

You have Heard... But I say to You... 4: Swearing

Introduction

Once again Jesus confronted the lax teaching of their scribes and teachers. These teachers were not demanding the self-control over anger and derisive remarks that “*you shall not murder*” required, but Jesus did. They were not preaching against the sensual lusts and thoughts that “*you shall not commit adultery*” forbid, but Jesus forbid them. They were not preaching on the sanctity or permanence of marriage required by the manner in which God created male and female in the beginning. So Jesus rebuked what these people were hearing and exposed it. “*You shall not murder*” not only included the act of murder, but any thought, word or action that would lead to it if it were not stopped. “*You shall not commit adultery*” forbid not only the act, but any thoughts, emotions or actions that could allow it to happen if it were not stopped. Divorce must be taught only in the context of marriage being a permanent commitment that cannot be lightly broken. Only the terrible *treachery* of adultery could be the cause for the *treachery* of divorce (Mal 2:13-17). Yet after this divorce Jesus only permitted the innocent victim who was forced to put away his treacherous adulterous spouse to remarry.

The next topic Jesus felt strongly about centered on the integrity and honesty of His disciples. Their “*righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees*” in this area as well. Although these teachers were commanding them to keep the oaths they made, the actual practices allowed them to make and break oaths at will.

“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.’ 34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. Mt. 5:33-37

Jesus expected His disciples to assess the integrity of their words and the honor of their reputation. He demanded that their given word was so sacred to them that once given there was no need for an oath. When ones ‘yes’ is ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ means ‘no,’ There is thought for an oath. Each disciple should have this reputation. He carefully considers before giving his word and then always keeps it after it is given. No matter what the cost or the effort necessary, if our word has been given, it must be kept. This “*you have heard... but I say...*” centered on the integrity and honor of our word.

Swearing in the Time of Christ

In order to fully appreciate what Jesus was condemning, we need to have a clear picture of Jewish society in this matter. This is not the only time Jesus spoke about the abuses in this realm.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ 17 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? Mt. 23:16-17

Think about the implications of these words. Not only were these teachers violating Jesus demand that their word be absolute and all that was necessary, but they had gone even further. They had developed a complicated scheme whereby they could even give oaths that need not be kept. One can only imagine the dishonesty and lack of integrity practiced in that day.

Clearly the word of these men could not be relied upon and everyone knew it. So they had devised a way to still convince others that they were telling the truth, but still intended to cheat or deceive. So if they swore by the temple, they did not have to fulfill that oath. But if they swore by the gold in the temple, which in their mind was of greater importance they must keep their word.

Jesus destroyed their sophistry with a simple observation. The temple was holy because it was God’s dwelling place. Because of its connection with God the temple was greater than the gold. The gold was only sanctified because it was in the temple. Once removed from there it had nothing inherently valuable and no connection to God. So they were wrong on two counts. The temple was greater than the gold, both of the oaths were binding, but neither should have been used.

When men no longer trust each other’s word because of their dishonesty, it isn’t long before even the oaths they swear are unreliable. Their elaborate scheme of swearing and having no legal obligation to fulfill it was despicable. But far worse than the lying dishonesty was the miscalculation Jesus brought to light. Though they were not intending it, they were actually invoking God and thus must answer to Him for their lies! Even though they thought they had carefully removed Him entirely from the oath. Jesus forcefully revealed that because God was the Creator, there wasn’t anything they could swear by that was not in some way connected to God.

And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ 19 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. 21 He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne

of God and by Him who sits on it. Mt. 23:18-22

In their dishonest scheme of using oaths of their own devising, they had violated Scripture. Though they thought they had avoided it, they had in fact violated the intent of the second commandment.

*You shall not take the name of the **LORD** your God in vain, for the **LORD** will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Ex 20:7*

Those who swore by the temple were really swearing by Him who dwells in it. Those who swore by heaven swore by God's throne and Him who sits on it. Jesus sets their sophistry aside and condemned them. Thus there were two grave sins involved in swearing as they were doing. The first was in taking the name of the LORD their God in vain, and the second, was their violation of integrity and truth. God did not authorize and Jesus confirmed that God condemned making frivolous oaths. God had spoken clearly. The only oaths they were to make were in the name of LORD ("YHWH" - "Jehovah" or "Yahweh"), and those oaths must be kept.

*You shall fear the **LORD** your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. Deut. 6:13*

*You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. 12 And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the **LORD**. Lev. 19:12*

The scribes and Pharisees were not heeding or teaching these commands properly. Instead of opening the door to oaths, these passage shut down any need for them and forbid all oaths except those specifically given in the name of Jehovah.

Degrees of Assurance.

Before we can make applications today we need to assess our own culture. In America we do not use oaths in this manner. We have three levels of assurance that are used in every day life to establish the veracity or truthfulness of something we say. Then we have one that is used in court or other extreme or special circumstances.

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| (1) We tell someone we will do something. | (3) We sign our name to a contract. |
| (2) We add a promise (especially to children). | (4) We swear in the name of God(in Court). |

The first level is how we conduct most of our lives. In our dealings with others we often tell them what we plan to do or they ask us to do something and we agree that we will do it.

The second level is something often asked of us by our children. "*Do you promise.*" A promise is a special way of saying yes that gives a stronger assurance that what is promised will be done.

The third level is how we conduct our business transactions. We sign our name. When we write a check, sign a credit card receipt, or we sign a contract when buying a home or car. Signing our name gives assurance we will pay or do what we have promised.

If we always keep our word, promises and honor our signatures with absolute integrity, then this is enough. No one would need to ask for more. This is exactly what Jesus stressed when He said "*let your 'yes' be 'yes' and 'no' be 'no.'*" If we always do this, then we are doing exactly what Jesus commanded.

Yet there is one level higher which mankind has employed when something extreme arises. If we are in need of even more assurance that someone will do what they have said, promised or signed, then we would ask them to swear by God.

God Swore with an Oath

This is exactly what the Holy Spirit described in Hebrews.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. 16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. Heb. 6:13-20

As we carefully consider this passage, the entire concept behind swearing is made clear. First, God gave His word and promise to Abraham. Before he came into the "**promised land**," God had given him the "**promise**"(Gen 12:1-3; Gal 3:14-18). A little over twenty-five years after these original promises (Abram was 75 when he left Haran(Gen 12:4) and was 100 when Isaac was born), God gave greater assurance. It was after Abraham had been asked to offer Isaac, had traveled to spot, tied him on the prepared altar, and took up the knife that God interposed with an oath.

and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not

withheld your son, your only son — 17 blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” Gen 22:16-18

When God spoke these words the Spirit revealed that He “confirmed it by an oath” because He wanted to “to show more abundantly unto the heirs of the promise the immutability of His counsel.” This was the purpose of any oath. The immutability was already established with the word and the promise. The oath was used to “show immutability” “**more abundantly**.” Since it is impossible for God to lie, His word was all anyone ever needed.

When God entered a covenant of promise with Abraham, He gave Abraham His word and solemn promise. That was the first immutable thing and with that God was bound and would never have changed. Yet God wanted to give more to the heirs (you and I — Gal. 3:27-29). In order to show even more abundantly that He would keep His word, He swore with an oath. That oath was first given to Abraham, then established more strongly with Isaac and his descendants.

Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. 4 And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; 5 because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” Gen. 26:3-5

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Deut 7:7-8

In the illustration given by the Holy Spirit, the true depth and meaning of one man swearing to another man is set forth. First in a true oath, men always “swear by the greater.” There is no point to swearing an oath if the thing used to confirm the oath has less power to compel veracity than his own word. Think about it! If we swear by something less powerful than ourselves what can they do if we break our word? The whole purpose of an oath is to place ourselves in deep trouble with the one to whom we have sworn. Hence, men always swear by something greater than themselves. Once they have done this “in every dispute of theirs the oath is final for confirmation.” An oath is final. Once given, there is no going back on it.

From the time of Abraham, the patriarchs had made a broad use of swearing. Abraham was asked to swear to Abimelech (Gen 21:22-24) and later asked his servant to swear to him regarding the wife of Isaac (Gen 24:2-10). Jacob asked Esau to swear when he sold his birthright (Gen 25:32-34). Jacob asked Joseph to swear he would not be buried in Egypt but taken back to Canaan (Gen 47:29-31), and Joseph did the same to the children of Israel (Gen 50:24-26).

Oaths in Moses Law

Under the law, God took both the oath and the vow and made certain the children of Israel recognized them as very special events.

‘You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. 12 And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. Lev. 19:12

If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. Num. 30:2

The main difference between an oath and a vow is that an oath always has at least three parties. A vow will generally only have two. When taking an oath, it is a promise to another human being made in the name of God to keep his word. Hence in an oath there is the person making the oath, the person receiving the oath, and God who is witnessing it. When one took a vow, it was always a direct promise to God that if they were blessed in some way or another they would fulfill some promise or commitment.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” Gen. 28:20-22

“I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.” Gen 31:13

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed — 5 Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? Eccl. 5:4-6

Hence all of these things. Oaths, vows, promises and our word were all done for one specific purpose. To prove that we would do what we promised to do. God was very clear in the Law of Moses that all

oaths that were taken were to be taken in His name and once taken out of honor and respect for Him they must be kept.

You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. Deut. 6:13

You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name. 21 He is your praise, and He is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen. Deut. 10:20-21

1 Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? ... 4 He who swears to his own hurt and does not change; Ps. 15:1,4b

What Jesus Forbid

Our neighbor has the right to expect truth from a servant of God. Any abuse of truth, veracity, integrity or honesty would be a terrible blemish on one's character. Just as it is impossible for God to lie it ought to be impossible for His children to lie. We should not need to resort to swearing at all. Especially the kind of swearing they were practicing at that time.

34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

Never should a true servant of God and disciple of Jesus lower themselves to swear by things like "heaven," "earth," "Jerusalem," or our own "head."

We often read this passage today believing it is not a current issue that we face. In our culture, when writing checks or verifying a credit card receipt, a simple signature is sufficient. Even our most expensive purchases(home, car, etc.), nothing more than a signature is required. We don't have swearing as a normal part of our culture. If we pay off all our signed obligations, then our integrity remains intact, and we have fulfilled the words of our Lord that our yes be yes and our no, no.

For most of us, the real issue of this verse is: "Can we swear in a court of law to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" Can the President "solemnly swear to uphold the constitution of the United States?"

What about a Court of Law?

How far did Jesus expect his words "*But I say to you, do not swear at all:*" to be taken? Is He only forbidding the type of swearing the Jews were then practicing? The two passages in Deuteronomy above plainly gave the right to swear by the name of Jehovah. It was practiced extensively during the Patriarchal and Mosaic ages. God swore to Abraham because He wanted to show more abundantly that He would keep His word. What if we wanted to do the same thing? If Jesus forbid it here universally, it is difficult to understand why He allowed himself to be placed under oath in a civil court.

And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" 64 Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." Mt. 26:62-64

It is also difficult to understand why Paul used God as His witness(a form of swearing):

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, Rom. 1:9

Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. 2Cor. 1:23

For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. Phil. 1:8

For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness — God is witness. 1Th. 2:5

Christians have differed for many years on this passage. Some believe that the words of Jesus should be taken as they were spoken. "*Swear not at all!*" Multitudes leave it at that. They will not swear at all. Others are convinced that Jesus was only speaking of individuals in their daily life as He does in the next passage. An eye for an eye was for civil government, not for individuals. So oaths are not for individuals, but are still intact for civil government. For individuals, "yes" and "no" are enough.

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. James 5:12

But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. Mt. 5:33-37

- 1 What does Jesus ask us to carefully consider with this beatitude?
- 2 What are the three levels by which we give our word?
- 3 What did God do when he wanted to show more abundantly that he would keep his word?
- 4 Why do men swear by the greater?
- 5 How often did people swear during the patriarchal age?
- 6 In what name did God ask all to swear by in the law of Moses?
- 7 What is the difference between a vow and an oath?
- 8 What did God demand if a vow was made to him?
- 9 What did God expect if an oath was made to another?
- 10 What was the real problem in the time of Christ?
- 11 What were they swearing by?
- 12 What distinctions were they making in their oaths?
- 13 What was Jesus forbidding?
- 14 Why are we of the evil one if our yes is not yes?