FOURTH ANTITHESIS

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those or early times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but you shall fulfill your oaths as to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, not by heaven, <u>because</u> it is the throne of God, or by the earth, <u>because</u> it is the footstool of his feet, nor with reference to Jerusalem, <u>because</u> it is the city of the great king, nor should you swear by your own head, <u>because</u> you are unable to make one hair white or black. But let your word be such that a yes is a yes a no is a no. But the rest of these practices are from the evil one.
Matthew 5:33-37

The fourth antithesis involves once again, as in the antithesis that preceded it, a denial of what was allowed by the Mosaic legislation. Here there is no contradiction of Moses, but only a contradiction at the level of the letter of the text, not in spirit.

In other words, Jesus pursues the same goal as does the law: integrity of the word.

With Jesus, however, and with the arrival of the Kingdom with him, he insists on the integrity of the word lying outside of the context of taking an oath. Thus, he once again sets the high ethics of the new reality of the Kingdom before his listeners.

The strong view against oath taking here might be the direct result of the clear abuse of the practice that Jesus would later condemn the Pharisees for in Matthew 23:16-23.

Once again Matthew remains orderly in constructing this antithesis in the following pattern.

1) the view received by tradition.
2) The new perspective of that view by Jesus.
3) The grounds Jesus gives for that perspective.
4) The fundamental principle in v.37.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those or early times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but you shall fulfill your oaths as to the Lord.'
Matthew 5:33

As in the first antithesis, Jesus' gives the longer opening formula: *Again, you have heard that it was said to those of early times."* By this Matthew relays to the readers that Jesus is starting a new set of three commandments.

Though it may not be apparent, Matthew has an orderly presentation in his Gospel for teaching or instruction using sets of three:

He used three divisions of fourteen in the opening genealogy.
The Adversary tempted Jesus three times.
He uses two sets of three petitions in the Lord's Prayer.
He uses three sets of devotions in Matthew 6:

Almsgiving; Prayer; Fasting.

He uses three sets of miracles in Matthew 8-9 with each set containing 3 miracles.

Miracles of Healing:

1) The Leper.

2) The Centurion' Servant.

3) Peter's Mother-in-Law.

Miracles of Authority:

1) Calming the Storm.

2) Healing the Gadarene Demoniac.

3) Healing a Paralytic.

Miracles of Restoration:

1) The Official's Daughter and the Woman with Bleeding.

2) Two Blind Men.

3) The Mute Demoniac.

He uses three passion predictions:

Suffering, Death, Resurrection.

He uses three prayers in Gethsemane.

He uses three denials by Peter.

Following the introduction formula, Matthew does not present a quotation from the Old Testament as he did in the first two antitheses, but clarity of the Old Testament teaching on the subject.

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.
Leviticus 19:12

If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.
Numbers 30:2

If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require of it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you shall not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.
Deuteronomy 23:21-23

do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD.
Zechariah 8:17

Given these texts, it is clear that the Old Testament emphasizes that oaths have a binding character.

Behind all these imperatives, we might see Exodus 20:7 as their foundation.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.
Exodus 20:7

'But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, not by heaven, because it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, nor with reference to Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great king, nor should you swear by your own head, because you are unable to make one hair white or black."
Matthew 5:34-36

Again, the *antithesis* is stated with authority: *"But I say to you."*

Whereas the Old Testament seemed to encourage the making of oaths, Jesus appears to deny the need for oaths altogether. To understand his strong stance, we must understand the context in which he is speaking.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. Matthew 23:16-23

What we glean from this stern condemnation is that what is assumed in the matter of oath making is a practice where more often the oath is a means of avoiding what the oath promises rather than performing what is promised in the oath.

The Jews had introduced a system that winked at oaths that were not directly oaths in the name of God.
Leithart – Jesus as Israel, page 139

"There are some who without even any gain in prospect have an evil habit of swearing incessantly and thoughtlessly about ordinary matters where there is nothing at all in dispute, filling up the gaps in the their talk with oaths, forgetting that it were better to submit to have their words cut short or rather to be silenced altogether. Some apparently think "that the continual repetition of a string of oaths will secure them their object."
Philo as quoted in Jerome H Neyrey, Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew, page 202

Given this, Jesus is stating that one should not swear by heaven, for it is the throne of God. That is, the oath is of a binding character, and to swear by heaven – or anything else one might care to mention – is much more significant than it may initially sound.
Hagner – Matthew, page 128

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, not by heaven, <u>because</u> it is the throne of God, or by the earth, <u>because</u> it is the footstool of his feet, nor with reference to Jerusalem, <u>because</u> it is the city of the great king, nor should you swear by your own head, <u>because</u> you are unable to make one hair white or black.

The word *"because"* is underscored four times in the above antithesis, each time introducing a clause that ultimately reveals God himself as being behind the oath.
Heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool are biblical metaphors.

Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?
Isaiah 66:1

The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.
Psalm 11:4

How the LORD in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger.
Lamentations 2:1

Jerusalem is the city of the Great King: the city of our God

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the "city of our God!" beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great king.
Psalm 48:1-2

Then there is the matter of the hairs on one's head. Here Jesus states that even the hairs of one's head are beyond one's control while still being subject to God's control.

But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.
Matthew 10:30

In this sense, all oath taking implicates God. They are in effect, to swear in his name thus, all oath taking is to be understood as possessing an absolute character.

The essence of what Jesus is getting at here is that of absolute necessity of integrity.

Listen, my children, to instruction concerning speech;
the one who observes it will never be caught.
8 The sinner is overtaken through his lips,
the reviler and the arrogant are tripped by them.
9 Do not accustom your mouth to oaths,
and do not habitually utter the name of the Holy One;
10 for as a servant who is continually examined under torture
will not lack bruises,
so also the man who always swears and utters the Name
will not be cleansed from sin.
11 A man who swears many oaths will be filled with iniquity,
and the scourge will not leave his house;
if he offends, his sin remains on him,
and if he disregards it, he sins doubly;
if he has sworn needlessly, he will not be justified,
for his house will be filled with calamities.
Sirach 23:7-11

Regarding the absolute necessity of integrity in the one who receives the Kingdom of God's word, Jesus is shocking his audience with this statement. Oath taking is unnecessary in the Kingdom since it serves no purpose. Therein lies the *antithesis.*

For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of which are the Pharisees; of the second, the Sadducees; and the third sect, which pretends to a severer discipline, are called Essenes. These last are Jews by birth, and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. They dispense their anger after a just manner, and restrain their passion. They are eminent for fidelity, and are the ministers of peace; whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath; but swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury for they say that he who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God is already condemned.
Josephus – Jewish Wars 2.8.2, 6

> *Quite simply, the Command of Truth seeks to protect speech in the community as the immediately preceding two Commandments sought to protect sex. The trustworthiness of what we say is as important to a community's welfare as the trustworthiness of our temperament or morals. Are we scrupulously concerned about the truth of what we say?*
> *Brunner – Matthew, page 238*

The point being made here is that the Old Testament had expressed its condemnation of untruthfulness by the use of oaths whereas Jesus condemns *the use* of the oath, forbidding oaths altogether.

Jesus has a desire to dismantle the whole lying structure of oaths and oath taking, at least among the recipients of the Kingdom.

> *It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.*
> *Deuteronomy 6:13*

> *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High. Psalm 50:14*

If one can receive it, the thinking Jesus is aiming at goes like this: *the one who swears assumes for himself a certain power of attorney for God which they do not have.*

> *Immanuel Kant, in his "Religion within the Bounds of Reason", was famously scathing about oaths: oaths are pure superstition because they naively believe that a person who cannot be trusted to tell the truth can "be persuaded to speak truthfully by the use of a formula." Kant, apparently like Jesus, feared that one bad effect of oaths is that "the greater importance [given to oaths] almost sanctioned the common lie."*
> *Brunner – Matthew, page 240*

> *Oaths are all oaths before God's presence, in the name of God. The escape routes that the Jews constructed are false escape routes. They are still oaths in the name of God, even if God's name is not invoked. Changing the words doesn't mean that you've escaped the responsibility. Jesus also commands us not to bluster and swear as a way of bullying people into accepting the truth of what we say. If you've got to yell and swear to be heard, you've got problems already.*
> *Leithart – Jesus as Israel, page 140*

But let your word be such that a yes is a yes a no is a no. But the rest of these practices are from the evil one.
Matthew 5:37

The strong affirmative statement that alone makes sense of Jesus' repudiation of oath taking is the imperative that one's word – whether a yes or a no – be sufficient.
Hagner – Matthew, page 128

When one's word is absolutely reliable, making oaths becomes superficial.

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.
James 5:12

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No.
2 Corinthains 1:17-18

Anything other than the validity of one's word is a deception from the evil one.

"You are from your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
John 8:44

In the ethics of the Kingdom, there is no need for the taking of oaths.

The prohibition of oaths, therefore, probably does not prevent Christians today from swearing "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, in a court of law or from occasionally inserting in their speech to emphasize the complete veracity of a pronouncement a statement such as "as God is my witness" or "I swear to God." Nonetheless, the seriousness of such statements should lead to their very judicious use, and only in contexts in which people are absolutely sure of the truthfulness of what they utter.
Blomberg – Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, page 26