

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
James #17
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Is it ever OK for a Christian to take an Oath?
James 5:12

Truth, or integrity in our speech, that sense of moral obligation to God according to which we represent things as they really are, both in word and deed, has gradually eroded in many segments of our society. This shouldn't come as a total surprise insofar as the first sin in the Garden of Eden was an attack upon the veracity or truthfulness of what God himself had said. Recall the statement: "*in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*" (Gen. 2:17). Man's test consisted in his trust of the veracity of the God who uttered those words. Satan spoke to Eve: "*You will not surely die*" (Gen. 3:4b). Satan does not deny that God *could* inflict the punishment of death, as if to say that God's power were at issue. Neither is it an impeachment of God's knowledge, as if to suggest that Satan questioned God's ability to anticipate the outcome of the whole affair. Rather, as John Murray makes clear:

"He directly assails God's *veracity*. 'God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes will be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3:5). He accuses God of deliberate falsehood and deception. God has perpetrated a lie, he avers, because he is jealous of his own selfish and exclusive possession of the knowledge of good and evil!" (*Principles of Conduct*, 126).

This is one reason Satan is called "the father of lies" (John 8:44). There is no greater work of Satan in the life of the individual or the church than to stir up falsehood and deceit. "All untruth," notes Murray, "has its affinity with that lie by which Eve was seduced" (*ibid.*, 127). Let us not forget that when God's retributive justice against human wickedness reaches its pinnacle on the earth, he sends upon them "a working of error to the end that they may believe a lie" (2 Thess. 2:11; cf. Isa. 59:4,14,15; Jer. 7:28; 9:3; Hosea 4:1; John 8:44-45). Untruth or deceit is the hallmark of impiety. When the book of Revelation describes those who shall have no part in the New Jerusalem, those who practice "lying" (21:27) are specifically mentioned. Indeed, "everyone who loves and practices lying" is on the "outside" (22:15). If untruth is the hallmark of impiety, truth is the sign of godliness (see especially John 17:3; 14:6; 8:31-32; 16:13 - "the Spirit of truth"; 17:17; Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9).

The Words of Jesus

We turn now to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said:

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, 'Do not take an oath at

all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make on hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:33-37).

What is the abuse, apparently sanctioned by religious tradition, against which Jesus directs his comments? What little evidence we have indicates that many believed that "when substitutes for the divine name were used in adjuration [i.e., the taking or asserting of an oath] then the person thus adjuring was exempt from the obligation and sanction attaching to adjuration by God's name" (ibid., 168-69). But what exactly is an "oath"? In an oath a person calls upon a thing, a power or other person greater than himself, usually God, to bear witness to the truth of what he says and to punish him if he breaks his word or if what he says proves to be false. We are now prepared to understand what Jesus meant. Here is Murray's explanation:

"When he [Jesus] says, 'Swear not at all; neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet,' he was striking directly at that profanity which enlisted substitutes for the name of God in order to secure the virtual emphasis of adjuration and yet at the same time sought escape from the obligations and sanctions that the use of the divine name itself would have involved. It is the evil of surreptitiously securing for oneself the advantages of adjuration while attempting to escape from its obligations and, in the event of falsehood, from the penalties attaching to perjury" (ibid., 169).

Our Lord's point is that we are not in the slightest degree free from the obligations and sanctions entailed by an oath simply because we swear by "heaven" or "earth" rather than explicitly by "God". Using such words in place of the divine name is *not* an effective *loophole* should we fail to live up to the conditions embodied in the oath. Since everything to which one might appeal is contained in the universe which God has made and now rules, an appeal to anything at all is, in effect, an appeal to God. One example of how sophisticated the loopholes had become is the fact that swearing *by* Jerusalem was not regarded as binding whereas swearing *toward* Jerusalem was!

The next question is this: Does Jesus here condemn all oath-taking? After all, does he not say, "do not take an oath at all" (v. 34)? My conclusion is that Jesus does not prohibit the taking of an oath, and that for several reasons. First of all, on numerous occasions in Scripture we read about the taking of an oath being not only sanctioned but actually commanded (see Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5,10). Second, God himself is portrayed as taking an oath (Gen. 22:16; Psalm 110:4; Heb. 6:17-18). "It is true," notes Murray, "that God may do what we may not do. But in the context of Scripture injunction and example, what God has done in this particular suggests, at least, that this is one of those things in which God's action is a pattern for us" (ibid., 171). Finally, it would appear from Matthew 26:63-64 that even Jesus himself consented to the taking of an oath.

I conclude, therefore, that when Jesus said, take “no oath at all” (5:34), he was referring to the kind of so-called oath-taking promoted by the Pharisees in which they intended to secure acceptance for what they said without putting themselves at risk should they prove to be liars. In other words, if your appeal to something other than God is for the express purpose of escaping the force and sanction of the vow, you must not swear “at all”. It is *that* sort of swearing, *not all swearing*, that Jesus condemns.

But we must now address yet another question. Assuming that Jesus is not prohibiting oath-taking in an absolute sense, do these verses (as well as James 5:12) imply that when we do take an oath we should appeal only to the name of God and not to any substitute, whether those noted in the text or any others to which one might appeal? In other words, some contend that we may continue to swear by “heaven” or “earth” or “Jerusalem” or by “all that is holy,” etc., as long as we do so with the realization that we are not exempt from its sanctions. They argue that the use of particular words is not ultimately relevant to oath-taking. The issue of importance is one’s intent or attitude.

Murray argues for this view by pointing to the fact that on several occasions in Scripture “sacred oaths were taken in terms of expressions other than that of God’s name expressly” (ibid., 172). In support of this he points to Gen. 42:15; 1 Sam. 1:26; 17:55; 2 Kings 2:2,4,6. He also appeals to Matthew 23:16-22. In this case Jesus “does not condemn the practice of swearing by the temple, or by the altar, or by heaven. But he is emphasizing that which is the main thought of Matthew 5:34-36, namely, that if we swear by the temple we swear by it and ‘by him that dwelleth therein’, and if we swear by heaven we swear ‘by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon’. There is no suggestion that the use of such terms is improper so long as we realize the Godward reference and understand that the adjuratory use carries all the implications of the direct and express use of the name of God” (ibid.).

My own opinion is that wisdom (if not Scripture) dictates that we *not* take oaths except when legal authorities demand it of us (as, for example, in a court of law). My reason is that the taking of an oath is an implicit confession that one is not altogether honest. It is ironic that an oath is the attempt to undergird the truth of what we say, which is at the same time a confession that we don’t speak the truth, that our word alone is suspect. *The taking of oaths is a pathetic acknowledgment of our own dishonesty!* If someone comes to me and says, “Sam, with God as my witness I am telling you the truth,” my response is: “If you are telling the truth, why do you need God as your witness?” Appealing to God is his way of overcoming my suspicion concerning his honesty. Would not the better approach be to cultivate a life of integrity and consistency and truthfulness so that we sufficiently gain the trust of others to preclude the need for an oath?