

**Understanding Oaths**  
**Matthew 5:33-37**  
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. The first four chapters of this book examine the person of Christ, including His incarnation and preparation for ministry. He is the rightful legal authority over God's people based upon His lineage as a descendant of Abraham and David and His fulfillment of many prophetic Messianic Old Testament passages. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7.

Matthew 5:33-37 is the fourth in a series of six specific examples that contrast the traditional teaching by the scribes and Pharisees with the teaching of Jesus. It begins the second set of three units that are building toward the conclusion of what it means to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

**The traditional teaching (5:33)**

This fourth example of Jesus' correction of traditional Jewish teaching involved oaths. Some Bible translations use the word "swear" in this passage but the meaning is "swear an oath." This passage does not address using cuss words or other type of unwholesome speech (cf. Ephesians 4:29; 5:4).

The Old Testament quotation by Jesus in Matthew 5:33 is not a specific replica of one passage but is rather a general reference to several Old Testament verses:

*"You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:12).*

*"Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the sons of Israel, saying, 'This is the word which the Lord has commanded. If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth'" (Number 30:2).*

*"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, what you have promised" (Deuteronomy 21:21-23).*

*“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving  
And pay your vows to the Most High” (Psalm 50:14).*

From these verses, it is apparent that Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:33, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord” is a true representation of the Old Testament. When people made an oath, it was understood to be binding.

Making an oath consisted of a solemn, formal appeal to God when making a promise or statement. These were serious and breaking an oath was considered non-negotiable and could not be disregarded without punishment.

*“Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in the war, when they cast up ramps and build siege walls to cut off many lives. Now he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, and behold, he pledged his allegiance, yet did all these things; he shall not escape. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, ‘As I live, surely My oath which he despised and My covenant which he broke, I will inflict on his head’” (Ezekiel 17:17-19).*

The seriousness of oaths was seen in the symbolic acts that often accompanied an oath. One might raise a right hand or lift both hands to heaven to show their commitment to keeping the oath (Genesis 14:22; Daniel 12:7). These acts show the solemnity to which oaths were regarded in the nation of Israel.

From the New Testament we can observe two types of oaths that were practiced. The first type of oath was a vow made to enhance the meaningfulness of a declaration. It was as if to say “I really mean it this time.” We see the practice of oath taking when Peter sinfully invokes an oath in his denial of Christ.

*“Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, ‘You too were with Jesus the Galilean.’ But he denied it before them all, saying, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’ When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and \*said to those who were there, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ And again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’ A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away.’ Then he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know the man!’ And immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, ‘Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.” (Matthew 26:69-75).*

After Peter's first assertion, he sought to increase his seriousness by first invoking an oath (26:72) and next by invoking a curse upon himself if what he stated was not true. This depicts well the fleshly practice of using oaths to demonstrate to others that you truly meant what you were saying, even if it was not true as in this case. This account demonstrates the use of oaths in making assertions of fact.

A second type of oath involves making a commitment to do something in the future based upon an action taken or because of a condition met. The promise to do something in response to something else can be seen by the oath taken by Herod Antipas that resulted in the beheading of John the Baptist.

*"But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Having been prompted by her mother, she \*said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' Although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison." (Matthew 14:6-10).*

Herod felt bound to do evil because of his oath. Herod was grieved because he knew it was wrong to commit murder but felt bound to his oath. This narrative depicts the seriousness of oaths in the society along with the confusion that results when oaths cause evil things.

### **The teaching of Jesus (5:34a)**

Jesus counters the traditional teaching of oath making by a simple declarative statement against making oath. His words "but I say to you, make no oath at all" is a clear, unambiguous directive against taking oaths.

These words of Jesus are reflected in 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."* This command by James supports Matthew 5:34 to instruct us to not make oaths.

Jesus was able to teach His disciples to make no oath at all because the Old Testament did not prescribe making oaths, it just described the practice and it taught the responsibility to oaths. Since no one had to make an oath, this teaching against oath taking does not violate the Law in any way.

## **The application of Jesus' teaching (5:34b-37)**

Jesus follows His prohibition against oath making by describing four different ways that oath making was practiced. Each of these examples that are spoken against involve assertions that are involving the realm of God. The first two examples involve heaven and earth, which are under the domain of God.

1. "Either by heaven, for it is the throne of God." This practice uses heaven as a replacement for making an oath to God. Out of extreme reverence, the Jews were reluctant to use the name of God so they used alternatives to mean the same thing. Instead of swearing by God, they swore by heaven, believing that this would be more appropriate.
2. "Or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet." Since invoking heaven was considered too close to God, oaths were made by earth as God's creation. The earth was God's footstool, meaning that just as God was connected to heaven by enthronement, He was likewise connected to earth.
3. "Or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." Oaths made to Jerusalem were also referenced. Just as God is connected to heaven and earth, He is also connected to Jerusalem. Jesus quotes Psalm 48:2 to show that Jerusalem is the place where God would choose to make His presence known on earth in the temple.
4. "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black." Even oaths that are not made of a substitute for God but are made on the basis of our own head are prohibited. By swearing to ourselves, we can think that we are not involving God but we do not have the authority over our own head, for we do not control even the color of our hair.

In each of these examples, a presumption exists that there is an ability to divorce God from places and from even ourselves. Yet God holds everything together (Colossians 1:17). In this respect, all these oaths were made to God, even if He was not named. All oaths are made to God regardless of how one might word their vow.

Jesus goes beyond the negative prohibition against oath making by providing a positive instruction regarding what our practice ought to be. "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil." (Matthew 5:37).

Our holy practice should be one of verbal integrity. We should say what we mean and mean what we say. Our words must be sufficiently reliable that they do not need to be supported by an oath to increase their weightiness.

This should not be understood to substitute a “yes, yes” formula for an oath making formula. Just as we should not increase the meaningfulness of our words through oaths, we also should not increase the significance of our words through a verbal script.

A common but mistaken understanding of this passage is that Jesus is not meaning that we should not make oaths but that we should not make frivolous oaths. The reason for this interpretation is because the Old Testament provides for oaths and the examples that Jesus gives involved oaths that were intended to obscure honest communication. The belief is that making an oath is good as long as it is not frivolous and it is kept.

There is no doubt that the Jews engaged in a practice of allowing themselves to be freed from obligations if the vow was correctly constructed. This was the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:16-22.

*“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.’ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.” (Matthew 23:16-22).*

Mankind will seek to escape commitments they do not want to keep. Mankind will also fraudulently lead people to believe something is true when it is not. The very nature of making oaths in order to bolster a claim or a commitment includes the understanding that if an oath is not taken, then the statement is less meaningful. This leads to levels of responsibility depending on our phraseology.

The Jews took this practice to an advanced place where oaths made by the gold of the temple were more weighty than oaths made by the temple. Obviously, the dwelling place of God is more important than the material the temple was made from. Thus there was an added degree of misunderstanding by the Jews.

Yet while the Jews made a fanciful practice of what they swore by and what that meant, this was not the essence of the problem of oath making. Jesus did not say to not make frivolous oaths but to make no oaths at all. James 5:12 provides the reason for not making any oaths.

*“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.”* (James 5:12).

The reason to not make oaths according to James is so that we may not fall under judgment. The judgment that we might fall under if we use oaths to bolster our words is the same path that the Pharisees took (Matthew 23:16-22). The practice of oath making leads to people making evasive or deceptive commitments based upon all sorts of vows. In essence, frivolous oaths arise from the practice of vowing to strengthen our words rather than provide a simple yes or no.

When we feel a need to strengthen people’s confidence in our words by the use of oaths, it will lead to more frequent swearing by different things, which will lead to distinctions between what is being sworn by, which will lead to degrees of seriousness regarding our commitments. Thus by making oaths, we necessarily end up diminishing our words that are not supported by a vow. When making assertions our words must be with full integrity and nothing should be added to make them more likely to be true.

This does not mean that it is forbidden to swear to our truthfulness when others require it. For example, when giving sworn testimony in a court, we are asked to vow to tell the truth. This is not what we are initiating in order to bolster our truthfulness but what others are requiring of all. We can swear to be truthful because we are not meaning that our words are any more truthful because of our vow.

Those who enlist as a soldier and those in high public office also take oaths regarding their service. Marriage ceremonies include vow, which is similarly a social construct to elicit a greater commitment in the marriage. We are at times faced with circumstances that require us to make a vow to demonstrate our seriousness. While this should not add to our commitment, people view it as necessary and we can comply.

This adjustment in our service to others explains Paul’s references to God as his witness to what he said (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20). He had no need to add God’s name except serve the understanding of his readers. His willingness to do this shows his desire to communicate in ways they would accept.

Apart from expectations of others, there is no need for us to add to our yes or no. Indeed, Jesus says it is evil (or possibly “from the evil one”) when we desire to go beyond the basic integrity of our words. We certainly must not allow for any untrustworthy speech by the use of oaths.

Regarding oaths that make promises based upon actions taken, we must realize that we can only commit to what we have an ability to fulfill. Since we do not know the future we can only intend to do something; we cannot vow to do something. In such matters we must be guided by the words of James regarding the future.

*“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.”* (James 4:13-16).

We can commit our plans but our plans lie in the power of God. To declare authoritatively regarding the future is arrogant because it presumes that we have some power that we do not. We cannot make one hair white or black, nor can we determine what we will be able to do in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus clearly instructed His followers to not make oaths. James 5:12 tells us to not swear so that we may not come under judgment. There is no reason why we need to bolster our words with vows unless it is required by others. Our simple verbal testimony must be sufficient in order to not be tempted with degrees of trustworthiness. Our yes must be yes.

We likewise ought not to commit ourselves to future events through oaths since *“it is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay”* (Ecclesiastes 5:5). Human contracts have penalties for violations but not so with oaths. With the future, we can declare our intentions but our ability to do anything is contingent upon God. Furthermore, our own weakness may make the fulfillment of a vow impossible. Best to not swear at all so that we may not fall under judgment.