

Jesus' teaching this morning is aimed at people of faith use their holy writings to take aim at other people.

He sounds exactly like someone has been coming up to him and proof texting. You know what that is. It's when someone starts an argument with you that begins with: "The **bible** says...."

When people do this, they are inevitably about to come out with some biblical text that will prove their point about something. The problem is, it's possible to find ---somewhere in the bible--- a text that will support any viewpoint.

The Bible should be used as a text to inform, comfort or build up the people of God, not as a tool to justify our incessant need to be right. And thus prove other people wrong.

The Pharisees- and other faith leaders-- of the Jesus' time often used scripture as a weapon to keep people in line, to ensure that they followed their edicts. They browbeat the people of God into thinking that following biblical rules was more important than loving God and loving neighbor. Loving God, loving neighbor—the rules for how that was going to look needed to be really defined, or people wouldn't love God the correct way. Or they might love ALL their neighbors. God forbid.

*"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.'"*

You have heard it said. It is said.

We still say this today. How many times has someone said to you, "They say that..... " and then follow that statement with whatever that person wants to argue for. And if you ask them the question, "who is "they" – who said that?" they most often will say, "Everyone!" or "I read it somewhere, can't remember where."

Maybe they have. Or maybe they are just trying to give credence to something they think. As if we need to back up our important statements with verification by an expert.

Jesus says: *“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, or no.’”*

I hear that “back in the day” people could be counted on to be true to their word. “I promise,” had meaning. Deals could be struck with a handshake. We didn’t need to swear an oath about our truthfulness. Or did we? I suspect we may all be guilty of “looking at the past through rose-tinted glasses”.

Even in Jesus’ day people felt the need to swear. They would say, “I swear it, by the Holy Name of God, or “I swear by all that is Holy.” Or even—“As God is my witness—I’m telling the truth!”

Now—we just say, “Really, REALLY—I mean it! Honestly!” As if we really weren’t being honest the rest of the time?

Why do people feel the need to do this?

Swearing—by the way-- has nothing to do with profanity—it has everything to do with oath-taking. People take oaths all the time: in courts of law, in armed services, as doctors—I took one before I was ordained. Some respect and honor the oaths they have taken. Some follow them when convenient. Some don’t follow them at all. That is swearing falsely. In every example Jesus talks about this morning—murder, adultery, divorce and swearing falsely—he is saying that the rules in the law of Moses only scratch the surface of what we need to be thinking about as we live in the kingdom of God. Loving God and loving neighbor is so much deeper than mere rules.

A man CAN divorce a wife by merely signing a paper. It was being done in Jesus' time. People were divorcing wives because they burned a meal, or they spoke out of turn, or they only bore daughters.

But hear Jesus' words: it hurts the woman when a husband did this. It destroys their life. It makes these women outcasts. And if someone was kind enough to take her in by marrying her—according to the same laws that allowed a certificate to end a marriage, the law also condemns the new couple as adulterers.

Then there is murder. Murder, Jesus argues, might only be the end product. Living in constant anger, he says, reviling other human beings by belittling them and calling them names, not caring if others have grievances with you—those things murder the soul. The soul of the person wronged, and the soul of person that *does these things*.

And then there's the issue of swearing falsely. Some of the Jews of Jesus day used false oaths as a way of manipulating the truth, taking charge of the conversation. But this also showed that there was no honor in them. No one could trust them.

So Jesus' taught that that our lives and words should be so honorable that there should be no need of oaths. We need to be people whose word is our bond. Yes means yes, and no means no.

Jesus says: we should no murder, with weapons of steel-- or words. We must take our vows seriously, and try to honor them, and we must stop swearing that we are truthful—especially when we are not--- and just let our yes be yes, and our no be no.

Because when we love God and our neighbor, that reality looks very different than merely following the rules.

Amen.