

Swear Not!

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*"But above all, my brethren, do not swear,
either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath."
—James 5:12*

From the very beginning of humanity's history, men have sought to swear by some power greater than themselves. Literature records that the ancient Greeks used to swear by their gods and goddesses—Zeus, Hera, Ares, Athena, etc.—and no doubt every culture has practiced some form of oath-taking. The Old Testament in particular provides several examples of this (see Genesis 50:25; I Samuel 24:21-22). This swearing, whether formal or casual, was intended to establish that what a person stated or promised was true, and people still follow this same practice today.

Every four years, most of us witness the oath of office given to the newly elected President. We see him lay his hand on the Bible and repeat these words: "I do solemnly swear [or affirm] that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." We may also see similar ceremonies when other governmental offices are taken, such as governor, mayor, police chief, etc. These are referred to as "swearing-in ceremonies."

We often do not consider this subject until we fall into a situation in which we are required to take an oath. In most cases, it is when we must take an oath "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" in a court of law, or in making a sworn deposition in an attorney's office.

I was once a character witness in a murder trial, in which a teenage boy was tried for stabbing another boy while under the influence of drugs. Before being called to testify, I told the bailiff that I would not swear but would affirm that my testimony would be true. When I was "sworn in," there was no disruption in the courtroom; the bailiff simply asked me to affirm that I would speak the truth.

Another time, I witnessed a truck-motorcycle accident, and in this case, I had to make an affidavit in an attorney's office. The unfamiliar situation caught me off guard, but I quickly informed the clerk administering the oath that I would affirm my truthfulness, not swear an oath. There was no further trouble.

God wants us to think about swearing by His name, not just in court situations or legal matters, but in everyday situations too.

Jesus and Oaths

Why are we not to swear by God's name today when we clearly see examples of swearing in this fashion in the Old Testament? Abraham makes his servant "swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth" that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites (Genesis 24:3). In another example, Bathsheba reminds David that he swore to her "by the Lord your God" to make her son Solomon his heir (I Kings 1:17).

An Old Testament prohibition on swearing is found in Leviticus 19:12: "And you shall not swear by My name falsely, neither shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord." The gist of this command is that one should not use God's name to support an oath that will not be kept. Here we begin to understand why we are not to back up what we promise with God's name.

Notice, however, Jesus' amplification of this verse in Matthew 5:33-37:

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," "No." For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Commentator Adam Clarke writes on verse 37:

That the Jews were notoriously guilty of common swearing, for which our Lord particularly reprehends them, and warns his disciples against, and that they swore by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by their head, etc., . . . their own writings . . . amply testify.

He shows that the Jews would also swear by the prophets, the books of Scripture, the Temple, the altar, the lamb, the Temple's chambers, the Temple's dishes, the sacrifices on fire, the moon, stars, the sun, their hair, their beard, and on and on. Yet, he goes on to quote what he calls "one of the holiest of their precepts relative to swearing": "Be not much in oaths, although one should swear concerning things that are true; for in much swearing it is impossible not to profane." Would that they had heeded it!

But what about Christians? Should Christians use oaths?

In verse 33, Jesus plainly states the Old Testament law: that we perjure ourselves in making an oath we are not planning to keep. In like manner, how often do we hear someone say, "I swear to God" after making a mild declaration—as if that makes their promise or statement true?

Another commentator, Albert Barnes, adds:

It appears, however, from this passage, as well as from the ancient writings of the Jewish rabbins, that while the Jews professedly adhered to the law, they had introduced a number of oaths in common conversation, and oaths which they by no means considered to be binding. . . . So long as they kept from swearing by the name Yahweh, and so long as they observed the oaths publicly taken, they seemed to consider all others as allowable, and allowedly broken. This is the abuse which Christ wished to correct.

Adam Clarke on verse 33:

They dishonor the great God, and break His commandments who use frequent oaths and imprecations, even in reference to things that are true; and those who make vows and

promises, which they either cannot perform, or do not design to fulfill, are not less criminal. Swearing in civil matters has become so frequent, that the dread and obligation of an oath are utterly lost in it.

Certainly, taking an oath in court has become fundamentally meaningless.

Yet, clearly, Jesus tells us in verse 34 not to swear *at all*. This is hardly an ambiguous statement. It is puzzling to see how many commentators, supposedly religious men, do not take our Savior's absolute statement in the way He spoke it. Many make an exception for swearing an oath of truth in legal matters, but Christ's words "at all" are a definite, across-the-board prohibition.

Adam Clarke concludes in his comments on this verse, "The best way is to have as little to do as possible with oaths. An oath will not bind a knave nor a liar; and an honest man needs none, for his character and conduct swear for him." Years ago, men only needed a handshake to seal a deal. The Bible holds up as an example to us the righteous man of Psalm 15; the one who will dwell on God's holy hill always fulfills what he promises.

Jesus tells us how we should approach situations in which others would use an oath: Simply give an affirmation—a "yes"—or a negation—a "no." Nothing more should be necessary from an honest person. A straightforward person has no need to equivocate. As the cliché runs, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." Anything else, Jesus says, flirts with sin.

A Higher Standard

The apostle James repeats his Elder Brother's command in James 5:12: "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment."

How James addresses this to his audience tells us he considers it an extremely serious matter. His use of "above all" suggests that we should be especially careful on this point. It is as if he is saying, "Make sure you catch this point because it may be the most important one." Swearing oaths is not a trivial matter!

In the Old Testament, taking oaths by God's name was more prevalent—even commanded (see Deuteronomy 6:13)—but God holds those He has called out of this present, evil world to a higher standard. The ancient Israelites were carnal human beings whose behaviors had to be constrained by statute. Knowing they would swear oaths, God directed them to take them honestly and only in His name, thus regulating and elevating the practice.

Christians, though, are to follow God's law, not just in the letter, but also in the spirit, a more in-depth and encompassing charge. The standard that has been set for us is that our word should always be true. Paul writes, "Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25; see Zechariah 8:16).

Our Savior puts it even more strongly in the form of an admonition: "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36). Because God is with us, every word that we speak is spoken in God's presence and thus should be true, making oaths unnecessary.

As God's people, we are to represent Him in honesty and obedience and reflect Him in our conduct in every way. Because of this, we do not need God's name in an oath to back up our word. Therefore, a Christian should simply say "yes" or "no" according to what he honestly believes to be true, even in legal matters. As Jesus says, anything we try to add to the unvarnished truth is Satan's handiwork (see John 8:44). In short, a Christian's word should be his bond.

Other Angles

We can look at the swearing of oaths from a number of different angles. For instance:

- » Adding God's name to an oath or promise does not obligate God to act on our behalf. Have we ever considered whether God even desires to be the Guarantor of what we say?
- » This scriptural instruction does not imply that oaths or vows are of and by themselves sinful, but God certainly wants us to consider what we are promising and our ability to fulfill it *before* we speak the words. Solomon warns: "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2).
- » We human beings are often powerless to fulfill even our strongest intentions. Thus, God commands us not to swear in His name in any oath, as failing to fulfill it would be taking God's name in vain (Exodus 20:7). In essence, we would be including God in a lie, misrepresenting Him and His perfect truthfulness.

At first, swearing oaths may seem a minor matter, but it touches on some vital spiritual issues, such as God's integrity, honesty, and judgment. Jesus Christ thought enough of this subject to make it part of His Sermon on the Mount. We would do well to remember that making a solemn promise under God is binding, and He will expect us to perform it. Thus, the scriptural advice, "Above all things, my brethren, do not swear."