

## How God's Name Is Dragged through the Mud

Matthew 5:33-37; Exodus 20:7

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To honor the glorious name of our God is more important than our possessions, our health, our job, our reputation, or our family and friends. To honor the name of God is more important than life itself.

God's holy name is dragged through the mud in the workplace, in stores, at the bank, on the streets, on radio, or on television. His holy name is mocked, hated, and used to punctuate sentences with profanity. That is wicked and vile, but it is to be expected by those who despise the Lord. But what especially aggravates that sin is when those who profess to be Christians use His good name in a flippant and irreverent way and who bind themselves by solemn oaths and vows invoking His high and mighty name as a witness (as in a wedding covenant—"in the presence of God and these witnesses"), and yet in their hearts, words, and deeds live daily contrary to what they have promised before God as witness. Invoking God's name is not just a nice thing to do (an expected thing to do) as a Christian. It is intended to move us to greater faithfulness, not less faithfulness. And using God's name in a casual, common way in our speech dishonors the Lord ("O my \_\_\_\_\_", "Praise the Lord", "In Jesus name", "Lord, have mercy"). When God's glorious name becomes more important to us than our own name, then and only then will the world take our testimony for Christ and His Covenant seriously (Ezekiel 36:23).

Though Jesus in our text today addresses the matter of our faithfulness in oaths, vows, and promises, what is really the core issue is God's holy name that becomes vain, empty, and meaningless when using His name does not lead us to honor Him and to be faithful to Him, to our spouse, to our covenants, or to the truth of Jesus Christ. It is the sanctity of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment that Jesus is defending. The main points from our text are: (1) The Perversion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by the Pharisees (Matthew 5:33); (2) The Upholding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by Jesus (Matthew 5:34-37).

### I. The Perversion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by the Pharisees (Matthew 5:33).

A. Jesus continues in His sermon to contrast the Pharisees' vain and hypocritical interpretation of God's good and holy commandments with His true and faithful interpretation as He demonstrates that the righteousness of the Pharisees is simply about making themselves look good outwardly and making God's commandments easy for them to keep. None of us perfectly keeps God's commandments; that is why we need the Lord Jesus, our Savior and Lord who kept all of God's commandments for us so that His perfect righteousness might be imputed to us by faith alone. We must not misinterpret God's holy commandments to make it easier for us to keep them. We may deceive ourselves that we are righteous, but God before whom we will stand is not deceived. May God's Moral Law perform its inner work by His Spirit in revealing to us our sin and His righteousness in which we are to walk.

B. Let's consider Matthew 5:33.

1. "Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time." This is the way Jesus introduces the various instances of the tradition of the elders which the Pharisees followed (Matthew 5:21,27, 31,33,38,43). In most of these instances, the problem is not so much with the words that are stated, for in most of these cases they are quotes from the Old Testament (or as in this case, a summary of quotes from the Old Testament). It is rather how the Pharisees falsely interpreted what was stated. In each case, this becomes clear when Jesus gives His true and faithful interpretation (this reveals the need for faithful Confessions and Subordinate Standards that interpret the words of Scripture).

2. The Pharisees had no problem swearing an oath using God's name as Jesus states in

Matthew 5:33 (“forswear” means perjure or swear falsely). In fact, lawful oaths and vows that are sworn when necessary must invoke God’s holy name (Deuteronomy 6:13). To swear falsely or rashly (using God’s name), or to swear in the name of a creature or “saint” (invoke Mary’s name), or to swear by no name at all (“I swear”) are ways people will use who do not take God’s holy name seriously (who do not reverence Him).

3. What Jesus states in Matthew 5:33 is not explicitly found in any one Old Testament verse, but rather summarizes the teaching of God’s Law in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:12; Deuteronomy 23:21).

C. So if Matthew 5:33 is an accurate summary of God’s law concerning oaths and vows, how did the Pharisees pervert it?

1. As we look ahead to the following verses where Jesus claims absolute authority in rightly interpreting God’s law, you can see how the Pharisees were seeking to avoid the lawful use of an oath/vow.

2. The Pharisees swore oaths invoking the names of things in the universe and world—heaven (verse 34); earth (verse 35); Jerusalem (verse 35); and one’s head (verse 36). Jesus condemns the Pharisees for seeking to escape their obligation to keep an oath because they swore not in God’s name (Matthew 23:16-22). Jesus condemns their hypocrisy in making all kinds of loopholes to not keep their oaths and promises to one another.

3. This reveals that they were not (we are not) lovers of that which is right and true. Do we look for ways to escape what we said we would do simply because it is hard or inconvenient? The Pharisees did not really intend to keep their word. They were simply looking for cover so that when it became clear that they would break their oath/promise, they could excuse their unfaithfulness by saying it was not a binding oath. How many promises have we made to our spouse or children/parents or to family/friends and not fulfilled (repairing something, going somewhere, being on time)? We don’t like others to treat us that way, and yet we do the same thing. What about our many promises to the Lord to exercise ourselves to godliness in some matter that dishonors Him (foul tongue, lack of communion with Him, inconsistent family worship)? Jesus is looking deep inside us when it comes to our oaths/promises. Are we lovers of truth and faithfulness or has making a promise just become a way to get someone off our backs? There may be times when promises cannot be kept due to circumstances beyond our control, but when that happens time and time again, we lose the trust of others. It causes people to doubt the credibility of our testimony for Jesus Christ, and the blessed name of Jesus which we profess is profaned and made common (not exalted and honored). Wow! This hits so very close to home with all of us. Our word should be our bond.

## II. The Upholding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by Jesus (Matthew 5:34-37).

A. Is Jesus forbidding all use of lawful oaths and vows without exception? No! “Swear not at all” means that we are not to swear at all like the Pharisees, for Jesus says that everything is under the lordship of God (whether heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even your head). You cannot escape God’s lordship over all things by avoiding the use of God’s name.

1. God swears by Himself and calls His people to do the same (Hebrews 6:13; Deuteronomy 6:13; Jeremiah 4:2; Matthew 26:63,64; 2 Corinthians 1:23; Revelation 10:5-6). Those who, therefore, teach that all oaths are unlawful teach that which is false.

2. Jesus is not forbidding lawful oaths and vows, but is sanctifying them from the deceitful lips and unfaithful hearts of those (like the Pharisees) who swear them in order to lie, deceive, or excuse their own unfaithfulness. It’s the abuse of oaths and vows that Jesus is condemning, not the lawful use of them.

B. Why is the name of God invoked in lawful oaths and vows?

1. For a true Christian, there is nothing more sacred than the name of God (not our own

name or even our life). When we invoke God's name, the truthfulness of what is stated is placed under the all-seeing eye of the Lord.

2. To invoke God's name is to bring ourselves under God's fierce judgment if what is sworn is not true. To swear, "so help me God", is not a mere formality when you appear as a witness ("For the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" Exodus 20:7).

3. To invoke God's name in telling the truth is what is called a super-added obligation. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment obligates us to tell the truth, so what is the need of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment? It is given to add a further obligation on certain solemn occasions in calling God to be a witness to what we confess as true. To break the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment is to lie. To break the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment is to perjure ourselves (i.e. to swear falsely before/unto God). How we should shrink away from such words and phrases in our conversation: "to be honest with you", "to tell you the truth", etc. Have we not been speaking the truth previously? If we always intend to speak the truth, we need no further qualification.

C. What is the difference between an oath and a vow?

1. They agree in the following ways. Both are acts of worship before God. Both are only lawful when the content of what is sworn is agreeable to God's Word—that which is not scriptural must be renounced and repented of (Mark 6:23,26; Acts 23:21). Both are binding and obligatory and cannot be cast aside because it is hard to keep—not impossible to keep, like sinless perfection in this life (Psalm 15:4). Both appeal alone to the one true living God (not to anything or anyone else).

2. What is different between an oath and a vow is that an oath calls God to be a witness to a covenant/promise made to others (as at a wedding); whereas a vow is a covenant/promise made directly to God (as when we promise to God that we trust Him, love Him, and obey Him; as when we renew our covenant with God at the Lord's Supper; as when a nation and/or church covenants to God to be His people and to endeavor to walk in faithfulness to Him in upholding His gospel and commandments—the Solemn League and Covenant). Before engaging in either an oath or a vow, write it down word-for-word and keep a record of it so that you can renew it on solemn occasions. Also, it is most wise (because of the seriousness of the matter) to seek the counsel of your minister/elder, husband, father. A husband or father may annul an oath or vow that is not needed to be faithful to the Lord on the day that he hears it—an ensnaring, rash, frivolous oath/vow (Numbers 30).

D. The teaching of Scripture and the Lord Jesus on the subject of oaths and vows can be summarized accordingly:

1. Swear only that which is lawful according to God's Word and that which God promises you the grace to perform (this does not include vows of celibacy and poverty—not biblical).

2. Swear only in the name of the one true living God (not in the name of creature or saint, and not in your own name, "I swear").

3. Swear only on solemn occasions in which an oath or vow is necessary or expedient (not throughout the day).

E. Jesus concludes His teaching on the abuse of oaths and vows in Matthew 5:37 by making it clear that ordinarily in our conversations with one another our word should be a sufficient testimony to the truth. If we have to use oaths or words in casual conversation to verify our honesty and trustworthiness, Jesus says those words proceed not from a pure heart, but from an evil heart (Matthew 5:37; James 5:12). God is jealous for His holy name to be exalted, honored, and set apart as holy ("Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" Matthew 6:9). This would be a very good day to renew in your own heart your covenant to be faithful to Christ and His commandments, to your spouse, to your children, and to the Church of Jesus Christ. Remember that Peter swore that he did not know Jesus, but he did not continue in that sin, but repented and was forgiven by Jesus. Let us fall before Him now, repent, and seek His forgiveness for how

we have dishonored His glorious name.

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