s basically what a contract says. So when people swear by something… whether they swear to God, or swear by the Bible, or swear on their mother’s grave... what they’re basically saying is, “You may not think that I’m trustworthy, but I’m going to swear by something so valuable that you know I’m going to keep my word. Even if my word isn’t important to me, you’ll probably think that my mother’s life is important to me, so I’ll swear by my mother’s grave in order to convince you to trust me.” Does that make sense? We swear by something outside of us to guarantee that what we’re saying is true.

Now, notice the example Jesus gives of this and what he says about it. He says, *“Don’t swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”* Jesus says, “You need to realize that when you swear by something, you’re implying that you actually have control over what you swear by.” If you swear by your mother’s grave, you’re implying you can control whether your mother lives or dies. If you swear by your own head, you’re implying that you can guarantee what happens

to your hair. And here’s the thing: you can’t control that stuff. You can’t guarantee that stuff. So the truth Jesus is teaching here is that any time you swear, it reveals that you have an inflated view of yourself. You think you can control things that you can’t. The only thing you can control is whether or not you keep your word. Anything outside yourself is ultimately beyond your control. So it’s pointless to swear by that stuff, because you’re pretending that stuff will guarantee your word when you really have no control over that stuff.

So the heart of this command is that you should be so humble that you realize how small you are. There’s a lot of stuff you can’t control. Do you know how much stuff you can’t control? You can’t control weather patterns. You can’t control our environment. You can’t control our economy. You can’t control our government. You can’t control the heart of one other person in this world. Now, you can influence and affect all those things, but you can’t control any of them. In fact, not a single one of us can guarantee our own lives even for the rest of this day. A tornado could rip through this town. A terrorist could bomb this building. A semi truck could run a red light in Providence. A French fry could get stuck in your windpipe at McDonald’s. And that’s not some sort of manipulative scare tactic. It’s just the truth. It is so important for you to come to an accurate view of yourself and to realize just how small you are. And one of the reasons why that’s so important is simply because it’s true. You *are* small. And you *can’t* control things. And you don’t need to be deceived into believing otherwise. But the other, even greater reason why that’s so important is because it should drive you to the only One who is not small… the only One who actually is big enough to control things. It should drive you to God Himself.

You see, it’s only when you’re finally emptied of all these delusions about yourself that you’re ready to be filled with the truth about God. It’s only when you recognize your own smallness and insufficiency that you’re going to find hope in God’s greatness and sufficiency. It’s only when you stop trusting in yourself and what you think you can do that you’re ready to trust God for Who He is and what He really can do. An accurate view of how small you are is a huge step toward having the right perspective on how big and how great God is. And the moment you realize that you aren’t pulling all the strings you thought you were, that there are 100 million factors that you can’t control, that’s the moment you will cry out in desperation, “Oh God! You do it! Only you can do it! You are my only hope! I can’t do it, so please, God, do what only you can do!”

And let me tell you, that is the truest moment of your life. That is the greatest moment of your life. That is the moment where you are closer to reality than you have ever been. And that is the moment where you have the best hope of seeing God work in your life in a mighty way to do what only God can do.

So Jesus says, “Be so humble that you don’t presume to swear. The only thing you can guarantee is that you’ll keep your word. So let that be the only thing you guarantee. Be so humble that you don’t presume to guarantee things that you really can’t guarantee.”

The other explanation Jesus gives for why we should be humble is in verses 34-35. Jesus says, *“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.”*

Now, there are two pieces that we’ve already seen that we need to put together here. First, remember the issue Jesus is addressing. The religious leaders were trying to find loopholes that allowed them to be dishonest by saying, “Oh, I only swore by heaven, so that’s not binding, because I didn’t swear by God.” Or, “Oh I only swore by earth, and that’s not binding, because I didn’t swear by God.” And Jesus says, “You don’t get it at all! You don’t have nearly a big enough view of who God is! Don’t you realize that heaven belongs to God, and the earth belongs to God, and Jerusalem belongs to God, and every other city belongs to God, and everything in the world belongs to God? Your very life belongs to God. There is nothing you can swear by that isn’t God’s. And when you play this silly game, it reveals that you have not yet been humbled by how great and how big God is! Everything is His! You cannot find one single thing to swear by that isn’t God’s.”

The other piece we need to put together is that we need to remember what we said about swearing just a minute ago. We said that when you swear, you’re using whatever you swear by to guarantee your word. For example, the purpose of a financial guarantee in a contract is that the money is supposed to guarantee you’ll keep the terms of the contract. So when you swear by something, what you’re really saying is, “I’m going to use this thing to serve my purposes. I’m going to use this thing to guarantee my word.” Make sense? Well, the religious leaders were swearing by stuff in order to manipulate and deceive. They were using the things they swore by for dishonest purposes. So with that in mind, think about what Jesus says in verses 34-35. He says, “Don’t swear by heaven, because it’s God’s throne. Don’t swear by earth, because it’s God’s footstool. Don’t swear by Jerusalem, because it’s the city of God’s Messiah, the Great King.” In other words, don’t use any of these things to serve your questionable purposes, because these things all belong to God, and God is more valuable than your purposes. God has greater purposes than just being an insurance policy for what you say. God is way bigger than you are and way greater than you are and way more valuable than you are, and it is absolutely ridiculous if you presume to use anything related to God in order to serve your purposes. Why would you insult God and subject His greatness to the meager purpose of manipulating someone into believing you’re telling the truth? If that’s the case, you’ve got the whole thing backwards. God’s not your servant. You’re God’s servant. You don’t use God for your purposes. God uses you for His purposes. God is bigger than your life, so don’t be so foolish and so arrogant that you think anything in your life deserves to have God as its guarantee. God is greater than that! God is more valuable than that! Don’t devalue God by treating Him as a tool you use to serve your purposes in your life.

And let me tell you, this truth extends way beyond just the issue of swearing. This is a fundamental question that we must ask about our lives and about our religion and about this church. Are we so arrogant that we live as if God exists to serve our purposes? Is our focus always on what *we* want to do and what *we* want to accomplish and what *we* want church to be like and what *we* want to get out of life and how *we* want to be blessed? And is God just a way for us to get what we want? Is God just a means to an end? Or do we humbly realize that we exist to serve God’s purposes? Is our one desire to seek what God wants to do, to submit to what God wants to accomplish, for this church to purely be what God wants it to be? And are we willing to die to anything that doesn’t fit God’s plans? Are we willing to let go of every desire we have if it hinders us from the one great desire of loving God and serving Him? Is God just our way of getting what we want, or is God Himself all that we want? I pray that we will lay down our agendas and our preferences and our self-centered desires and our man-centered way of thinking and our worldly plans. I pray we will die to those things, and they will be replaced by an all-consuming, single-minded passion to love God and serve Him and be used by Him in whatever way He chooses to work in this church and in our lives.

That’s what Jesus is really concerned with here. The reason He says, “Don’t swear,” is because he wants you to be so humble that you never presume to use God for your purposes. Instead, you surrender your entire life to God’s purposes.

So, that’s the heart of our text today. Jesus’ concern is much deeper than whether or not you swear. Jesus’ concern is that your heart be so transformed that you become the type of person who is so honest that you don’t need to swear and so humble that you don’t presume to swear.

And then there’s one last thing I want us to notice as we close. And actually this is something that has been true in each of our texts over the past three weeks. We just haven’t talked about it yet. Remember, these verses today are part of a larger section that starts back in verse 17 and runs all the way though verse 48. And Jesus starts this section by saying that we have to be more righteous than the Pharisees if we’re going to get into the kingdom of heaven. True righteousness is not just a matter of behavior, it’s a matter of the heart. It’s just not about what you’re doing on the outside. It’s about who you’re becoming on the inside. Jesus says this over and over. It’s not enough just not to murder. You need to have such a pure heart that you don’t hold on to anger. It’s not enough just not to commit adultery. You need to have such a pure heart that you never lust and you honor your marriage vows for life. It’s not enough just to keep the oaths you make to God. You need to have such a pure heart that you’re always honest. It’s not enough just to love your neighbors. You need to have such a pure heart that you even love your enemies. Over and over Jesus emphasizes that true righteousness is a matter of the heart. It’s not just about doing righteous things. It’s about becoming a righteous person.

And what I want us to notice right now is that as Jesus gives us each of these examples, He does something very bold and very shocking. In each example, He starts out by quoting the Bible. *“Do not murder”* is from Exodus 20:13. *“Do not commit adultery”* is Exodus 20:14. “*Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce”* is from Deuteronomy 24:1. *“Eye for eye and tooth for tooth”* is Exodus 21:24. *“Love your neighbor”* is Leviticus 19:18. And our text today actually has three Old Testament connections. *“Keep the oaths you have made to the Lord”* comes from Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 23:23. So Jesus starts by saying, *“You have heard that it was said,”* and He quotes the Bible. Then He says, *“But I tell you,”* and He gives His teaching. Now, make sure you don’t miss the monumental significance of that. Don’t miss how bold and shocking that really is. When Jesus refers to the Old Testament and says, *“You have heard that it was said,”* who’s the one who said those things? God did. Those are all commands that God gave to Israel. And Jesus quotes those commands and says, “*God* told you this.” And then Jesus says, “And now *I’m* telling you this.” Jesus suggests that His teaching is every bit as authoritative as the teaching of God Himself in the Old Testament. In fact, in one sense, Jesus suggests that His teaching is actually greater than the Old Testament, because it reveals the heart of the Old Testament and completes the Old Testament and fulfills the Old Testament.

And the reason that’s so significant is because it means that Jesus teaches with the same divine authority that God has. Jesus boldly claims that His teaching is just as authoritative as the teaching of God Himself. And there is only one way for that to be true. The only way that Jesus’ teaching can be as authoritative as God’s teaching is if Jesus is God. And make no mistake about

it, Jesus certainly teaches as if that is the case. He teaches as if His words are the very words of God… because they are.

So Jesus reveals a massively bold and monumentally important truth about Himself in the Sermon on the Mount. And out of all the truths that you should take away from His sermon, this one is the most crucial: Jesus Christ is God. Jesus is not just a teacher who is making suggestions or giving good advice. Jesus is the rightful God of your life. When Jesus teaches these truths, the very God who created you is telling you how to live. Jesus words are the very words of God from the very mouth of God, and that means you desperately need to live out His teaching. You need to be this type of person.

But I want you to know the truth: You can’t do it. You aren’t honest enough. You aren’t humble enough. You aren’t good enough. Neither am I. None of us are. And the purpose of Jesus’ commands is not just to make you try harder. The purpose of Jesus’ commands is to break you and cause you to depend on Him. You see, not only is Jesus your great God, He is also your great Savior. When Jesus speaks, the Savior who died to redeem you is telling you what it means to follow Him. And that means you desperately need Jesus’ grace to make you into the type of person He calls you to be. That is your only hope. You will never do this on your own. But Jesus Christ can do it. And He will do it for you if you throw yourself on His grace and trust Him and follow Him.

So I pray that you won’t reduce Jesus’ teaching to some legalistic command that you try to keep by your own effort without changing your heart. I pray that you will be driven to the grace of Jesus and that you will trust Him to truly change you from the inside out. I pray that you will become the type of honest, humble person Jesus describes in these verses. And I pray that God will receive all the glory as He changes you by His grace.