

Title: Words that Matter
Text: Matthew 5:33-37
Big Idea: Mean what you say and say what you mean.

Introduction:

What **DO** our words mean? What **SHOULD** our words mean? This is a difficult subject to navigate. Language is ever **evolving** and with it there grows a difficulty in discerning **WHAT IS AN INNOCENT PHRASE** and **WHAT WORDS REFLECTS A FLAWED HEART.**

In one sense there is a **simplicity**, an **innocence** and a **cultural garbling of language.**

On the other, there is a **character flaw**, a **deception**, a **yanking of the chain of people's lives.**

On one hand there are **idioms** and the other **meaningless words with no value and content.** I think most of us are familiar with **idioms** or **slang.** Expressions like **“that’s tight,” “work it out,” “I’m down,” “it’s all good”** and **“bling”** are a cultures way of picturing certain events.

On the other hand, there are times **WHEN WE SAY WORDS THAT HAVE NO MEANING, NO CONTENT, NO AMBITION BEHIND THEM, NO INTENT TO CARRY OUT WHAT WE HAVE STATED.** It is **THESE WORDS** I believe Jesus is confronting us today.

Let me illustrate with a recent example in my life. Over 20% of the students at Gordon-Conwell were from Korea. In many ways, that statistic speaks to the ongoing work of God in that land that had little or no viable witness for the Gospel some 50 years ago. Nevertheless, most of these Korean students can not speak fluid

English. Though schooled in English in many years, like most language learners, there comes a time where you must exit the classroom and go out into the marketplace to exercise what you have been taught. When a new student from Korea comes to Gordon-Conwell, the Student Services offices hands them a sheet of idioms and phrases Americans use on a regular basis. For instance, “How are you doing?” typically means “Hi.” Most of us when we use that phrase never want to stick around and find out how the person is doing. No rather, we want to simply acknowledge the person with a warm smile and then go on our way. Or this one, “I’ll call you” or “Give me a call sometime” which basically means nothing. Many Korean students got upset when after days, weeks or even months, the phone never rang and the person never called. Or when they did call someone hoping to build a relationship, they found after a few calls that the person really did not want to build one and did not mean what they say. Or this one, “I’ll pray for you”. This one obviously can not be measured, but I believe if we are honest, most of us fail to do what we say. Some Korean students thought we would pray right then and there. Though we have good intentions, we just never back up those aspirations with real action.

Well, Jesus has something to say about this terrible habit of ours. In fact, His words on this topic are quite strong. Let’s explore together what He has to say and see whether our words are made of weeds or made of gold, but before we do, let’s pray.

Words that mean nothing:

Once again, we find our selves in the, “You have heard that it was said,” “But I tell you” pattern repeated 6x in Matthew 5. Here we are at the 4th of these sayings and we must ask ourselves again **what distortion the Pharisees were teaching and what correction Jesus is bringing?** First the distortion.

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.’”
Matthew 5:33

At first glance this quotation appears **HARMLESS IF NOT CONVICTING**, but we have to dig a little deeper to see what issue Jesus is specifically addressing. What we have here is **NOT AN ACCURATE QUOTATION** of any one law of Moses. Yet, on the other hand, it is **NOT ENTIRELY AN INACCURATE** summary of many OT texts that speak about **OATHS. OATHS WERE VERBAL DECLARATIONS OF THE INTENTS OF THE HEART.** In the ancient world, God was called upon to witness a vow and to punish the individual if he fails to break it or bless them if they keep it. Remnants of this practice still exist today such as in a **court room** or in a **wedding ceremony**. What we have here in our text is probably a consolidation of a couple OT passages such as:

Num. 30:2 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.**

Deut. 23:21 If you make a vow to the LORD your God, **do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.**

The intention here is plain. **God takes our words very seriously.** He wants our words to be as good as gold, not worthless as some weed.

PROBLEM: Now our friends the Pharisees shifted the people’s attention away **FROM THE VOW** itself and the need to keep it, **TO THE FORMULA** used in

making it. They listed which formula was binding and which ones were not. Yet, Jesus did not buy into such practices. Listen to His harsh rebuke of their words later recorded in Matthew:

¹⁶ *“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’* ¹⁷*You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?* ¹⁸ *You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’* ¹⁹ *You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?* ²⁰ *Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.* ²¹ *And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.* ²² *And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.*

Matthew 23:16-22

Similarly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states:

³⁴ *But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;* ³⁵ *or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.* ³⁶ *And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.*

Matthew 5:33-36

Now I remember when I was a kid, we use such formulas or coined phrases to vow our silence when “secret squirrel“ information was about to given us. Expressions like, “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye” or “Scott’s honor” became the necessary key which would allow me into one’s circle of secrecy or the signed contract WHICH TOLD EVERYONE I COULD BE TRUSTED. Like the Pharisees, the value of the formulae depended on which object it was invoking (gold in the temple, gift on the altar, heaven or earth, Jerusalem or your head). I remember placing pocket knife’s, skateboards, marbles and baseball cards on the table to guarantee that to somehow prove my words were valid and true. In the same light, THE PHARISEES HAD THEIR COINED EXPRESSIONS WHICH

ELEVATED ONES CHARACTER FROM A SHADY PERSON TO PERSON OF GREAT INTEGRITY AND TRUST.

Looking back at this oath taking process, I must say that the thinking behind it is quite illogical. Follow my reasoning here. If a person has to make an oath or vow to keep a secret, that infers that they are a dishonest person, or at times a dishonest person because their language can not be taken as gold or as trustworthy. Thus, if a dishonest person makes a vow to make him or herself honest or reliable, then how do we know that they are being credible in their vow when they tend to be dishonest in their everyday language. Or to put it another way, if a person repeatedly cries, "Wolf, wolf" when there are no wolves, then how can we trust them when they cry, "Wolf, wolf, cross my heart and hope to die..." when there really are wolves.

OATHS ARISE BECAUSE MEN ARE SO OFTEN LIARS. The bottom line according to Jesus is that the formula (or the oath) does NOT add value to the vow. Whether there is a formula or not, the words of an honest person will be as good as gold and the words of a dishonest person will be as useless as weeds.

Now this is not to say as Christians that we should altogether abandon vows in court room or in wedding ceremonies. The Anabaptists took this line in the 16th century as do some Quakers today. While I do admire their attempts to take Jesus' words literally, I do believe their interpretation is excessive. For even Jesus, when on trial before the high priest did not refuse to reply when He was put under oath, "*I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God*" (Mt 26:63).

Essentially, what Jesus is teaching then is that **HONEST MEN AND HONEST WOMEN DO NOT HAVE TO RESORT TO OATHS; IT WAS NOT THAT THEY SHOULD REFUSE TO TAKE AN OATH IF REQUIRED BY SOME EXTERNAL AUTHORITY.**

Words that have value or words of gold:

If swearing or oath taking is a pathetic confession of our own dishonesty, then what should our language sound like? What content should we use? What expressions, exaggerations or adjectives should we pull of the shelf, if at all? To these questions, Jesus gives this brief reply:

³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'
Matthew 5:37a

CHRISTIANS SHOULD SAY WHAT THEY MEAN AND MEAN WHAT THEY SAY (2x). Our unadorned words should be enough. A simple "yes" or "no." REPEATED TWICE FOR EMPHASIS, AND STATED AS AN IMPERATIVE OR COMMAND FOR FORCE, JESUS WANTS THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO FOLLOW HIM TO MEAN SOMETHING, TO BE AS GOOD AS GOLD, NOT USELESS AS WEEDS.

What is particularly startling is the **BREVITY** of the answers Jesus gives. It has been said, **"Never use a gallon of words to express a spoonful of thought."** And when a monosyllable will do, why waste our breathe by adding to it. **Don't ramble, or make excuses.** People don't want to hear any more words. In our mechanical age, all words have become alike... *To say "God is Love" is like saying, "Eat Wheaties."* Consider this paradox discovered by Ted Koppel, *"Almost everything that is publicly said these days is recorded. Almost nothing of what is said is worth remembering."* Rather, for the Christian, though, **our words should have MEANING, PURPOSE and VALUE.**

The world is constantly looking for **anchor points** to ride out the turbulent storms of this life. When in trouble, we toss our anchor, a polite word or two, toward family, friends, coworkers and classmates hoping to find some sure a stabilizing point

to our dilemma. Yet, too often, all we experience is polite words with no real substance. Good intentions, but no depth.

Promise keepers, but not promise makers. Promises may get friends, but it is **performance** that must nurse and keep them. And so it is to **performance, meaning, content and purpose** that Jesus is calling us to speak. The words of those who travel down this road less traveled should be valued as gold, not as worthless as weeds.

Getting practical:

Now this simple truth has **profound impact** on how each one of us live. There are many ways this teaching must work its way into our lives. Let me begin with a few instances:

Commitments:

If you say that you are going to be a part of an athletic team, a drama group in church, a children's ministry program, if you tell your boss or your teacher that you will have the report on his desk by Monday, then you follow through. Too many people flake on their commitments. Too many people don't honor their word. Don't make commitments you don't intend to honor. **Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!! (Todd commitment to do a drama)**

Character:

There are too many starters in this world and too few finishers. Why? People with good intentions and lofty promises can't back up their stated course with proper character. **Promises must be kept, deadlines met, commitment honored, not for the sake of morality, but because we become what we do or fail to do. Character is the sum of that.** Thus, I believe Jesus makes words a big deal, because character is a big deal. **We are what we do, NOT what we say we will do. Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!**

School:

Percentage of students who admit to having cheated on exams at colleges with honor codes: 30

Percentage of students who admit to having cheated on exams at colleges without honor codes: 45

cited in USA Today

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Software Piracy:

Percentage of software in the U.S. that was illegally acquired: **67**
Citation: PC Today,

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Music Piracy:

Percentage of illegal music downloads from the internet in the U.S: **95**

According to the estimates of the organization, some 40 billion music files were illegally shared in 2008, while only 1.4 billion were downloaded legally. They say that the digital music business has expanded last year by more than 25 percent, reaching an estimated value of around \$3.7 billion. Because people share music illegally and don't pay for the albums and tracks they own, they cause massive dents in profits for companies, labels, and music artists, the IFPI, which represents 1,400 companies in 72 countries, says.

Citation: International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI)

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Credit Card Debt:

Amount of credit card debt written off each year because of bankruptcy: **20 Billion**

Citation: http://www.usdoj.gov/ust/eo/public_affairs/articles/docs/abi_1203.html

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Financial debt: School loans, child support (Boston), taxes.

Our Witness and Influence:

To be persuasive, we must be believable. To be believable, we must be credible. To be credible, we must be truthful.

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Courtship:

Saying, “I love you.” Reserve it. Some can say these words and not mean commitment at all. Some hear these words and read into them lifelong commitment. More confusion has come in dating and courtship because these words were stated days, weeks, months, perhaps even years before commitment was ever intended. I would reserve it until you are committed. **Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!**

Marriage:

“... to have as my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish til death us do part and thereto I pledge thee my life.” Public words before family and God. Do they have meaning for us as a culture. **Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!**

Worship and Prayer:

Worship songs. May I make a radical suggestion in worship. Rather than sing a song, read it first. Look at each line, each word and examine it for truth as well as sentiment. If you concur with what is being sung in, if you desire to make these words, your words of worship or prayer to God sing it with all your heart. If you can't, then remain silent. Pray to God and ask Him for the grace to rise you above your weakness so that you can truly mean what you say.

Altar time and prayer. We will talk about prayer more specifically in subsequent weeks, but I want to bring up a few pointers now. I believe when we pray, we should be slow down. Mean each word rather than dump a ton of words.

We will here Jesus' view on rambles in chapter 6, but for now trust me when I say that we should be deliberate in what we say and what we mean.

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Responsibility:

There may be a temptation to avoid saying anything altogether to not avoid any incriminating charges against our lives. Though it is wise to be selective in what we say, being silent doesn't bring maturity and growth. Show that you are responsible by living up to you own words. **Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!**

Mortgages:

This is a tough one, but in our day today it needs to be addressed. To sign a mortgage is to give one's word. One should try at honor that word. If one cannot, one must try with humility and honesty to navigate the difficult paths of bankruptcy or foreclosures.

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Why do we do speak this way?

All of the reasons and examples I just gave you are valid and appropriate, I believe, results of what Jesus is teaching about our words. **Yet, none of them is the reason Jesus gives on why our words are to have value, depth and meaning.** Look with me at the last phrase of our text and see **THE ONE REASON** why Jesus commands us to talk this way.

³⁷ *anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

Matthew 5:37b

What was that Jesus? Did you go over the deep end with this topic? Come on Jesus, **demons and dialogue, Satan and speech. Words and Wormwood.** Listen here folks, this is Jesus speaking not Roger. This is **His** connection, not mine. This is how Jesus views our **idle, meaningless, empty words.** He sees them as **demonic.** **The source of our babbling, the origin of our excuses, the root of our rambling comes from the father of lies, the deceiver, the evil one, namely, Satan.** “Too harsh? Unrealistic? Only simple mistakes?” you say. I present to you Jesus’ words here today. You can write them off or you can examine your life in light of them. The choice is up to you.

In the Sermon of the Mount itself, “the evil one” is only mentioned twice - here and later in the Lord’s prayer “*deliver us from the evil one.*” Both settings involve our words. Both call us to have **meaning, value and content** to what protrudes from our mouth. Both remind us to consider what we are saying and to put value behind those words.

Since the evil one cannot defeat the power of the message (i.e. the gospel of Jesus Christ), he goes after **the veracity of the messenger.** If he can get people to

question the messenger, he can get them to doubt or ignore the message. Think about it. If people see a Christ-follower cheat on your taxes, doesn't keep their word at work or unfaithful to their marriage vows, why would they consider believing what they say if spoke the gospel.

Words were the medium in creation. Jesus is called the Logos or the Word. It is the power of a few words that one transverses from this world to the next. "That if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

Words can heal or they can destroy. They can bind or loose. With words we sing or we curse. The world needs paperwork, signatures, id, background checks, character references and ...

Muslim Afghan and bread...

Your word should be good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

Conclusion:

How do I live this way? How do I place value and meaning in my words? How do I make my words gold and not weeds? 1) Take seriously the meaning of your words. Don't blow off. 2) Realize that you can't keep your words. What did you say? You heard me. ? Realize that you can't keep your words. That may seem like a strange first step toward the goal of keeping your word, but it's true. Consider this question: "If we could keep our word, wouldn't we have done it by now?" How many times have we made the same promises? Let's face it, **rededication to keep our words won't work**. If it did, we wouldn't find it necessary to keep rededicating ourselves. Many of us have struggled with promise-keeping for one reason: **We have focused on our performance more than on Jesus Christ**. We have tried to keep our promises, but the Bible teaches that effective Christian living doesn't come by trying. It comes by trusting Christ to express his life through us. He is the only One who can successfully keep our word.

Before we can be effective promise keepers, we must become promise receivers. The Bible is clear about God's promise: the One who has given us his life will be the One who lives it for us. Only Jesus Christ can effectively live the perfect life. He lives inside believers today and wants to reveal His perfect life through us.

He will make your words as good as gold, not as worthless as weeds!!!

What do our words mean?

“Let’s do lunch.”

“No new taxes.”

“I will give you a call sometime.”

“Do you promise to tell
the truth, the whole truth
and nothing but the truth
so help you God?”

“Do you promise to tell
the truth, the whole truth
and nothing but the truth
so help you God?”

“I do”

“I won’t be late.”

“I did not have sex with that
woman.”

“It will be on your desk
by noon tomorrow.”

“You can count on me.”

“I promise never to do it again.”

“I’ll pray for you.”

“I do.”

“I will return this by
Saturday.”

“I’ll make my bed before I go out
with my friends.”

“I promise to take you camping
before the summer is over.”

“I won’t tell no one.”

“But we’ll get together then, Son,

“But we’ll get together then, Son,
You know we’ll have a good
time then.”

“Jesus, if you do this for me,
I promise to go back to church.”

“You have my word.”

What do our words mean?

What should our words mean?

