

OATHS AND TRUTHFULNESS - Matthew 5:33-37

The Jews in Jesus' day heard it was said, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord (Matt. 5:33)." There was no direct quotation in the OT regarding this though there are allusions to it (Ex 20:7; Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23). But here Jesus says not to swear at all (5:34). Why?

The Purpose of Oaths

Oaths are more than promises, they are made by swearing by what is valuable or sacred and are intended to strengthen someone's word and give assurance that what was said is true. "The oath is thus a declaration which backs up a human statement, which guarantees its veracity, and which is affirmed by divine co-operation" (TDNT V, 458).

Oaths not only gave assurance to the listener, but also encouraged the truthfulness of the one taking the oath for they often included invoking a curse if the vow was not fulfilled. Though the nature of the curse isn't always stated, in some cases it is specifically mentioned (Jer. 29:22; Job 31:7-8, 21, 22, 38-40, etc.).

Once God's name was attached to the vow, it became a debt that had to be paid to the Lord. Therefore, oaths made promises more solemn because a false or irreverent oath profaned the name of God (Carson, 153). In brief, oaths were "to produce conviction of the truth, to satisfy others of our sincerity and fidelity, and to make an end of controversy" (Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 309).

The Use of Oaths

Both the OT and NT permitted oaths to be taken in God's name.

1. On certain occasions people were commanded to swear by God's name.

Deuteronomy 6:13 "You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.

Deuteronomy 10:20-21 20 "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. 21 "He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen.

In the pagan world, an oath was usually made in the names of the gods. In Judaism, swearing by other gods was considered idolatry (Jer. 5:7; Zeph. 1:5, etc.). Since oaths could only be taken in the name of YHWH, they became an expression of belief in the only true God. Hence an oath was a solemn confession of faith that excluded all other gods (TDNT V, 459).

Concerning the wicked nations that surrounded Israel, God promises hope if they turn from their gods to Him. He expresses this change of belief in terms of who they swear by.

Jeremiah 12:16 "Then if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the LORD lives,' even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, they will be built up in the midst of My people.

2. God Himself makes oaths (Gen. 9:9-11; 22:16, 17; Luke 1:68, 73; Acts 2:27-31) - not because He sometimes lies, but in order to help men overcome their doubt.

In speaking of the eternal priesthood of Christ the Scriptures say,

Psalm 110:4 The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek."

When God promised Abraham that He would multiply his seed, God swore by His name.

Hebrews 6:13 For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,

"The divine oath is the guarantee which rules out all doubt and gives faith the assurance of the promise . . . [It] binds God and gives His word unconditional and impregnable validity" (TDNT V, 184). It is God condescending to our thought processes to strengthen our weak faith.

3. The early Christians also took oaths to emphasize the sincerity of what they said (Ro. 1:9; II Cor. 1:23; I Thess. 2:5, 10).

4. Jesus Himself testified under oath at His trial before the high priest (Matt. 26:63-64).

Therefore, when Jesus forbids taking oaths, His words need to be considered in the context in which He is speaking and with the audience He has in mind.

"A great part of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount is devoted to the correction of perversions of the law, introduced by the Scribes and Pharisees. They made the sixth commandment to forbid only murder; our Lord said that it forbade all malicious passions (Matt. 5:21ff). They limited the seventh commandment to the outward act; He extended it to the inward desire (Matt. 5:27ff). They made the precept to love our neighbor consistent with hating our enemies; Christ says, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you (Matt. 5:43ff)." (Hodge, Systematic Theology) In like manner, the Scribes had twisted the intent of taking vows and had used them as a means of promoting deceit. One Rabbi even said that if you swear toward Jerusalem you are bound to your vow, but if you swear by Jerusalem, you are not. Other Rabbis felt there was no binding authority to an oath unless some form of the name of God was contained in it. Thus they felt that they could swear by the temple, the law, the altar etc. and yet be under no obligation to keep their promises (Matt. 23:16-22). Jesus insists that this thinking is not only sinful, it is best not to swear at all (also Ja. 5:12).

Jesus charges men to regard the principle of the law, not merely its external form. The four statements that follow in Matthew 5:34-36 forbid the Jews from avoiding God's name by substituting equivalents. Jesus reveals the fallacy of this practice by showing that such attempts are in reality swearing by the name of God even though His actual name is avoided.

First, swearing by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem are things that God cannot be separated from. Heaven was God's throne (Isa. 66:1) and the earth was His footstool. Likewise, Jerusalem was well known as the city of God (Ps. 48:1-3; Zech. 8:3).

Taking it a step further, it wouldn't even be safe to swear by the hairs of one's own head since they too belong to God. Even hair color is under God's control. In other words, everything that exists is ultimately God's (Ps. 89:11), so to swear by any oath is to swear by Him. Therefore, no oath should be broken.

A passage that is similar is Matthew 23:16-22.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 17 "You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18 "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 19 "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20 "Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21 "And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22 "And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

The real intent of Jesus' teaching is truthfulness. Those who follow Christ should view all of life as holy unto Him (Ro.14:6-8; Zech. 14:20, 21; I Cor. 10:31; Col.3:17). If men were truthful there would be no need for an oath at all.

Ephesians 4 Paul gives us more reason to be truthful. He tells us

Ephesians 4:22-25 22 . . . in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. 25 Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another.

In verse 22, the believer is told to "lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit." We are to put on the "new self" of verse 24 which is the "new creation" of II Corinthians 5:17 and "His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works" in Ephesians 2:10. Because we are new creatures that are His workmanship, the ethical qualities of holiness, righteousness, and truth are part of us.

One manifestation of the deceitful ways of the old self that needs to be laid aside is falsehood. But laying aside falsehood is not enough. The new self, that is, the new identity that aligns itself with the truth that is found in Christ, must be put on. Putting off the old person is more than putting off old practices, because Colossians 3:9 says we put it off WITH its practices.

There is a strong connection between Ephesians 4:25 and Zechariah 8. In speaking to the remnant of Israel, Zechariah 8:16 and 17 say, "These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. Also, let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate," declares the LORD." The people are called the "City of truth" (Zech. 8:3) because YHWH will dwell among them and He is a God of righteousness and truth (Zech. 8:8, cf. Eph. 4:21). Similarly, in Ephesians, God is said to dwell among

believers (Eph. 2:22) and the new person, like the true believer in Israel, is expected to display the nature of God in his actions.

The Church is to be a model of humanity by being united and living in peace with each other. This involves being truthful. Likewise, Zechariah predicts that the testimony of the remnant will be a drawing force that leads the nations to worship God.

Zechariah 8

20 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities.21 'And the inhabitants of one will go to another saying, "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go."22 'So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.'23 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'""

Let your "Yes" be "yes" and your "No" be "no" is the recognition of that fact that every word we utter is done in the presence of God, not only those words accompanied with an oath.

James says,

James 5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, *so that* you may not fall under judgment.

Since we are always to speak the whole truth, an oath is unnecessary. To make an oath is to throw doubt on the veracity of all our other statements – that is one reason why it is evil. However, there is another reason why oaths are not to be taken. No one knows the past perfectly nor can they foresee the future. To make an oath on either would be foolish (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 153).