

# THE LAW OF CHRIST:

God's Will

for

New Testament Believers

by

George R. Law

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RSP

## Day 19

# CHRIST'S 4<sup>th</sup> COMMANDMENT: TRUTH

*Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,  
and your law is the truth (Ps 119:142).*

*The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD,  
the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and  
abounding in lovingkindness [covenant loyalty] and truth"  
(Ex 34:6 NASB; cf. Ps 86:15).*

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me:  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
on you do I wait all the day (Ps 25:5).*

*Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall  
not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord." But I  
say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's  
throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem,  
for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your  
head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let  
your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," be "No." For whatever is  
more than these is from the evil one (Mt 5:33-37 NKJV).*

Truth is one of the character traits which God included in His description of His name:

The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness [covenant loyalty] and truth" (Ex 34:6 NASB; cf. Ps 86:15).

These four godly characteristics, covenant loyalty, truth, grace, and compassion, are commanded by the Law of Christ so that believers will reflect the godliness of their heavenly Father. For New Testament believers, obedience to Christ's Commandments gives understanding of the mind of Christ and advances their progress in becoming Christlike.

#### **4. Commandment of Truth:**

"let your communication be 'Yea, yea'"

–Be honest in your communication with all men (Mt 5:33-37).

The phrase "you have heard that it was said to those of old" refers to this ordinance in the Law of Moses: "You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord" (Lv 19:12 NASB; cf. Nm 30:2). The Israelites were told to take great care to actually perform any oath which they voluntarily swore in God's name. God warned them that He would require an account from them for any oaths made in His name (Dt 23:21-23). In this Commandment of Truth, Christ exercises His authority as the new Lawgiver and rescinds the permission in the Old Law to swear by God or His name.

The illustration of this fourth Commandment of Christ concerns the common practice of someone who would swear by God that he would perform an oath. The problem was that Jewish tradition had changed the effectiveness of these oaths because, instead of being one's true intentions, the issue had become a matter of legal technicalities.

The requirement for truth in the ninth Commandment of the Old Law was quite limited in nature: it required only that the Israelite was "not to bear false witness" (Ex 20:16; Dt 5:20). This

Old Commandment dealt primarily with one's testimony in a matter to be settled by a court. When interpreted narrowly, which seems to have become the practice of many Jews, this Commandment did not restrict one's false communication in everyday life, only when one was a witness before a court.

Therefore, according to those who narrowly interpreted the Commandment "not to bear false witness," only certain promissory oaths, when technically correct, were binding on a man. Consequently, those who were crafty and wanted to escape their obligations would swear by something less than God or less than His name. They thought that this technicality, specifically, swearing an inferior and therefore a defective oath, would relieve them of the guilt of breaking the Law of Moses. Thus, the Jews were reduced to judging each other according to whether or not one kept the technicalities of the Law of Moses, instead of according to whether or not one actually told the truth. Some of the Jews were trying to hide their immoral actions behind the supposed legal trivia of Moses' Law, and they were losing their reputation for honesty because their oaths could not be trusted.

### **Ancient Concept of Truth**

The ancients valued truth as a fundamental virtue. Ancient Greek writers described "truth" as a report which represented the facts of an event. Aristotle said "that which is is true and that which is not is false" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.7 (1011b 25-8)).

In Hebrew thought, a man was described as being "true" or not. Joseph, the second highest ruler in Egypt, accused his brothers of giving a dishonest report. They protest that their report is true: "We are all one man's sons; we are true men; [we] are not spies" (Gen 42:11; cf. 19, 31, 33, 34). So Joseph tests the report of his brothers: "you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you" (Gen 42:16). The brothers prove their honesty, that their words are "true," by bringing Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, to Egypt. Eventually, Joseph is reunited with his whole family, including his father Jacob.

In the Old Testament, the characteristic of covenant loyalty (*hesed*) is frequently linked with truth.

All the paths of the LORD are mercy [*hesed*] and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies (Ps 25:10).

For your lovingkindness [*hesed*] is before mine eyes: and I have walked in your truth (Ps 26:3).

I have not hid your righteousness within my heart; I have declared your faithfulness and your salvation: I have not concealed your lovingkindness [*hesed*] and your truth from the great congregation (Ps 40:10).

For your mercy [*hesed*] is great unto the heavens, and your truth unto the clouds (Ps 57:10).

Mercy [*hesed*] and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Ps 85:10).

Covenant loyalty is closely connected with truth because those who are faithful to their covenants are being true to their word. Thus, God is loyal and true: He cannot lie and will not be unfaithful to the covenants He has made with man. Therefore, it was incongruent for the Israelites to serve a God of truth, yet have a reputation for making dishonest oaths and breaking their covenants.

### **Adding to the Truth**

Christ's illustration concerns those who would make dishonest oaths. When the Jews added their tradition to God's truth, they changed honesty from the moral requirement of God into a matter of technicalities.

The question of "what keeping the Law of Moses means" had become a widespread problem for the Israelites. For a long time, their leaders, priests, and rabbis had been adding their own traditions to Moses' Law. The addition of these traditions had the effect of undermining the Law of Moses and had left the common people confused concerning what God actually required.

Back in the time of Malachi, God had rebuked the priestly leaders for departing from God's way, corrupting the covenant, and causing the people to stumble at the Law of Moses:

“For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have departed from the way; You have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” says the LORD of hosts.

“Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, Because you have not kept My ways But have shown partiality in the law” (Mal 2:7-9 NKJV).

Jesus similarly rebuked the Jewish leaders because they were more concerned with their traditions than with God's Word:

He said unto them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, so that you may keep the tradition of men. . . . Making the word of God of no effect through your tradition, which you have handed down: and many such things you do.” (Mk 7:9, 13 NKJV; cf. Mt 15:1-6).

The traditions of the Jews minimized the Law of Moses and often resulted in the failure of many to keep its requirements.

Perhaps these traditions began innocently. Most rabbis and Pharisees were extremely particular about their observance of the Law of Moses and went to great lengths not to be guilty of breaking any of its commands. Therefore, they decided to build a “fence around the Torah” (Avot 1:1), and added their human wisdom and personal experience to God's Torah. Thus, their traditions were considered to be “defensive walls” protecting the Torah, built to assure strict observance of Moses' Law. Logically, in order for the Jews' added traditions to be protective “walls” around God's original Law, they had to be even more restrictive than God's original commands.

Unfortunately, the Jews' practice of adding their traditions to the Law of Moses often ruined the effectiveness of God's original commands. Maybe this is why God had expressly forbidden any such additions to His Old Covenant Law:

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you (Dt 4:2 NKJV).

Colin Smith, a favorite professor at Piedmont Baptist Graduate School, explained that Moses had given a prime example early in Scripture of the foolishness of adding to God's Word. When God gives Adam the original command not to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God does not specify how close Adam is allowed to get to this tree, or how far Adam is to stay away from it. God does not forbid man's appreciation of the tree's beauty; neither does He give a specific command concerning whether or not man can touch the tree or handle its fruit. Adam is simply commanded "not to eat of it" (Gen 2:17).

Either Adam decides to add to God's command, or when he discusses it with Eve, they both agree that adding their own emphasis to His command will insure their observance of it. Either way, one of them reinterprets God's original command, adding the further restriction "not to touch it." Eve reports this amplified command as if it were God's when she tells the serpent: "God has said, 'You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Gen 3:3). Thus, Adam and Eve are the first humans to receive God's command, and also the first humans to amplify His command by amending their own "tradition." Regrettably, their "fence" around God's command fails to insure their obedience.

Although such extra precautions might seem quite logical, adding human wisdom to God's Word leads to imbalance and to devastating results. Disregarding the poor example of Adam and Eve, the Jews disobeyed God's command not to add to His Word. Instead of simply obeying in righteousness and godliness, the Jews became legalistic in their obedience to God's commands.

### **Just the Truth**

In the Commandment of Truth, Jesus Christ presents this principle: always communicate the truth. A believer should say "yes" when he means "yes" and "no" when he means "no" (Mt 5:37). The citizen of the heavenly Kingdom is to be honest in all of his

communications to all men. If one is always honest, there will be no reason for anyone to doubt his word and no reason to require that he swear an oath. Therefore, if the believer is always truthful, he will never have to swear and take an oath at all; and so, he will never be forced to break any oath for any reason.

If a believer is unable to speak the truth, he should say nothing at all. Speak the truth, no more, and no less.

### **Less than the Truth**

In the Scriptures, speech which was less than honest is described as “guile” (Ps 32:2; 34:13; 55:11). In the New Testament, guile is crafty speech used by someone who desires to bait or set a snare to catch another (Mt 26:4; Mk 7:22; 14:1; Jn 1:47; Acts 13:10). The serpent in the Garden of Eden is described negatively as being “crafty” (Gen 3:1); and so, Satan is known as one who lays snares (1 Tim 3:7; 2 Tim 2:26).

When Jesus sees Nathaniel coming, He commends him for not being deceitful or practicing false communication: “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (Jn 1:47).

Peter reports that Christ did not use false communication in His speech: “Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Pet 2:22). We also should be known for our honesty and good character, not for false or crafty communication. When Peter admonishes believers to be honest, he adds a promise much like the Old Decalogue’s promise of long life: “For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile” (1 Pet 3:10; cf. Ex 20:12).

May we always imitate the God of truth and be truthful in our communication.

Memory verses:

LORD, who shall abide in your tabernacle? Who shall dwell in your holy hill? He that walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart (Ps 15:1-2).

But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No.” For whatever is more than these is from the evil one (Mt 5:37 NKJV).