

## On Swearing

- I. Definitions.
- A. swear: To make a solemn declaration or statement with an appeal to God or a superhuman being, or to some sacred object, in confirmation of what is said; to take an oath.
  - B. oath: A solemn or formal appeal to God (or to a deity or something held in reverence or regard), in witness of the truth of a statement, or the binding character of a promise or undertaking; an act of swearing; a statement or promise corroborated by such an appeal, or the form of words in which such a statement or promise is made.
  - C. adjure: To put (one) to his oath; 'to impose an oath upon another, prescribing the form in which he shall swear,' J.; to bind under the penalty of a curse. *Obs.* 2. To charge or entreat (any one) solemnly or earnestly, as if under oath, or under the penalty of a curse.
  - D. forswear: *trans.* To abandon or renounce on oath or in a manner deemed irrevocable. 2. To deny or repudiate on oath or with strong asseveration. 3. To swear falsely, commit perjury.
  - E. communication: The action of communicating or imparting. 2. *spec.* The imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs).
- II. **MAT 5:33-37; JAM 5:12** warn against particular swearing.
- A. God Himself swears with oaths. **LUK 1:73; ACT 2:30; HEB 3:11; 7:20-21.**
  - B. Would God condemn men for what He Himself does?
- III. Consider that James (**JAM 5:12**) is referring to the things that he has already written. He had just mentioned injustice and affliction that believers experience and the need to patiently endure in view of the coming of the Lord. **JAM 5:4-11.**
- A. In view of the injustices and afflictions, and previous instruction about governing the tongue (**JAM 3:2-13**) James's command here was quite appropriate.
  - B. James is very relevant. Brethren who do not properly process injustices against themselves are likely to grudge (murmur) or swear falsely or foolishly out of frustration, and thus break God's law and give away the moral high ground.
  - C. How many have in frustration rashly sworn by God to do something that would be very regrettable? *c/w* **1SAM 25:21-22, 32-33.**
  - D. How many might under pressure be tempted to swear flippantly or with mental reservation (deliberate swearing with secret intent to obfuscate or equivocate: "weasel wording")?
  - E. Have you ever heard someone say something like, "I swear on my mother's grave..." or "By Jupiter, I will finish this job on time"?
- IV. The O.T. by precept and example affirmed proper swearing. **EXO 22:10-11; DEU 6:13; 1KI 17:1 ct/w JOS 23:7; ZEP 1:5.**
- A. Christ and the apostles affirmed swearing. **MAT 26:63-64; 2CO 1:23; 11:31; GAL 1:20.**
  - B. When a particular Scripture prohibits what elsewhere is permitted or commanded, the prohibition only applies to an abuse of what is under consideration.
    - 1. Example: The command, "Thou shalt not kill" (**EXO 20:13**) is a prohibition of murder (**MAT 19:18**), not of capital punishment (**GEN 9:6**) or self-defense (**EXO 22:2**) or killing an animal (**ACT 10:13**).
    - 2. Example: The command, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth..." (**MAT 6:19**) is not a prohibition of saving money (**PRO 21:20**), investing for profit (**MAT 25:20-21**) or providing for an inheritance (**PRO 13:22; 2CO 12:14**) but rather against godless pursuit of wealth (**LUK 12:21**).

- V. Christ was countering the Pharisee's idea of swearing by objects other than God to give oneself an "out." **MAT 5:33-37 c/w LEV 19:12.**
- A. Recall that the definition of *forswear* includes *To swear falsely, commit perjury.*
  - B. The scribes and Pharisees taught that not all oaths were binding. **MAT 23:16-22.**
    - 1. They taught that an oath sworn by the Lord, or by the gold of the temple, or by the gift on the altar was binding, but such was not the case with other oaths such as swearing by the temple or the altar. Mind that this shows with what they most associated God: money.
    - 2. There were two swearing errors in this: *swearing by other than God* (contrary to **DEU 6:13**) and *swearing falsely* to avoid the performance of an oath (contrary to **NUM 30:2**). The first was grounds for the second.
  - C. "The special oaths mentioned were those in vogue among the Jews, and just the very ones which our Lord himself had specified. On the need of such teaching as this, see Thomson's 'Land and the Book,' p. 190: "This people are fearfully profane. Everybody curses and swears when in a passion. No people that I have ever known can compare with these Orientals for profaneness in the use of the names and attributes of God. The evil habit seems inveterate and universal. When Peter, therefore, 'began to curse and to swear' on that dismal night of temptation, we are not to suppose that it was something foreign to his former habits. He merely relapsed, under high excitement, into what, as a sailor and a fisherman, he had been accustomed to all his life. The people now use the very same sort of oaths that are mentioned and condemned by our Lord. They swear by the head, by their life, by heaven, by the temple, or what is in its place, the church. The forms of cursing and swearing, however, are almost infinite, and fall on the pained ear all day long." So, too, Aben Ezra speaks of the practice of swearing as almost universal in his day, so that he says, "men swear daily countless times, and then swear that they have not sworn!" (Pulpit Commentary on JAM 5:12)
  - D. "That the Jews were notoriously guilty of common swearing is allowed on all hands; and that swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, the altar, different parts of the body, was not considered by them as binding oaths, has been sufficiently proved. Rabbi Akiba taught that "a man might swear with his lips, and annul it in his heart; and then the oath was not binding." (Adam Clarke Commentary on JAM 5:12)
  - E. An oath that is not binding is worthless and shows no regard for truth and righteousness.
  - F. Without binding oaths, the foundations of society (truth, justice, etc.) break down: "Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?" (George Washington, *Farewell Address*)
- VI. An oath adds strength to what we say. **HEB 6:16.**
- A. confirmation: The act of making firm or sure; strengthening, settling, establishing.
  - B. Generally, what we say should stand on its own without being propped up by an oath: "...let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay..." (**JAM 5:12**).
  - C. Let swearing be reserved for needful and solemn occasions rather than being thoughtlessly used in conversation. Mind that Christ was addressing our *communications*, not solemn oaths or testimonies before law. **MAT 5:37.**
- VII. According to **JER 4:2**, swearing should be:
- A. *in truth*. Do not swear to a falsehood.
  - B. *in judgment*. Use good judgment (discretion) when swearing rather than swearing rashly, flippantly or needlessly.
  - C. *in righteousness*. Swear for a right cause.