

Words, Your Word, and Biblical Swearing

Matthew 5:33-37

Introduction – As we come to this next passage, correcting another false teaching of the Pharisees, you may be tempted to think this is less important and less interesting. But it is this issue of our words, and the giving of our word, that has led to so much infidelity, theft, and violence in our post-Christian land. Language has a central role in a Christian society. A tree is most easily identified by its fruit, and the heart of a man is most easily identified by his words – and his use or misuse of words (Luke 6:43-45, Prov 15:2).

“Crossed My Fingers” – This is the attitude of the Pharisees in verse 33. Teaching that it was never binding if you swore by things other than God’s name, they were encouraging exactly the opposite of the purpose of God’s law. Their teaching had become a perverse net of legal technicalities (Matt 23:16-22) rather than an exhortation for honesty from the heart as David taught – “Behold, you desire truth in the inward parts...” Psalm 51:6.

Biblical Swearing -

Systematic Theology – Verse 34 is an important verse to see another example where we must learn to study the scriptures systematically. Jesus assumes you have been reading your Bible – all of it. Taken by itself, this verse is interpreted by some to mean that a Christian should never swear an oath.

Bad Words – It is important to remember that if you simply reject the use of ‘bad words’ you tend towards a prudish Victorianism rather than biblical morality. Not all cursing is bad – “...if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be *anathema*.” (Gal 1:9). In the same way, there is ungodly swearing as well as godly swearing.

Godly Swearing – In vv. 34-36, Jesus is prohibiting a glibness in swearing, and taking an oath in the name of a created thing rather than in the name of God. This point has been almost completely misunderstood as Christians reject using the name of God solemnly in an oath, but have no problem swearing “on a stack of Bibles”.

The Bible requires solemn swearing – “You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name.” (Deut 6:13, see also Deut 23:21, Num 30:2) The oath taking is an act of worship.

“And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord” (Lev 19:12). Notice that in the quotation of the Pharisees, the vow is not taken “in God’s name”.

The righteous man described in Psalm 15 ‘swears to his own hurt and does not change;’ He makes a vow, and he keeps it even to his own loss.

A Change In the New Testament? – Remember, Jesus said He did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. There are plenty of examples of swearing in the New Testament:

“I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit...” (Rom 9:1)

“Moreover, I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.” (2 Cor 1:23)

Jesus is put under oath by the high priest – Matt 26:63-64.

Hebrews 6:13-17 teaches that there is nothing wrong in swearing, and that God Himself, condescending to us, swore an oath.

The Importance of “Amen” – When Jesus says, “Amen, amen...”, He is using oath-taking language. We have not changed our practice of speaking our “Amen”s simply out of preference, but rather out of principle. Do you mean what you are saying when you say Amen? Then speak up. Do you understand the nature of our corporate Amen? Then let us say it in one voice to the Lord.

A Land of Liars – On certain solemn occasions, an oath is required, but in day to day living, honesty is commanded (verse 37). In our courts, oaths are no longer taken in the name of God, and atheists are allowed to sit on juries. Worse, no one expects politicians or presidents to tell the truth. But leading the way has been the church where first, we have taught how to twist scripture to justify our sin. Second, we have called for a pluralistic nation instead of a Christian nation; we want the rule of the majority-mob, not the rule of God’s law.

We are liars, worthy of being thrown in the lake of fire (Rev 21:8). But by the grace of God, even liars can be forgiven.