

Excerpts of Archived Lecture:

Oaths (Matthew 5:33–37)

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As a small boy I was told by Sunday School teachers that Christians should never swear. They made reference to the fact that Jesus taught people to swear not at all. Then, they usually concluded that this prohibited taking an oath in a court of law. Some years later, I was told that the prohibition of Jesus regarding oaths does not include oaths in a court of law.

What is the truth about oaths? What did Jesus really teach, and how does it apply to us? Our study of this matter will have the objective of determining the correct answers to these questions. We will seek the correct answers by studying these topics: the definition of “**swear**” and “**oaths**”, oaths and swearing in the Old Testament, what the New Testament teaches about oaths and vows, judicial and legal oaths, and a practical application of these truths to our lives.

DEFINITION

To “**swear**” is to invoke the names of Deity, or other sacred persons or things; to utter an oath. “**Oath**” is defined as a solemn appeal to God, or to a sacred or revered person or sanction (as the Bible, the temple, the altar) by way of attesting the truth of one’s word, the inviolability of a promise, etc.; also, the affirmation or promise supported by an oath, or its form of expression. (Websters Collegiate Dictionary.)

So, in practical everyday language, taking an oath or swearing is a means of verifying one’s words as being true by calling upon sacred persons or things as proof of honesty.

OATHS AND SWEARING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Numbers 30:2 we read, **“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.”**

Then I read in Deuteronomy 23:21, **“When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee.”**

Also, from Ecclesiastes 5:2–5, **“Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth: therefore let thy words be few.... When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.”**

Oaths were very common among the Jews in the Old Testament. There were public and legal vows, and there were vows to perform certain acts. The passages in Numbers 30; Deuteronomy 23 and Ecclesiastes 5 demanded great respect for vows. In fact, punishment for failure to perform or keep a vow was strictly enforced (Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; Deut. 19:16–19; Zech. 8:17).

In summation, the people of the Old Testament days were told to make few vows, and they were commanded to keep the vows they made, with punishment promised to those who failed to keep a vow!

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ABOUT OATHS AND VOWS

In the sermon on the mount, our Lord Jesus taught, **“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: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne; Nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea, Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil”** (Matt. 5:33–37).

The command, **“thou shalt not forswear thyself,”** meant it was wrong to swear falsely. The phrase, ... **“but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths,”** indicates that some excused their dishonesty or failure to keep their vows on the basis that they did not profane God’s name because they did not vow with His name. They knew the Scripture forbade profane or flippant use of the name of God, but they often justified a false oath when there was no specific mention of the name of God.

In other words, the scribes and Pharisees considered an oath binding or not binding according to the sanctity of the object by which the oath was sworn. An example of this is shown in Matthew 23:16: **“Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!”** The Lord Jesus responded to this attitude by saying, **“Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind; for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon”** (Matt. 23:17–22). The main message in these verses is that a false oath is always false whether made in the name of Deity and sacred things or not.

Thus, Jesus forbade all false swearing and commanded His disciples to always be truthful. If the correct answer is **“yes”**, let it be so. If **“no”** is the right answer, let it be so. The disciple of Christ should not have to call upon the name of Deity or sacred things to attest to the truthfulness of his words, and he should never perjure himself, appealing to the name of God or not.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:37 are virtually quoted by James in James 5:12. **“But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.”**

James, like Jesus, was teaching the Christian to always be truthful lest he **“fall into condemnation”**—that is, under punishment for perjury. This is parallel to Jesus saying that more than this **“cometh of evil.”**

WHAT ABOUT JUDICIAL OATHS, LEGAL OATHS, ETC?

Do the commandments in Matthew 5:33–37 and James 5:12 forbid us to take an oath in court, before a notary public, and such like? James even prohibited the making of **“any other oath.”** Does that include all oaths and vows in all circumstances?

It is highly significant that an oath in the name of God is not mentioned as being wrong, by either Jesus or James. Instead, as our study has shown, the thrust of Matthew 5:33–37 and James 5:12 is that the Christian should never swear falsely, but always tell the truth.

Furthermore, under the law, swearing by the name of Jehovah was commanded (Deut. 6:13; 10:20). This commandment was qualified by the warning in Leviticus 19:12, “... **ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God ...**” Also, it is apparent that Jesus and James did not intend to forbid **all** oaths by reason of the fact that Jesus, before Caiaphas, testified under oath (Matt. 26:63, 64). Paul, the apostle, also appealed to God as his witness (Rom. 1:9).

The conclusion that not **all** oaths are forbidden is further supported by a study of the Greek from which is translated, “**any other oath**” (James 5:12). James used “**allos**,” meaning another of the **same** kind. Had he intended to teach that **all** oaths are wrong, he would have used “**heteros**” which means another of a “**different**” kind. Therefore, it is obvious that James intended to say that all oaths of the type specifically under consideration were forbidden.

The purpose of taking an oath in court must be distinguished from having to call upon Deity to prove one’s words in the absence of having a character recognized as always truthful.

Some today object to taking an oath in court and fulfill their civil duties, while satisfying their conscience, by “**affirming**” to tell the truth. However, such an affirmation binds one to speak the truth just as would an oath, and a failure to tell the truth under affirmation convicts one for perjury. Lying under an “**affirmation**” is the same as lying under “**oath**.” So there is really no difference between “**affirming to tell the truth**” and “**swearing to tell the truth**.”

PRACTICAL APPLICATION TO OUR LIVES

Our world is so filled with lies and deceit that to require an oath of another man is no assurance of getting the truth. Our world is starving for men who have integrity and who are trustworthy. In fact, the thing that is so desperately needed in this country is a restoration of old-time, downright truthfulness and honesty.

When a Christian says a thing, we ought to be able to believe him 100 percent. A simple “**yes**” or “**no**” should be sufficient with the Christian. A Christian’s word should be no less reliable than an oath. Clement of Alexandria said, “**Christians just lead such lives and evince such character that no one will ever dream of asking an oath from them.**”¹

¹ Sain, D. (1982). [Oaths \(5:33–37\)](#). In G. Elkins & T. B. Warren (Eds.), *The Sermon on the Mount* (pp. 127–132). Ramer, TN: National Christian Press, Inc.

Retaliation (Matthew 5:38–40)

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Since the days of Eden the word of God has been perverted, misinterpreted, misapplied by its friends and foes alike. By the time the Christ came into the world, Jewish sects and parties had mastered the art of wresting the Scriptures from their intended meaning, using them only to substantiate their doctrines and traditions. Rabbinical interpretations and applications of God's law were not in accord with the righteous moral teachings and principles of divine revelation. Regarding their perversion of truth, insistently demanding the "**letter of the law**" to the neglect of the "**Spirit of the law**," Jesus charged them with making the commands of God of none effect by their traditions (Matthew 15:6). The first recorded sermon of the Master finds Him dealing with the holy principles of God, "**preaching the gospel of the Kingdom**," which demanded true righteousness of His followers, a righteousness sharply contrasted with the self-righteousness of the Jewish sect.

THE LAW OF RETALIATION

The law of retaliation is thrice stated in the Old Testament Scriptures. "**Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe**" (Exodus 21:23–25). Leviticus 24:20 adds "**breach for breach**" (fracture for fracture, RSV); Deuteronomy 19:21 adds "**life for life**."

The law of retaliation was a good law. "**But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully**" (1 Tim. 1:8); "**... the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just and good**" (Rom. 7:12). The law was good in that it would exercise control over, or punish, those who did not live by the law of righteousness. The law was made "**... for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of mothers, for manslayers. For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for men-stealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine**" (1 Tim. 1:9–10).

The law of retaliation was **just**: The punishment rewarded was to be according to the crime, neither more nor less. **“Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward”** (Heb. 2:2). It was a **merciful** law which imposed restraint on the avenger. It mercifully allowed only one eye for an eye; only one tooth for a tooth. It would not permit the harshness of a life for an eye, nor a limb for a tooth. It was a **beneficent** law for all Israel, designed to protect the weak from the strong, the peaceable from the lovers of violence.

The law of retaliation was a **necessary** law which served as a salutary warning unto evil doers which, in many instances, would prevent evil actions of wicked men. It was also necessary that vengeful judges be restrained from inflicting too severe a punishment upon those who were guilty of maiming others.

The law of retaliation was a **judicial** law and was to be administered by duly authorized magistrates. The law of retaliation was a law of the civil courts designed to take away the unjust practice of one's seeking private revenge against real supposed offenders. The Old Testament law of Israel had never given place to individual revenge. **“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people ...”** (Lev. 19:18); **“Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee”** (Prov. 20:22); **“Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me; I will render to the man according to his works”** (Prov. 24:29).

The administration of justice was to be a matter of public record and witnessed by the people: **“Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him”** (Lev. 24:14). In offences, witnesses were to be summoned, **“And the judges shall make diligent inquisition,”** determine the guilt and prescribe the punishment (Deut. 19:15–21). The spirit of the law was not in favor of revenge, but rather to limit and check it.

SCRIBES AND PHARISEES PERVERTED THE LAW

The scribes and Pharisees selfishly and unlovingly misinterpreted and perverted the good law. The rabbis and doctors of Jewish law had enjoined men to insist on retaliation as their duty and declare it lawful in many cases for the injured party, at his own hand, to avenge himself, provided in his revenge he did not exceed the measure prescribed in the law. Their perversion had made a good law into a bad one. Their doctrine was to return evil for evil.

One would wonder why religious men would wrest such a good and sacred law from its holiness. It should be realized that the natural opinion of man is to avenge himself in private when wrong has been done him personally. By nature, there is a strong desire for revenge in everyone's heart. In man's **“getting even,”** or in **“settling accounts,”** man is not satisfied with an even settlement. The spirit of vengeance drives him beyond justice, beyond the limit of one eye for one eye.

Thus, among those Jews, the spirit of resistance was cherished and the act of retaliation condoned. To be governed by a ritualistic, legalistic compliance to the law rather than be governed by the spirit (purpose) of the law was more satisfying to the sinful inclinations of man. To render harm for harm done is the natural reaction of man, but the spirit of Christ working in man transforms him and enables him to resist evil.

As a result of this perversion the spirit of malice and revenge was encouraged. The Jews, under the sanctions of this perverted law of retaliation, carried their resentments to the utmost length and, by so doing, **maintained infinite quarrels to the great detriment of social life.** Jesus condemned their unjust execution of God's high law by ordering men under the gospel dispensation to proportion their resistance of injuries to their nature and importance.

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN: RESIST NOT EVIL

Jesus' law of retaliation—to turn the other cheek, to give the cloak also—is not to be interpreted in a literal sense. To do so would be to interpret Scripture according to the same rules used by the scribes and Pharisees. If verses 38–40 are to be interpreted in the literal sense, verses 29 and 30 must be taken in a literal sense. To avoid temptations and sin, one must actually pluck out an eye, cut off a hand! A literal interpretation and execution of the law would destroy the very framework of all society and let loose all that is evil in the human heart. Did the Lord intend that evil doers were free to assault over and over again? To give to every rascal and thief that ask of you, turning none away? The passage must denote something less than literal import.

Neither did the Lord intend to teach mental inertia. He Himself remonstrates against the high priest when smitten of him (John 18:22, 23). Paul, His apostle, did not slavishly follow the letter of this law in his often encounters with enemies of righteousness. He smote Elymas blind for a season (Acts 13:6–13). He championed his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25). He challenged the magistrates at Philippi for their unjust treatment of the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:35–40). He accused Ananias, the high priest, of being a “**whited wall**” and a law violater himself (Acts 23:1–3). Paul resorted to civil law in hopes to gain his cherished freedom and made his appeal to Caesar. When he was unlawfully charged and imprisoned, he did not turn the other cheek, and, while in prison, rather than “**let him have thy cloak also,**” requested Timothy to bring him his cloak that he had left at Troas with Crispus (2 Tim. 4:13).

The Lord's teaching to resist not evil does not repeal the law of self-preservation and the care that one is to take of one's family. There is nothing to indicate that He disallowed the apostles from carrying swords for self-defense. However, when Peter drew the sword to resist the arresting officers who came to apprehend Him in the garden, Jesus ordered him to sheath it again.

Jesus simply meant that small injuries or offences were to be gracefully passed over. For one to **“smite thee on the right cheek”** is indeed an insult, but it is not an assault on life.

... There are no bones broken, no great harm done, forgive it and forget it and if proud fools think the worse of thee, and laugh at thee for it, all wise men will value and honor thee for it as a follower of the blessed Jesus, who, though He was Judge of Israel, did not smite those who smote Him on the cheek (Micah 5:1)

The Christ demonstrated an aloofness to the insults and tyranny of despotic men that was nothing less than the turning the other cheek, a giving away of the cloak: **“When he was reviled, reviled not again: when he suffered, he threatened not: but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.”** Christ’s doctrine was that a good man is so far from revenging private injuries that oftentimes he does not even resist them and always forgives them.

Jesus, in turning the other cheek, in giving up the cloak rather than retaliating with angry and destructive force, was to condemn the spirit of lovelessness, hatred, yearning for revenge. He is saying, **“Do not resist the evil-doer with measures that arise from an unloving, unrelenting, vindictive disposition.”** Once this is understood, it becomes clearly evident that **“to turn the other cheek,”** to **“give him thy cloak also,”** means to show in attitude, word, and deed that one is not filled with the spirit of rancor but with the spirit of love.

PAUL’S COMMENTARY ON THIS LAW

Living in this world, one must expect to meet with injustice’s and unprovoked offences. How is one to conduct one’s self? God forbids one to take personal vengeance (Prov. 20:22; Matt. 5:38–40). Vengeance belongs to God for Him to avenge or to delegate the power and authority of vengeance to another. He gave the individual no authority to avenge himself.

The apostle Paul elaborates on this law and amplifies the Lord’s teachings of non-retaliation (Romans 12:9–13:7). God has appointed the civil office as His minister and avenger to execute wrath on all those who violate the person and property of man. The role of the individual, the Christian, is one of peace, love, and forbearance. Paul emphasizes both positive and negative aspects of character which are to be exemplified in the life of the Christian. He is to love, choose the good, be kindly affectioned one to another, industrious in honest labors, compassionate and hospitable. In the face of offensive enemies he is to practice the law of non-retaliation, recompensing no man evil for evil, giving place to wrath, letting it have a wide berth. For his enemy, if he **“hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

CONCLUSION

The world is not a place of justice and equity. There are many miscarriages of justice even among those who seek to do justly. The disciples of Christ realize that they are to experience many wrongs and slights of men. They live with the realization that there will be a final judgment when all wrongs will be punished and right will be rewarded. For their brief time in the earth among men their mission is to glorify the Father in heaven. This cannot be done through clamor, rancor, and contentiousness. To insist on every personal right, to right every personal affront, to retaliate at every real or supposed injury or insult is to continually war, quarrel, and wrangle with every man. This is contrary to the spirit of Christ which must pervade every disciple who claims Him as Lord and Savior.

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace (James 3:14).²

² Miller, M. (1982). [Retaliation \(5:38–40\)](#). In G. Elkins & T. B. Warren (Eds.), *The Sermon on the Mount* (pp. 133–140). Ramer, TN: National Christian Press, Inc.