



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN
OF THE
OLSEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

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Evangelists:

Austin Byers

Kyle Pope

Let Your Yes Be Yes

By Kyle Pope

In Matthew 5:33-37 Jesus offers the fourth of a series of antitheses by which He contrasts His own teaching with Mosaic Law and rabbinical tradition. This contrast addresses the issue of *swearing*. This is not swearing in the sense of foul language, but making oaths. Jesus summarizes Old Testament laws on the subject, then declares, **“But I say to you, do not swear at all”** (Matt. 5:34a, NKJV). *What does Jesus prohibit with these words and how must His commands be applied today?*

Mosaic Law

The Law of Moses permitted oaths made to the Lord. Leviticus 19:12 taught, **“And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.”** This is probably what Jesus summarizes in Matthew 5:33, **“you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely.’”** The Law even declared, **“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). God expected the Israelites to do what they said they would do, but as J.W. McGarvey points out, *“The only oath authorized by the law of Moses was one taken in the name of God (Deut. 6:13),”* other oaths made by places and things, *“were all unauthorized by the law”* (*Commentary on Matthew* 57). Deuteronomy 6:13 commanded, **“You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in his name.”**

“But I Say to You”

In the three contrasts Jesus offered before these verses, He has shown how the New Covenant standard raises the bar of conduct above rabbinical

cal tradition and even the Law of Moses. Schneider writes, “Jesus issues a new commandment binding on his disciples. They are to be so truthful that no oaths are needed to back their statements” (178). Early Christian writers understood Jesus’ words to prohibit all oaths. Justin Martyr quoted portions of Matthew 5:34 and 37 in explanation of why Christians “do not swear at all, but always speak truthfully,” explaining that Jesus taught, “Swear not at all, but let your yes be yes, and your no no, for whatever is more than this is from the evil one” (*First Apology* 16.5, Pope). If this was understood in its strictest sense, it would prohibit any contract or assertion in which God acts as witness. Yet, Jesus has just strengthened the binding nature of the marriage covenant in the previous verses (5:31-32)—a covenant to which God acts as witness (Mal. 2:14). James may help us clarify this in his use of similar wording, writing, “do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath” (Jas. 5:12a). W.T. Hamilton argues, “for ‘other’ he used the word *allos* which means ‘numerical distinction of objects of similar character.’ Had he intended to make a blanket condemnation of every kind of oath,

he would have used *heterous* and thus indicated those of a different kind” (96).

The second-century writer Clement of Alexandria offers one of the most thorough discussions concerning how swearing was viewed by early Christians. He records that Christians always preferred to say simply “yes” or “no,” but he did not see it as swearing to say “I speak truly.” Although Clement speaks of Christians making no oaths, he did not understand this as an absolute prohibition of any oath, writing that the Christian is one “rarely coming to the point of swearing,” but generally, even when “being asked for an oath, does not swear.” Instead, he teaches that one’s life should be shown to be “a firm and clear oath” as the Christian “lives and governs himself and shows both in life and in word the faithfulness of his profession—unchangeable and steady” (*Stromata* 7.8, Pope).

Oaths by Places and Things

In our text, Jesus qualifies (at least in part) the type of oaths He forbids—those “by heaven,” (5:34b)—“by the earth”—“by Jerusalem” (5:35), and in the next verse by one’s head (5:36). Jesus explores this issue further later in this same gospel (23:16-22). To swear by places or things was a pagan practice that the Jews had adopted. Theophilus claimed that Socrates swore oaths “by the dog, and the goose, and the plane-tree” (*Theophilus to Autolyclus* 3.2). In the early persecution of the church, a Christian named Polycarp was given the opportunity to be spared execution if he would swear “by the fortune of Caesar”—which he refused (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.2). It was common among the Greeks and Romans to confirm an oath, swearing by the head (Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 3.151; Virgil, *Aeneid* 9.300). The Mishnah echoes Jesus’ words, recording that the Jews followed this same practice, swearing “by the life of your head” (*Sanhedrin* 24a). An oath by one’s own head presumes that one has control over that which he cannot control. Humans have no power to control the natural color of the hairs of the head. To condition one’s word by something he cannot control is foolish and presumptuous. Jesus clearly forbids His disciples from making these types of oaths.

The Jews had developed elaborate standards by which oaths held varying degrees of force binding people to their word. The Mishnah taught that a man was exempt from liability if he broke an oath made “by heaven and earth” (*Shebuoth* 35a). The Talmud records debates among the Jewish rabbis over the binding force of vows made “by

Jerusalem” as opposed to those made “by the altar” (*Nedarim* 10b-11a). Jesus cites these practices in our text. This is not the attitude a Christian should possess. Instead, if one of Christ’s disciples says something it should be trustworthy without anything additional to confirm it.

Swearing in the New Testament

The word *omnuō*, translated “swear” is used elsewhere in the New Testament. Later in Matthew, Peter sins swearing that he did not know Jesus (26:74; cf. Mark 14:71). Herod sinned, swearing impulsively to the daughter of Herodias (Mark 6:23), Matthew describes this as having “**promised with an oath**” (14:7). *Omnuō* is also used in reference to oaths God has made with man (Luke 1:73; Acts 2:30; 7:17; Heb. 3:11; 3:18; 4:3; 6:13; 7:21).¹ In the vision on Patmos, an angel swears to John “**by Him who lives forever and ever**” (Rev. 10:6). Finally, the Hebrew writer will refer to the practice of men swearing by one greater, with no comment on whether this is right or wrong (Heb. 6:16).

Many have argued that Jesus swore under oath later in this gospel when Caiaphas declared, “**I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God**” (26:63, KJV). An adjuration was an appeal by one party calling another party to act or answer under oath. We see adjurations by demons (Mark 5:7), Jewish exorcists (Acts 19:13), and even by Paul when he commanded the Thessalonians—“**I adjure you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the brethren**” (1 Thess. 5:27, ASV). *Did Paul and Jesus violate the prohibition against oaths?* First, we should note that an adjuration does not automatically bind a second party under oath. Brant, notes, “Jesus’ rejoinder to the adjuration is enigmatic but clearly causes the adjuration to misfire. Many exegetes note that Jesus’ response to the adjuration is an indirect affirmative, but He does not actually take an oath” (15). Numbers 5:19-22 taught that one put under oath accepted this adjuration with the words “Amen, amen”—which Jesus did not do. This method of accepting adjuration is further attested in the Mishnah (*Shebuoth* 29b). Beyond this, we must ask if Jesus is defining an *oath* or *swearing* in the same way it was defined under the Law of Moses or by the Tradition of the Elders? If so, Paul would be calling the Thessalonians to vio-

late Jesus’ command. If so, Paul and others later violated Jesus’ command by making vows (cf. Acts 18:18; 21:23). On the other hand, if Jesus here changes the definition of an *oath* or *swearing* to no longer include adjurations, agreements, or affirmations that call God to act as witness, there is no violation. In Matthew 5:32-33 Jesus changed the definition of *adultery*—would it be any wonder if He changed definitions once again? If so, Jesus broadens the responsibility of His followers to be honest in all things, recognizing our accountability before God as the sole confirmation of our word.²

“Let Your ‘Yes’ Be ‘Yes’ and Your ‘No, No’”

After forbidding oaths by places and things, Jesus adds, “**But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one**” (Matt. 5:37). Jesus here stresses that the word of a Christian should be such that a “yes” or a “no” carries binding force. I appreciate Schneider’s point, “In the order of life ruled by the kingdom of God, there is no further place for the oath. It makes sense only when there is reason to question the veracity of men” (178). The Mosaic command regarding oaths was never intended to give greater weight to certain types of oaths.

Instead, the Law stressed the importance that one **“do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth”** (Num, 30:2). Instead of oaths, Jesus commands the simple affirmative **“Yes”** or negative **“No.”** The Gr. *perissos* translated **“more than”** here means “exceeding some number or measure or rank or need, over and above, more than is necessary” (Thayer). Any testimony, agreement, or contract (even if God acts as witness) must not exceed the basic sense of an affirmation or a negation. Otherwise it is from Satan in that it allows one to think that there is room for dishonesty. James 5:12 puts it, **“lest you fall into judgment.”** To imagine that our word must only be kept if a certain type of oath accompanies it is an evil mindset that seeks to excuse dishonesty.

¹ Carl Allen uses this to argue that Jesus is not restricting all oaths, arguing that it would be contradictory for God to forbid something of man that

He allows of Himself and of angels (26). While I agree with most of Allen’s conclusions, this argument does not follow. We are not told what (if any) law governs angels, and there are many things God prohibits human beings from doing that do not restrict His behavior (e.g. vengeance – Rom. 12:19; calling someone a fool – 5:22; 23:17, 19; etc.).

² I would add as a matter of judgment, in our language to say “I swear” is understood to carry a more emphatic force than a simple affirmation. U.S. courts still allow a witness the option to affirm one’s testimony rather than to swear. In my judgment, this is a better option that allows the Christian’s “Yes” to be “Yes” and “No,” “No.”

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