

A MATTER OF SIMPLE SINCERITY

Matthew 5:33-37

I. INTRODUCTION

Presidential Oath (Constitution Art. II, Sec.1, Clause8)—“ I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

NOTE: Only Franklin Pierce (1853) said “Affirm”

Oath for Commissioned Officers—I ___ having been appointed an officer in the Army of the United States, as indicated in the grade of ___ do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservations or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter, so help me God.

II. THE TEXT

KJV—**33** *Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: 34 But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: 35 Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. 36 Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. 37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.*

NIV—**33** *“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

NASB—**33** *“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ 34 “But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 “Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.*

The Message—*And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.*

Parallel Text:

James 5:12—**NASB**—*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.*

III. BACKGROUND

A. THE NATURE OF OATHS

1. Oaths were used to verify sincerity and truthfulness of oath-giver
2. Usually sworn upon an object or person with which/whom oath-giver has relationship.
 - a. The power of sworn object/person gives significance (sometimes awe) to oath-giver's words.
 - b. The character of sworn object/person gives credibility to words of oath-taker.
 - c. The greater the sworn object/person—the greater the significance and credibility of the oath

Modern examples: “So help me God” or “As God is my witness.”

3. Oaths were like conditional curses
 - a. If oath not kept—something bad would happen to oath-taker

I Kings 2:23—*Solomon's oath when his rebellious older brother Adonijah requested the hand of Abishag in marriage—Then King Solomon swore by the LORD: “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Adonijah does not pay with his life for this request!*

Modern example: “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

- b. If oath not kept—it dishonors not only oath-taker but the sworn object/person
 1. The dearer the sworn object/person—the greater the genuine guilt and shame felt by breaker
 2. Breaking an oath involves the sworn object/person—as complicit in wrong-doing!

B. OATHS IN ANCIENT SOCIETY

1. Pagans saw oaths as essential to society

Example: Lycurgus (4th cent BC Athens)—said oaths were a key element for a cohesive Democratic society—like cultural glue

2. Pagans took them seriously—viewed as conditional curses

Example: Pliny said—“[If my oath isn't true] let the divine vengeance fall upon my own head, and my whole family.”

3. Jews used them for moral and religious purposes

Example—adultery test for woman—she took oath of curse after drinking bitter water:

Dt 5:21-22-- *Then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman, “the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people*

by the LORD'S making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away." And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen."

C. CONTEMPORARY SITUATION REGARDING OATHS

1. Mosaic law

- a. Assumed oaths were necessary for good order of society
- b. For example—in conducting transactions

EX 22:11—*If anyone gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep or any other animal to their neighbor for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before the LORD that the neighbor did not lay hands on the other person's property. The owner is to accept this, and no restitution is required.*

- c. **Numbers 30** lists some of them—and addresses the seriousness of taking an oath

1 *Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: "This is what the LORD commands: 2 When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.*

- d. The only limitation/warning: do not swear falsely

2. Elaborate Rabbinical regulations

- a. Rabbinical code had elaborate hierarchy of laws devoted to oaths
- b. One full tract of the Mishnah gave detailed rules—what was a valid or an invalid oath
- c. Legalistic attitude led to hair-splitting in order avoid obligations [casuistry]
- d. Jesus condemned this kind of legalistic wrangling—pronounced woes upon Pharisees

Mt 23:16-22—**16** *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.'* **17** *You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?* **18** *And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.'* **19** *You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?* **20** *Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it.* **21** *And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.* **22** *And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.*

3. Problems with contemporary oath-taking

- a. Oath-taking had become commonplace and trivial
 - Pronounced by everyone upon and for everything

- This watered down significance of truly grave occasions when truth really mattered
 - Consequently, people treated them frivolously, and broke them easily and frequently
- b. Jewish situation
1. Jews said unless God’s name was specifically mentioned the oath was not binding
 2. Lengthy debates about which oaths were binding and which ones were not
 3. People sometimes swore by heaven or earth or similar thing, then later claim they were not bound by oath because God was not mentioned.
- c. Reactions
1. Some philosophers said oaths should be avoided whenever possible
 - Example: Philo**—said one’s word should be one’s oath
 2. The Essenes—ascetic cult of Jesus’ day
 - Said one should simply tell the truth—and never pronounce oaths
 3. The rabbis
 - Beginning to complain about frivolous attitudes towards oaths
- d. Jesus’ approach
1. First—stop oath-taking altogether
 2. Second—tell the truth all the time
 3. Anything else—comes from an evil impulse—even the evil one

IV. EXPLANATION

A. THE OLD STANDARD

33 *“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false oaths, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’*

1. **Again**

- a. Introduces a new (second) set of three antitheses—oaths/vengeance/selective love
- b. The first set of three—murder/adultery/divorce—was introduced the same way

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago”

2. **You have heard that it was said**—two commands
 - a. **Do not swear falsely**—do not break your oaths
 - b. **But keep the vows** (what you swore) **you have made to God**
3. First command: do not swear falsely—derived from two texts
 - a. 3rd Commandment: **do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain**—**Ex 20:7; Dt 5:11**
 - b. **Lev 19:12**—**You shall not swear by my name falsely**
4. Second command: keep the vows you have made to God

***Dt 23:21**—If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.*
5. Notice—the shift in the two clauses
 - a. First clause—deals with oaths in general = **επιορκεω** = to swear an oath falsely
 - b. Second clause—deals with vows—**ορκος**— specifically to God
 - c. Significance
 - Suggests any oath carries weight of obligation vowed before God
 - Jesus is highlighting this fact: all vows/oaths are said in the sight of God!
 - And we are answerable to God for them all—regardless of how they were made.

B. THE NEW STANDARD

34 *“But I say to you, make no oath at all . . .*

1. The Negative—an Absolute Prohibition
2. The Positive—implications:
 - a. There should be one standard of truth all the time
 - b. There should not be a ‘double-standard’—telling the truth only at certain times
 - c. Be transparently honest all the time—not economical with the truth
 - d. You don’t need anything but your own word
 1. One’s integrity is to stand on its own—without any other support
 2. An oath is a crutch used to prop up your word

3. To swear raises the implicit question—can you be trusted when you do not swear?

C. NOTHING IS UNDER YOUR CONTROL

34 . . . *either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36* “Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

1. Jesus’ general approach in these verses
 - a. He is raising these questions: how great a thing can one swear on—and does it really matter?
 - b. Jesus moves from the greatest to the smallest of things
 - c. His ultimate point
 1. To show that *nothing* is under our control
 2. So we cannot swear on *anything* with certainty
 3. From God and His universe—to the earth—to a city—to an individual’s hair

2. Do not swear by heaven

- a. It is not our domain to use this way
- b. Instead it belongs to God—as does the earth
- c. Allusion to **Is 66:1**

Thus says the LORD, “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?”

- d. Do not presume against the **sovereignty** of God—as King/Ruler of the universe
- e. In fact—swearing by heaven is nothing less than swearing on/by God himself

Jesus said this very thing in **Mt 23:22**— *And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.*

3. Do not swear by the earth

- a. Narrows scope from heaven/universe to the earth
- b. But God is also in control of the earth—it is not the oath-taker’s domain to control
- c. Another allusion to **Is 66:1**
- d. Presumes against the **providence** of God—as Sustainer

4. Do not swear by Jerusalem
 - a. Narrows focus to capital city of one nation on earth
 - b. But God is still sovereign and providential sustainer of all nations—especially Israel
 - c. Allusion to **Ps 48:1-2**

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, His holy mountain.
Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, the city of
the great King.*

5. Do not even swear by your own head
 - a. Narrows scope to the individual person
 - b. And focuses on the smallest of things—slender follicles of hair
 - c. We don't even control such things—as the color of our own hair!
 - Though hair-dyeing was already done in Jesus' day
 - One cannot change the inherent natural color of hair
 - One cannot keep it from turning white—can only cover it up!

D. A MATTER OF SIMPLE SINCERITY

1. **Simply let your yes be yes, and your no be no!**
 - a. Be transparent
 - b. Don't hedge about—trying to qualify your statements
 - c. Don't hesitate—be straightforward
 - d. There should be no in-betweens
2. Tell the truth—whole truth—and nothing but the truth
 - a. Don't look for ways to be 'economical' with the truth
 - b. Half-truths are really 'white' lies
3. So—what replaces our oaths as verification we are honest?
 - a. Just our integrity—be honest all the time—simple and sincere
 - b. If everyone did this—then our word would be the bond of a healthy society
 - c. Here—Jesus states explicitly and positively what He implied in negative form in **verse 34**

E. THE BAD ALTERNATIVE

1. **Anything beyond this comes from evil!**

- a. When we try to justify what we are saying—and hedge it about with qualifications
 - b. Then there is usually an element of doubt associated with what we say
 - c. Even evil impulse beneath it—that raises questions about our motives or conscience
2. Also remember who is the source of all lies—is the “evil one”

Jn 8:44—You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

3. The use of oaths does two negative things

- a. It calls into question our veracity at other times
- b. It presumes an atmosphere of distrust—we will not believe others unless they swear an oath!

V. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

A. EARLY CHURCH

1. First 3 centuries—Christians followed Jesus’s words literally
2. Even faced persecution for not swearing oaths
3. **Clement of Alexandria**—Christians are “addicted to the truth”

B. MEDIEVAL CHURCH

1. Situation changed after Constantine
 - a. Church-state unified—with common political and religious interest
 - b. Many civil practices/organizations—were adopted by the church
 - c. Wholesale entrance of pagans into church
 1. Brought their cultural/legal practices with them
 2. Including their common practice of everyday and trivialized swearing
2. Christian imperial court expected oaths as part of Christian duty

3. Key factor: legal requirement for witnesses to be bound by sanctity of oath
4. Theologians' response
 - a. At first, Christian theologians resisted oath-taking
 - b. But later they accommodated gradually—for example: **Augustine**
 1. Augustine generally prohibited oaths
 2. But he allowed them for two special exceptions
 - When they were absolutely necessary [for social/legal order]—a **necessity**
 - When they accomplished a greater good—enabling people to believe what was beneficial to believe—a **benefit**
5. Eventually in Christian nations
 - a. They became accepted as a universal social condition
 - b. Regularly used to attest loyalty of Christian subjects to their rulers and the church

C. REFORMATION

1. Magisterial Reformers
 - a. Said oath-taking was both **biblical** and **necessary**
 - b. Continued to allow them for attesting political and religious loyalty
 - c. Began to make accommodations in the 17th century

Example: English Toleration Act 1689

1. Required oaths of allegiance to monarch and to religious beliefs
2. Article XIII for those who scrupled oaths allowed—they did not *swear*:
 - Political oath: “I do sincerely promise and solemnly declare before God and the world that I will be true and faithful to King William and Queen Mary . . .”
 - Religious oath: “I do profess faith in God the Father . . .”

2. Reformers Who Opposed to Oaths

a. Quakers

1. Believe in telling the truth at all times
2. So, an oath to do so at a specific time would imply a double standard

b. Anabaptists and later Mennonites

1. Used the same reasoning as Quakers
 - Tell the truth at all times
 - Do not support a double-standard
2. Plus—they refused to swear loyalty to any secular ruler
3. Said oath-taking might be *biblical* (OT) but not Christian (NT)
 - The Old Testament is a shadow of what came later, the NT
4. Said it oaths were *not* necessary—but actually created problems
 - Requiring oaths gave more power to rulers who abused that power
 - Oaths actually promote untruthfulness among those predisposed that way
 - Oaths create a situation where perjury becomes a problem
5. They also objected based on two other points:
 - Humility—we don't know future, so we cannot swear to do anything later
 - Loyalty—baptismal promise requires loyalty only to the Lord and nobody else

VI. WHAT DID JESUS REALLY MEAN?

1. Jesus recognized that certain oaths were allowable and served a good purpose:
 - a. Some were required by OT law—as we have seen
 - b. God Himself swore and oath

Heb 6:13-14—*For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.”*

- c. Jesus Himself swore before the high priest

Mt 26:62-64—*The high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*

2. So Jesus was not laying down a legal or absolute prohibition
 - a. Certainly some oaths were still allowable
 - b. Those legal and necessary ones which the individual does not control

3. Again—He was fulfilling the law—explaining its original intent
 - a. Original intent—be truthful all the time
 - b. Do not use human devices and disingenuousness methods to avoid or qualify the truth
 - c. In situations which you control—oaths are not necessary
 - d. Let your word be your bond—and so establish a reputation for honesty