Let Your Yes Be Yes

MATTHEW 5:33-37 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

If you're a person who tells the truth all the time, you never need to swear you're telling the truth right now. Jesus wants your plain word to be so reliable that 'I promise' becomes pointless.

Opening Lines

Think about the last time you added extra words to make someone believe you. 'I swear.' 'Honestly.' 'I promise.' Tonight we're going to ask why we reach for those props at all.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to see that every 'I swear' is a quiet confession that their ordinary word can't be trusted. Send them out aiming for a bare 'yes' that stands on its own.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the deep dive on first-century graded oaths (temple gold vs. Jerusalem) if time is short. It's fascinating but the exercise on their own hedging language matters more.
- Where the moment lives: In the moment a person names the exact filler word they personally reach for when they want to be believed. That naming is where the passage stops being about Pharisees.
- Your prep: Have your own filler word ready to confess out loud before you ask anyone else. Read Matthew 23:16-22 so you can describe the oath-ranking game they played.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Use the classroom opening (hands up, why did we invent 'I swear') — 5 min. Read the passage aloud — 3 min. Teach the graded-oath background and the 'nothing is neutral to swear by' point — 10 min. Teach the word 'nai' with the contract image — 7 min. Discussion questions 1-3, pooling short answers — 15 min. Landing with out-loud commitments and prayer — 5 min. Transformation lives in question 3, where they name their own hedge. If short, cut the temple-gold detail from the background block.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Use the small-group opening (confess your own tell) — 8 min. Read passage — 3 min. Brief background on the loophole game — 7 min. Word study on 'nai' plus the keepable line and silence — 7 min. Full discussion questions 1-5 with real silence on 3 and 5 — 28 min. Commitments out loud and spontaneous prayer over their actual words — 7 min.

Transformation lives across questions 3 and 5. If short, cut question 2 and protect 3 and 5.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Use the coffee opening (clean no vs. 'we'll see') — 4 min. Read the passage off your phone — 2 min. One sentence on the loophole game, then straight to your own confessed hedge word — 5 min. Questions 1 and 3 conversationally — 12 min. Land on the big idea and each name one filler word to drop — 5 min. Short prayer over exactly what you each said — 2 min. Transformation lives in question 3. If short, skip the background entirely and just live in question 3.

Silence

Silence after a question is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Remember week 2 you practiced just holding your tongue for a slow ten-count. Level up now: after you ask your hardest question, don't only stay silent — resist the urge to rescue it by rephrasing on the first stall. Count a full ten seconds in your head, keep your face open and expectant, and let the discomfort do its work. The person who finally speaks into that silence is usually saying the truest thing in the room. If you crack and reword too fast, you teach them that if they wait you out, you'll answer your own question.

Why This Passage Matters

Most of the Sermon on the Mount confronts sins we can point at in other people — anger, lust, hate. This one confronts a sin we've practically made into a manner of speaking. Every 'to be honest with you' and 'I swear on my life' is a tiny admission that our regular words come with a discount built in. Jesus reaches past the courtroom and into the way people talk all day at work, at home, in the group chat. That makes this passage uncomfortably close for everyone in your room, including you. Nobody gets to sit this one out as a spectator. And here's why it's a gift to teach: underneath the command is the character of God, whose bare word made the worlds and never needs backing up. When Jesus says stop swearing, he's inviting your people into the family likeness of a Father who simply cannot lie. You get to hand a room of ordinary, over-explaining, hedging people the dignity of being folks whose plain word is enough. That's not a rule. That's a promotion.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, do the exercise on yourself in the days beforehand. For two days, listen to your own mouth. Catch every 'honestly,' 'I swear,' 'trust me,' 'no really,' 'I promise.' Write down the one you reach for most. Then ask the harder question: which conversations made you reach for it? You'll find it clusters around the times you weren't fully doing the thing you claimed. Bring that discovery into the room raw and specific — not 'we all hedge sometimes' but 'my word is honestly, and I noticed I say it most when I'm running late on something I said I'd do.' If you haven't felt the sting of this passage in your own speech, the room will hear a lecture instead of a confession.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time your bare word was doubted and you scrambled to prove it with extra words instead of just letting it stand.
- A time you said 'we'll see' or 'maybe' to soften a no, and it left someone hanging longer than a clean no would have.
- Someone in your life whose plain yes you trust completely — what that trust feels like to be on the receiving end of.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real) — Polished: 'I've learned that integrity means letting your character speak for itself.' Real: 'My kid asked if I'd be at the game and I said I'd try. I didn't try. I hedged so I wouldn't have to say no, and she stopped believing my try.'
- Guardrail: keep it one unfinished, still-a-little-embarrassing moment — not a cleaned-up story with the lesson already bolted on.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Raise your hand if you've said 'I swear' or 'honestly' in the last twenty-four hours. Now here's the question: why did we invent those words at all? What is a 'trust me' actually admitting about a regular 'yes'?"

Start with a shared observation, not a doctrine — get them noticing before they're defending.

SMALL GROUP: "I've been listening to my own mouth this week and I caught my tell. Mine's 'honestly.' I say it right before something I want to make sure you believe. What's yours? What word do you tack on when you really want to be trusted?"

A confession invites a confession — go first with your own hedge word.

COFFEE: "When someone asks if you'll do something and you can't, do you say a clean no, or do you say 'we'll see'? I think Jesus has an opinion about that, and it surprised me."

One concrete, low-stakes scenario opens the door faster than a big theme.

Teaching the Word

The Greek word to teach here is 'nai' — the plain 'Yes.' It's not a fancy religious word. It's the ordinary sound of agreement, the word a merchant said across a table, the word a child says to a parent. Jesus takes the smallest, most everyday syllable in the language and says: let that be your whole guarantee. Here's the physical image. Ask the room to imagine signing a contract — the pen, the witnesses, the notary stamp. That whole apparatus exists because a bare 'yes' isn't trusted. Now imagine handing someone a blank sheet with a single word on it — 'yes' — and them treating it as binding as the contract. That's the person Jesus is describing. Paul says of Jesus that in him, however many the promises of God, the answer is 'Yes' — the same word. Your yes is meant to sound like his. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' [Let that sit. Say nothing. Count ten.]

Discussion Questions

1. What's a word or phrase you personally add on when you really want to be believed?

Coaching note: Keep it light and fast at first — you want ten quick honest answers, not one deep one. Say yours first so nobody feels exposed.

If it stalls: Just go around the circle: is yours 'honestly,' 'I swear,' 'trust me,' or 'I promise'? Pick one.

2. Jesus says the extra oath is actually 'of the evil one.' Why would padding your words be that serious to him?

Coaching note: Guide them toward the idea that the very existence of a bigger promise implies your normal word carries no real obligation. That's the fraud he's exposing.

If it stalls: Put it this way — if you only tell the full truth when you swear, what does that say about all the other times?

3. Where in your week are you most tempted to hedge — to fudge a number, soften a no, or leave something as 'we'll see'?

Coaching note: This is the pivot from theory to their actual life. Give real silence here. The honest answer is often about work deadlines or saying no to people they don't want to disappoint.

If it stalls: Think about your job. When your manager asks if something's done and it's ninety percent there, what do you actually say?

4. Behind this command is a God who literally cannot lie. How does knowing your salvation rests on a 'Yes' God will never take back change the pressure around your own honesty?

Coaching note: Let them connect that we tell the truth not to earn anything but because we belong to a truthful God. Don't rush past the comfort in it — a Yes that never wavers.

If it stalls: Simpler: is it easier to be honest when you're not afraid of being punished for the truth? Why?

5. Who in your life has learned they can trust your word completely — and what would it cost you to become that person for one more relationship?

Coaching note: End on the aspiration, not the failure. Some may name someone; some may realize nobody can. Both are honest. Let the room sit with it.

If it stalls: Name one person who'd say 'if she said it, it's true.' If you can't think of anyone, that's worth naming too.

Questions You May Hear

"So does this mean Christians can't take an oath in court or say wedding vows?"

The point isn't a ban on ever formalizing a promise — the Old Testament permitted oaths and told people to keep their vows. Jesus is attacking the game where people used lesser oaths as escape hatches, and calling us to be so honest that our ordinary word already carries the weight.

"Why does swearing by heaven or earth still count if you didn't say God's name?"

Because it all belongs to him anyway. Heaven is his throne, earth is his footstool,

Jerusalem is his city, and you can't even turn one hair white — so every oath drags God in whether you name him or not. There's no neutral thing left to swear by.

"Wasn't the Old Testament fine with vows? Isn't Jesus contradicting it?"

No — he's restoring it. The law required that vows to the Lord be kept and forbade swearing falsely by his name. The Pharisees cheapened that standard with loopholes, and Jesus deepens it by binding truth to every word, not just the sworn ones.

"Did anyone else in the New Testament repeat this teaching?"

Yes — James, Jesus' own brother, echoes it almost word for word: let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you will not fall under judgment. The early church clearly heard this as a call to plain, dependable honesty in everyday speech.

For Experienced Leaders

- When someone shares their hedge word, resist commenting on each one. Nodding and moving to the next person keeps it safe and fast; analysis makes people clam up.
- The oath-ranking history is genuinely interesting, and a curious person may pull the whole room into it. If it's alive, on the text, and the quiet folks are leaning in, follow it and cut your outline without guilt. If it's two people relitigating temple-gold trivia while everyone glazes, name it kindly: 'Let's you and I finish that after — I want to get us back to what you say when you want to be believed.'
- Watch for the person who turns this into beating themselves up. Steer them to the comfort side fast — God's unbreakable Yes over them is the ground they stand on, not their track record.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Before we close, say it out loud: name the one filler word you're going to drop this week, and name the one place you tend to hedge that you're going to answer plainly instead.

Close by praying out loud over the actual words people just named — the specific hedge word this person is dropping, the specific 'we'll see' that person is turning into a clean answer. Don't reach for a written prayer; saying their own words back to God, and thanking him for a Yes that never wavers, is the whole point.

If you run out of time: If the room is still going hard on question 3 — where they hedge — stay there. That's the transformation question. You do not need to reach questions 4 and 5 for this lesson to land.

Midweek follow-up: Send one text midweek: 'Did you catch your filler word yet this week? What was the moment?' Nothing more — just let them report back.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/5-33-37/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The word I add on when I really want to be believed is:
- I noticed I reach for that word most when I'm _____ (be specific about the situation):
- One place this week I tend to hedge — fudge a number, soften a no, say 'we'll see':
- Someone whose plain word I trust completely — and what that trust feels like:
- The keepable line, in my own words: what would change if my bare 'yes' were enough?

Take-home actions:

- This week, when you feel the pull to prop up your words with 'I swear' or 'honestly' or 'I promise,' drop it. Say the thing plainly and let it stand.
- At work, refuse to fudge the deadline. When it's ninety percent there, don't say 'basically' or 'just about' — say the real number, then hit it.
- When you can't commit, say no cleanly. Skip the 'we'll see' that leaves someone waiting; a clear no today is kinder than a maybe.

> Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' — Matthew 5:37