

## **Your Word**

Interpretation: Part 3 “Your Word”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – July 24, 2022

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

**Readings:** Numbers 30:1-2; James 5:7-12; Matthew 5:33-37

**Reflection:** Psalm 24

**Greeting:** The Lord has told us what is good and right. The Lord requires of us that we are to do justice. The Lord our God calls us to love kindness. We are to walk humbly with our God! Praise the Lord! (*Micah 6:8*)

**Prayer:** O God, our Guide and Guardian, you have led us away from the stress and the strain of the world to be in your peaceful presence. Grant us grace to worship you in Spirit and in truth. May we find comfort in your love and may you build us up by your faith. Enable us to do the work that you have called us to, without fear of failure or hesitation to do good. May we worship you, not just with our lips this hour, but in word and deed all the days of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 24

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it, for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. (Psalm 24 NRSVue\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 24 and hear of God's majesty. That we are called to follow God. That we shouldn't do what is false but to be trustworthy and true in the Lord. That God holds dominion over all. What does it mean to you to have the Lord's blessing? How do you share in that blessing with others? What does God's love mean to you? How do you share that love with others? How do we celebrate God together?

**Prayer:** O God, you are our hope and our praise. Help us to seek your wisdom in all that we are and do. May we be strengthened by your steadfast love and faithfulness as we come before you in prayer this day. Help us Lord, that you lift us up in both our joys and our sorrows. Be with us in both our laughter and our tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Numbers chapter 30 verses 1 through 2.

*Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Israelites, saying, "This is what the Lord has commanded. When a man makes a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:1-2 NRSVue\*)*

Our next reading for today comes from James chapter 5 verses 7 through 12.

*Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about, for the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Above all, brothers and sisters, 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 5:7-12 NRSVue\*)*

Our final reading for today comes from the gospel according to Matthew chapter 5 verses 33 through 37.

*[Jesus said] "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37 NRSVue\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today we have another one of the sayings from Jesus that begins with the refrain of “you’ve heard it said...but I say.” This time we have Jesus speaking about making an oath. And this whole idea can be a bit confusing. Part of the problem is that we can get the wrong idea about the implications of what Jesus is saying. It is tempting to suppose that we should never make any promises at all. That we should avoid committing ourselves to anything with our words so that we can avoid any problems. That the only problem Jesus is actually addressing is the making of an oath. And if we did that, we would be missing the larger point that is being made in our reading today. To figure out what the issue is, we begin with our reading from Numbers. It may not be one that you’ve heard very often, partly because the books that lay out the law are often dense. Numbers is no exception to that. Here we have Moses instructing the Israelites in the law and about oaths. This is just one section out of many that speaks of making an oath. The idea that we get from the various sections of the Old Testament law is that you shouldn’t swear falsely and that if you make an oath, you must keep it. Whatever pledge it is you have made, an oath is binding. In James, we hear that people shouldn’t be grumbling about each other. People should be patient, waiting on the Lord, and that they should have endurance. And above all, that they shouldn’t swear by heaven or earth at all or have any other oath. One should let their yes be yes and their no be no. Why? So that you don’t fall under condemnation. Why would they be condemned?

Here we come to the Gospel account from Matthew. Jesus says that our word should be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No” and if they are anything more than that that it comes from the evil one. Or, you might simply read it as having roots in evil intentions. So, what does this mean? Is this forbidding us from making any promises? That we should never make any kind of vow? When we look at this in more detail, one idea that we get is that this is about not making statements we aren’t sure we can uphold. That if we have to make a show of our oaths so that people trust our word, we already have a problem. Because we discover that we are making these extravagant shows because people aren’t taking us on our word. Because people don’t see our “yes” as yes and our “no” as no by themselves. Why else would we need to go the extra mile to make an oath but because we’re not trustworthy? We need something more than our word for people to believe us because we haven’t instilled trust with our word. And this is where our real problems begin. I don’t think the issue at hand is that people are swearing oaths, the problem at hand is that people are swearing oaths because it’s the only way anyone will believe them. Worse than that, some people are using oaths as an extravagant way to make it seem like they will keep a promise that they have no intention of keeping. Later in Matthew, Jesus calls out those who would try to get out of keeping an oath by trying to weasel their way out of it using any number of technicalities. We can quickly begin to understand that there is little point to swearing an oath. Especially if you’re swearing an oath on things that you have no control over. You can’t change a hair on your head, why swear by the hairs on your head? James echoes this by reminding us that we need to let our answers be clear and to gain trust so that we are always simply trusted by our word. In short, don’t get yourself into situations

where you have to do anything more than give your word, because it means you are already not being trusted.

This is a pretty major issue that we can easily mistake for something else. We might ask if now we shouldn't make any sort of promise because we might be held to account if we fail to keep our word. But the more important part is that we should not be out making promises we aren't sure we can keep. It is better to say that you cannot make a promise than to make a false promise. It is better to say you can try rather than to make a pledge you cannot fulfill. If someone asks if you can do something, rather than making elaborate pledges to get people to trust your word, make sure your words are always true and people will always trust them. This is the core of the way Christ is interpreting the rules about making an oath. Don't get yourself into situations where people don't accept your word as your word. If it is not good enough for your "yes" to be yes, then either you've failed to build trust, or you are dealing with people who simply refuse to trust you. In either case, there should be no need for an elaborate oath to be proclaimed, as it will inevitably undermine your own words. If you have to place your hand on a stack of Bibles before someone will believe you, then there is already no trust. If you do swear by them, what is the point? Do they actually do anything to change your vow? Isn't it the same vow as before? But now you've turned the stack of Bibles into a cheap prop, and you've devalued both your own word and the Bible itself. That is the warning Christ is giving us. That all of the oath making using props and fancy words is just a show for those involved. It doesn't honor the law from Moses saying that you must keep the words of your mouth, because your words have become convoluted. James points out that we condemn ourselves when we make a show out of our pledge because we have not let our word be enough. Jesus is saying that if our word isn't enough that we already have bigger problems to solve.

This in turn is a call for wisdom. This interpretation of our making an oath isn't just a simple rule about not making them at all. We must avoid that trap, just as we need to avoid the trap of making extravagant oaths or making promises we either can't or won't keep. Because our word is the strongest bond that we have. And if we are going to be effective witnesses of Christ, we must be honest witnesses. Part of being honest is making sure that we are honest with expectations and honest in how we deal with others. If we cannot be believed in small matters, how much more will we not be believed in larger matters? If someone can't trust your word that you will do what you say, how much more will they doubt when you speak of your faith? If we are going to be followers of Christ, sharing the message of Christ, then we should be trustworthy. We should not be known for our double talk and our unwillingness to keep a promise. We should not be known for being two faced. We should not be known for our favoritism or our discrimination. We should be known that when we say "yes" we mean yes. We should be known that when we say "no" we mean no. And that when we say something, when we say anything, we mean it. When we say we will do something that we need no oath to bind us because our word is our bond. That we don't have to swear by the altar, the heavens, or by the hairs of our heads. Because it will already be assumed that our word is enough.

That's the message that I hear from Christ. So, in this I pray that we all are given cause to stop and reflect on our own word and our own trustworthiness. That we give careful consideration to the words that we use and the things that we say to others. That we should always speak what is right and true. That if we find that we are not, that we more deeply devote ourselves to Christ and let our hearts and lives be changed so that we can speak truthfully and be trusted. So let us say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" so that we may be known for our honesty. Let our words be true so that when we speak of our Lord, others may know his truth as well. And may we always walk faithfully and honestly because we walk in the Lord all the days of our lives. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Our Current Series – Interpretation**

Our current series will be looking at the ways that we interpret Scripture. Each week will be a different lesson that will look at the Old and New Testament and what we learn about them both through Christ.

### **Prayer List**

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Nancy Hoke
Family of Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead
Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel	Sage Martin
Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Susie Callahan	Kenny Holmes
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Don Holsapple
Family of Loise Roberts	Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa
Family of Bunny Sparks	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte			

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