

Question: Since Jesus said, “swear not all,” does this include swearing in court? What would Jesus do?

When Jesus said that one should “swear not all,” he was not concerned about all use of the word “swear” but about always speaking the truth. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said: “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:33-37). Some folks at that time had created a loophole for themselves by making a distinction between an oath taken in the Lord’s name and other oaths. They felt compelled to keep an oath made in the Lord’s name, but they did not feel that their words were as binding in other oaths. Jesus was teaching that Godly people always speak truthfully. A man’s word is his bond no matter whether sworn or not.

However, refusing to swear in court reflects a failure to understand and properly apply what Jesus was teaching. Compare what he said about “swearing” with what he said about prayer: “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen” (Matthew 6:6). But few among us would insist that we should only pray in a closed room. We understand that in the present context Jesus was teaching that prayer should not be a hypocritical, showy practice done to gain the praise of men. Other passages in the Bible illustrate how prayer can also be spoken openly in public places. Jesus prayed both privately and publicly (John 11:41-42), but he was not praying in a showy way as the hypocrites did.

As further evidence that Jesus was not condemning all swearing of oaths like those in court, the Bible tells of several times when God swore an oath. For example, we are told that “when God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself” (Hebrews 6:13). The prophet Ezekiel quoted the Lord as saying, “I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn” (Ezekiel 36:7). Our holy God does not do something that is unholy and forbidden for us.

Therefore, Jesus would only object to lying under oath, but he would not object to telling the truth by swearing under oath in court or in other legal situations.

People who think the statement about swearing as applies in all situations without exception will usually take an oath in court in which they “promise” to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But what is the difference between an oath in which one “promises” or an oath in which a person “swears” to tell the truth. Either way, a person is swearing an oath. If one is bothered by using the word “swear” and prefers to say “promise,” I don’t think Jesus would have a problem with him; and the substitution of “promise” is acceptable in court.

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