
"SWEAR NOT AT ALL"

George Battey | January 20, 2014

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What is the major difference between swearing and vowing?
- 2) Was it sinful to swear under the OT law?
- 3) What is an "adjuration"?
- 4) Did God or Jesus ever swear?
- 5) What is the meaning of the Greek word ἕτερος?
- 6) When is swearing wrong?
- 7) What is "mental reservation"?
- 8) What religious organization does not believe truth has to be told to people "not entitled to the truth"?

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 5:33-37

33 "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.

When Jesus addressed the subject of swearing, He was addressing a very ancient practice and a very abused practice.

SWEARING – AN OLD PRACTICE

The first Biblical reference to the practice seems to be:

Genesis 14:22-23

22 But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have **raised my hand** to the LORD,
God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth,
23 ... that I will not take anything that is yours, ...

Lifting the hand seems to signify that one was appealing to the God of heaven as his witness. Thus, to "*lift the hand*" meant to swear (cf. Dt 32:40).

(The custom of placing a hand on the Bible arose to indicate an appeal to the God of the Bible and that the penalty for perjury found in the Bible was accepted as punishment for violation of the oath.)

As you can see, swearing was around long before the Law of Moses.

Moses' Law regulated swearing and it's to these regulations that Jesus now turns His attention.

TEXT (1)

Matthew 5:33

33 "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.'

"swear falsely" (ἐπιορκέω) – "*to swear falsely, break an oath, commit perjury*"

This is exactly what the OT taught.

Leviticus 19:12

12 And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

To fully appreciate what Jesus teaches we must first become familiar with what the OT taught about swearing.

DEFINITIONS

An entire chapter (Num 30) is devoted to the subject of vowing, swearing and oaths.

Numbers 30:2 (KJV)

2 If a man **vow a vow** unto the LORD, or **swear an oath** to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.

Four important words are found in this verse: one "*vows a vow*" but "*swears an oath*."

- **Swear** – "to make a solemn declaration or promise ... to assert under oath ... to affirm earnestly and with great conviction" (American Heritage)
- **Oath** – "a formal promise to fulfill a pledge, often **calling upon God as witness**" (ibid.)
- **Vow** – (verb): "to promise or pledge solemnly" (ibid.)
- **Vow** – (noun): "an earnest promise or pledge that binds one to a specified act or mode of behavior" (ibid.)

Look at these definitions closely and you will see very little difference between vowing and swearing.

VOWS AND OATHS

The verbs "swear" and "vow" with their corresponding nouns tend to be synonymous. In function they are all basically equivalent, but there are technical differences:

VOWS	OATHS
1) One vows to God	Swears to men (Same basic action, but directed towards different groups)
2) Voluntary (Ecc 5:4-5)	Obligatory
3) Private – between a man and God	Public – the state has an interest in the affair
4) Positive – asking a blessing from God	Negative – asking for a curse to befall him if he lies
5) Promissory – promising to perform a certain action	Affirmatory – affirming truth rather than guaranteeing action
6) Looks to the future	Looks to the past – verifying a past event

Genesis 28:20-21

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, ...

21 ... then the LORD shall be my God. (looking to the future)

Although these "rules" may not always prove true, they seem to be the "rule of thumb."

SUMMARY

For all practical purposes swearing and vowing are equivalent.

- They are coupled together in Numbers 30.
- The same **rules** govern both.
- The same **blessings** are rewarded if the oath or vow is kept.
- The same **penalties** apply if the oath or vow is violated.

For all practical purposes there is no difference between swearing and vowing:

- They stand or fall together
- If one is wrong, both are wrong

These points will be important a little later in our study.

THE VARIOUS FORMULAS

When an oath was taken it was to be in **God's name** and none other:

Deuteronomy 6:13

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

To swear any other way than in God's name was sinful! This will be very important later.

IMPLICATIONS OF SWEARING

By swearing in God's name the worshiper implied several things:

- **God's existence was acknowledged.** Men don't swear in the name of a god they don't believe in.
- **God's attributes were acknowledged:** His omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience.
- **God is acknowledged as supreme Judge.**

Because of these implications, to swear by the name of God was an acknowledgment of Him as the only true and living God. In essence, it was an act of worship.

In contrast, to swear by a false god implied that the idol:

- actually existed
- was omnipresent, omniscient and powerful
- was the supreme judge of men

Thus, to swear by a false god is idolatry. The Scriptures warn against this practice repeatedly (Jer 5:7).

OT REQUIRED SWEARING

Not only did the OT allow one to swear and take vows, it actually required it on different situations. There were three types of oaths:

1) **The exculpatory oath** – an oath to clear oneself from guilt when no witnesses are available. This was used:

- to prove a man had not stolen his neighbor's property (Ex 22:11)
- to prove no citizen of a city was guilty of shedding innocent blood (Dt 21)
- to prove a woman had not violated her marriage vows (Num 5)

If the defendant took the oath, the suit was decided in his favor. If he refused to take the oath, it was an admission of guilt and he was branded with the crime (cf. Ecc 9:2, "**He who fears an oath**").

If a perjurer of the exculpatory oath desired to clear himself of his perjury he must follow the prescription of Lev 6:1-7.

- 2) **The adjuration** – this was an adjuration (or summons) to appear and give testimony or information. The summons was announced to the entire community:

Leviticus 5:1 (NIV)

1 "If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible.

This is apparently why Achan's entire family was destroyed (Josh 7). Apparently the camp was placed under the adjuration to testify and Achan's family withheld the information.

If someone withheld information and later repents, he must follow the prescription of Lev 5:5-13.

- 3) **The voluntary oath** – (vow) although the taking of this oath was voluntary, once it was made it was obligatory (Lev 5:4). One was required to keep his rash oath even if it resulted in his harm (Ps 15:4).

Ecclesiastes 5:2-5

2 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.
3 For a dream comes through much activity,
And a fool's voice is known by his many words.
4 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.

Lev 5:5-13 explains how to receive atonement after violating such an oath.

SUMMARY

To summarize, the people of the OT were told to make few vows, and they were commanded to keep the vows and oaths they did make. Serious punishment was promised to those who violated the vow, or oath.

These teachings are what Jesus referred to in Mt 5:33.

TEXT (2)

Matthew 5:34

34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: ...

To begin our study of this verse we notice this critical point: **some people swore, even in NT, with God's approval, even though Jesus said, "Swear not at all."**

NT EXAMPLES

1) Jesus answered a question under oath.

Matthew 26:63-64

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. ...

This is the "adjuration" oath (cf. KJV).

Jesus did not denounce the high priest and say, "You shouldn't talk like that." He did not condemn him for using God's name in that manner, but seemed to regard it as perfectly legitimate. Then, and only then, did Jesus answer the question.

(To refuse this oath would have been looked upon as an admission that Jesus was not God's Son.)

It seems rather strange that Jesus would answer under oath when He instructed His disciples to "swear not at all." Jesus usually practiced what He preached to others.

2) Paul swore in God's name.

Romans 1:9

9 For **God is my witness** [definition of "oath"], whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,

2 Corinthians 1

18 But as **God is faithful**, our word to you was not Yes and No.

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

If we used these same words in a court of law today, every civil authority present would accept it. They would agree we were taking an oath and swearing to the truth.

Galatians 1:20

20 (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, **before God, I do not lie.**)

Philippians 1:8

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

1 Thessalonians 2

5 For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness; **God is witness.**

10 You are witnesses, and **God also**, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe;

3) **Paul applies OT passage on swearing to Christians.**

Isaiah 45:23

23 I have **sworn** by Myself;

The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness,

And shall not return,

That to Me every knee shall bow,

Every tongue shall **take an oath**.

Here God is swearing that every tongue shall take an oath.

The historical setting seems to be that someday even Gentiles would swear allegiance to God ⇒ they would take a loyalty oath.

This passage is quoted in the Roman epistle:

Romans 14:11

11 For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD,

Every knee shall bow to Me,

And every tongue shall **confess** to God."

To confess to God is to "**swear**" to God according to Isaiah.

Apparently, then, when one obeys the gospel he is in effect taking a vow/oath to be loyal to God.

That's why falling away makes one worse off than before conversion (cf. 2 Pet 2:20-21 with Ecc 5:1-5).

A man has lied to God when he quits! He has committed perjury!

4) Paul puts some Christians under oath.

1 Thessalonians 5:27

27 I **charge you** by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.

charge (ὀρκίζω) – "to put to an oath" (Greenfield)

5) Paul and others made vows.

Acts 18:18

18 ... Paul ... had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for **he had taken a vow.**

Remember, a vow is a **voluntary oath**, and Paul vowed to things.

6) An angel from God swore

Revelation 10:5-6

5 The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land **raised up his hand to heaven**

6 **and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, ...**

7) God Himself swore

Hebrews 6:13

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, **He swore by Himself,**

This passage does not have the negative tone toward swearing that would be expected if all swearing of all kinds were forbidden.

A LIMITED COMMAND

NOTE: The fact that God, Jesus, an angel and Paul all took oaths, swore and made vows shows that the prohibition on swearing in Mt 5:34 is *limited*.

Jesus was not forbidding all swearing in all places for all time! He was only forbidding **a certain kind of swearing** – a certain kind of oath.

ILL: "*Don't drink and drive.*" Does this mean no drinking of any kind, or no drinking of a certain kind? It means no drinking of alcoholic beverages while driving.

When Jesus said, "*Swear not at all,*" He went on to specify exactly what He meant. He was saying, "*Swear not at all*":

- **by heaven**
- **by earth**
- **by Jerusalem**
- **by your head**

No where does the NT forbid swearing, or taking oaths in God's name!

Remember, **Dt 6:13** said it was sinful to swear any other way than in God's name – and that's exactly what Jesus is saying here.

WHY THIS PROHIBITION?

Why forbid:	But not
heaven earth Jerusalem Head	God

ILL: If one swears by the earth, that oath is not as binding as if he swore by heaven.

Only when they swore in God's name did they feel **duty bound** to tell the truth.

Matthew 23:16-19

16 "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?

18 "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?

They believed:

- Only the oath offered upon the gold of the temple was binding.
- Only the oath offered upon the gift of the altar was binding.

To swear simply upon the temple, or the altar was not binding and one did not have to keep his oath/vow.

(They didn't believe they were obligated to tell the truth except under oath, and then it had to be a special kind of oath – an oath in God's name!!)

Jesus condemns their entire system. Their oaths were defeating the very thing for which the oath was designed to serve: **truth!**

TEXT (3)

Matthew 5:34-36

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.

Jesus is saying you can't get around God. You can't get away from God. If you swear by:

Heaven – it's just as binding as if you had sworn by God, because it's His throne (Isa 66:1; Mt 23:22).

"You're not going to get by with anything when you swear like this."

Earth – it's just as binding as if you had sworn by God, because its His footstool (Isa 66:1).

Jerusalem – it's just as binding as using God's name, because it's the city of the great King (Ps 87:3).

Your head – it's just as binding as using God's name, because He's controlling even the color of your hair!

Swearing by all these *inanimate objects* is improper.

- They cannot verify if you are telling the truth.
- They cannot exercise vengeance if you lie!

But, if I swear by God, He knows if I'm telling the truth and He can exercise vengeance if I don't.

WHAT JAMES TAUGHT

Now we want to notice what James taught on this subject:

James 5:12

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.

"any other oath"

The Greek language has two words that are translated into the English as "other":

ἄλλος – "other (usually another of the same kind)" (Summers)

ἕτερος – "other (usually another of a different kind)" (ibid.)

James used the word which means "another of the same kind" (ἄλλος). Had he wanted to forbid all oaths of all kinds he would have used the word which means "another of a different kind" (ἕτερος).

TEXT (4)

Matthew 5:37 (KJV)

37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

The KJV is superior here to the NKJV. The NKJV leaves out any equivalent of the word "communication" (λόγος) which indicates casual speech or "daily conversation."

From this we learn: The oaths which Jesus condemned in the previous verses, were not judicial oaths. No court among the Jews allowed men to swear by their own heads. The oaths He is condemning have three qualities:

- They are made in daily conversation
- They are pronounced over trivial matters
- They are made with the intent of circumventing the force of a solemn oath

In other words, you want to add force to what you are saying, but you don't want the penalty that accompanies a solemn oath.

What are some examples of these types of oaths and curses?

- gosh
- golly
- gee
- heck
- darn, etc.

The list could go on and on, but you are aware of what I mean. These are "*curse words*" and "*swear words*" in the purest sense of the meaning. They are designed to:

Add force to what we say, but:

- They are designed to prevent saying the actual name of God!
- They are an attempt to circumvent the force of a solemn oath
- They are used in daily conversation, not in courts of law
- They are pronounced over the most trivial and mundane matters
- They desecrate the holy name of God because of their frequent and casual use

ARGUMENT: "But I didn't mean anything by this word. Besides, I didn't actually use the name of God."

A: That's exactly what the Jews were saying when they swore by heaven, by earth, toward Jerusalem and by their heads!!

The exact wording does not matter. James said not to swear by any other oath of the same kind!

But we have brethren saying much worse than this.

Matthew 12:36

36 "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

DAILY SPEECH

communication (λόγος) – the context indicates our daily conversation, our routine speech.

Jesus is forbidding habitual swearing to ***everything*** in our daily conversation.

McGarvey:

"Instead of an oath for confirmation on ordinary occasions, Jesus enjoins a simple affirmation or denial – 'Yea, yea; Nay, nay'"

We may not use these "swear words" in our daily speech to emphasize the truth of our statements!!

On ordinary occasions we must use a simple "yes" or "no."

Q: Why can't we swear and take oaths about every single thing we say?

A: "Whatever is more than these (yes/no) comes from evil"

Notice, the swearing which Jesus condemns comes from the Evil One.

The solemn judicial oath originated with God, not the Evil One!! (Dt 6:13)

Q: Would God have sworn with an oath if judicial swearing originated with the Evil One? Would Jesus? An angel? Paul?

But, swearing to everything in daily conversation does originate with the Evil One.

- It profanes the solemn name of God.
- It tends to make men feel that they are not obligated to tell the truth unless under oath, and then it must be a certain kind of oath.

Have you ever see a man who swears to everything?

- "I swear I can bench-press 500 lbs."
- "I swear I get by on 1 hr. of sleep a day."
- "I swear I could have any girl I wanted." (Yeah ... right!)

When we hear a man who swears to **everything** it is pretty good evidence that he's not telling the truth in anything and we should be on our guard because he's getting ready to tell us a whopper!!

(He knows his reputation is no good and his simple word is worthless. So he must add weight to what he says.)

We must develop a reputation of being truthful people. When we say, "Yes" in our daily conversation, we mean it just as much as if we were in a courtroom taking an oath!

EVASIVE SPEECH

As we look back at the text we will see that Jesus is not only forbidding the use of oaths in daily conversation, but He is also condemning evasive speech:

"let your communication be yea, yea, nay, nay"

James words this a little differently:

James 5:12

12 ... let your "Yes," be "Yes," and your "No," "No," ...

In other words, when we say "**yes**" we do not have a hidden meaning.

ILL: Mom asking, "Did you wash face, brush your teeth and put on plenty of deodorant?"

I would answer, "Yes mam!" Under my breath, where she couldn't hear I would mumble, "Last week."

(Strictly speaking I said nothing false, but there was a hidden point I held back. It left a false impression.)

CATHOLICS

This is what the Catholic church calls "*mental reservation*."

New Catholic Encyclopedia:

"If for example, a wife, who has been unfaithful but after her lapse has received the Sacrament of Penance, is asked by her husband if she has committed adultery, she could truthfully reply: "I am free from sin." ... the speaker does not question the hearer's right to know a truth. He presents the truth as discoverable but not disclosed. He has made no false statement, but has allowed an admissible ambiguity, foreseeing a possible, or even probable, deception" (vol. 9, p. 663).

You can say something, leave a false impression and it not a lie!

They can call it the truth if they want to, but when you draw that bottom line, it's a lie!

"Simplicity in speech is to be regarded as obligatory under ordinary circumstances" (ibid.)

If we all thought long enough we would come up with a *"just reason"* to use evasive speech and deceive people!

"JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES"

The Catholics are not the only ones who teach their members may lie! The Jehovah's Witnesses do the same!

Aid to Bible Understanding:

"Lying generally involves saying something false to a person who is entitled to know the truth ..." (1971, pp. 1060-1061).

I suppose that's why they lie to me all the time ... I'm not *"entitled to the truth."*

We could all figure out some reason why someone is not entitled to truth couldn't we?

"While malicious lying is definitely condemned in the Bible, this does not mean that a person is under obligation to divulge truthful information to people who are not entitled to it" (ibid.).

This is what Jesus forbids when He says, *"Let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay."*

ALL OATHS FORBIDDEN?

Are all oaths forbidden today? What about taking a judicial oath in a courtroom? before a notary public?

ANSWER: Absolutely not!

On solemn occasions before magistrates even Jesus answered under oath (Mt 26:63-64).

Hebrews 6:16

16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

An oath puts a serious matter to rest. Paul doesn't say it's wrong to swear; he accepts it as legitimate and right.

It makes some cringe to think of taking an oath in court, but no one thinks anything of a couple taking "*wedding vows*."

The swearing Jesus and James condemned was:

- by heaven
- by earth
- by Jerusalem
- by your head
- or by any other oath of a similar nature

The object of Jesus' legislation was to stop this indiscriminate, glib oath-taking, and to show that to take an oath is a very solemn matter – something that must be reserved only for those occasions that are solemn and vital.

THE CONTRAST

What then, is the contrast between the OT teaching on oaths and Jesus' teaching? This:

OT – guarded the sacredness of truth in court

NT – guards the sacredness of truth out of court

The truths Jesus taught here were not addressed in the OT Scriptures. He taught:

1) Casual oaths / swearing - unnecessary.

There is no need to swear when a simple affirmation is sufficient.

2) Casual swearing comes from the Evil One:

- it profanes God's name
- it desensitizes man's conscience

3) Any evasive speech with the intent to deceive is wrong.

In essence, Jesus taught that a simple "yes" or "no" in our daily conversation is as serious and as binding as a judicial oath uttered in the name of God!!

(The OT never taught that.)

CONCLUSION

Our world is starving for men of integrity and who are trustworthy. What we need worse than anything else is a restoration of old-time, down-right honesty!

Nothing is hurting the influence of the church more than the absence of truthfulness and honesty.

Psalms 24:3-4

3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
Or who may stand in His holy place?
4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol,
Nor sworn deceitfully.

Psalms 15:1-4

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;