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You Have Heard That It Was Said: Do Not Break Your Oath

Matthew 5: 33-37

You have heard that it was said, “Do not break your oath” DIG: Did Jesus say that oaths were evil? How do you imagine the teaching in the TaNaKh about oaths was being misapplied to avoid taking responsibility? Why are oaths a poor substitute for integrity? Does this passage prevent believers from taking an oath in a trial or court of law?

REFLECT: How do you think your friends see your integrity? Your spouse? Your children? Your relatives? Your co-workers? Your neighbors? When people look at you and talk about you, do they say you are a truth-teller? Or are they wary of you because they cannot trust that you will do what you say you’re going to do? If that is true about you, what steps can you take to change that?

In His fourth example contrasting the true righteousness of the Torah with pharisaic Judaism, the Master teaches us to have integrity in our promises at all times. Once again, **Jesus** teaches about a common theme in first-century Judaism. The use of one’s word in an **oath** or a **vow** was taken quite seriously. In the Torah, your word was your bond. If you took an **oath**, it was absolutely mandatory that you keep it. But, **the Oral Law (to see link click [Ei - The Oral Law](#))** gave all kinds of ways to break an **oath**. **Two tractates of the Talmud address a multitude of details and interpretations regarding oaths (Tractates Shavuot and Nedarim).** It is some of these rabbinic interpretations that **Yeshua** is addressing when **He** said: **You have heard that our fathers were told, “Do not break your oath,” and “Keep your vows to ADONAI” (Matthew 5:33 CJB; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21).**

God provided for making **oaths** in **His** name (**Leviticus 19:12**) and many righteous of the TaNaKh, both before and after the giving of the Torah, followed that practice. Abraham confirmed his promises to the king of Sodom (**Genesis 14:22-24**) and to Abimelech (**Genesis 21:23-24**) with oaths in the name of **ADONAI**. He also made his servant Eliezer swear by **ADONAI, God of heaven and God of the earth** that he would not take a wife

for Isaac from among the pagan Canaanites around them but from relatives in Abraham's homeland of Mesopotamia (**Genesis 24:1-4, 10 CJB**). Isaac did the same thing (**Genesis 26:31**). Jacob and his father-in-law, make an **oath** when they made a covenant together at Mizpah (**Genesis 31:44-53**). David and Jonathan made an **oath** together regarding the house of David (**First Samuel 20:16**). David himself **swore to ADONAI, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Ya'akov (Psalm 132:2 CJB)**. All those great men of YHVH, and many others, made oaths and covenants calling on **the LORD** as a witness to their truthfulness (see **Genesis 47:31, 50:25; Joshua 9:15; Judges 21:5; Ruth 1:16-18; Second Samuel 15:21; Second Chronicles 15:14-15**).

A clear description of an **oath** is given in the book of **Hebrews: People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and put an end to all argument (Hebrews 6:16** also see **6:13-14**). The name of something or someone greater than the person making the **oath** was called upon to give greater believability to what was said. Any **oath** calling on **ADONAI** invites **Him** to witness the honesty of what is said or to avenge if it's a lie. So the **oath** supposedly was to be taken as the absolute truth.

Messiah addressed a popular abuse of **oaths** in **His** day. To protect the sanctity of the divine name against unintentional **oath** taking, common Jewish practice introduced *kinnuyim*, or substituting objects to swear by. However some unscrupulous people apparently thought it was harmless to deceive others if they swore by something like their right hand. Others took all **oaths** more seriously, but specifically warned against using the name of **the LORD**. Their belief was that if the **oath** was broken or not fulfilled, **ADONAI's** name would be blasphemed. At that time the rabbis had to actually judge which **oaths** were actually binding as allusions to **God's** name. The further removed the **oath** was from the actual name of **God**, the less danger they faced for violating it. **But Jesus** taught: **Do not swear an oath at all (Matthew 5:34a)**.⁵³²

The general principle that **His** disciples should not take **oaths** is now illustrated by a series of examples of specific **oaths** that are inappropriate. To avoid swearing an **oath** by **God's** name people swore **by heaven** and **earth, Jerusalem** and **the Temple**. **The Talmud gives an example in which a vow is firmly upheld if it is made under the authority "of Jerusalem, for Jerusalem, by Jerusalem . . . of the Temple, for the Temple, by the Temple" (Tractate Nedarim 1)**. **Jesus'** point is that **ADONAI** is **the Creator** and **LORD** of everything that exists; **heaven** is **God's** (**Isaiah 66:1-2**), **the earth** is **God's** (**Isaiah 66:1-2**), **Jerusalem** is **God's** (**Psalm 48:2; Matthew 5:34-35**), **the Temple** is **God's** (**Habakkuk 2:20**) and even **the hairs** on your **head** are **God's**. Therefore, **Jesus** commanded: **Do not swear by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for**

it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black (Matthew 5:34b-36). Therefore, it is wicked and sinful to use anything of **God's**, whether **His** name or any part of **His** creation, as a witness to anything that is dishonest, deceitful or insincere. Every lie is against **God**, and every false oath dishonors **His** name.⁵³³

Even though this practice of having some kind of extra reinforcement was acceptable in the first-century Judaism, the implication was that their original word was not good enough. Instead of being an indication of integrity, it became a mark of deceit. Instead of inspiring confidence, it promoted skepticism.



Our **Lord Himself** came under an **oath (Matthew 26:63-64)**, as did Rabbi Sha'ul with the Nazarite vow (**Acts 18:18**). But, **the Meshiach** is making it clear that there should be no need for such reinforcements if our word is spoken with integrity. **He** taught: **Simply let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No" be "No," anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:37).** The truth has no degrees; a half-truth is a whole lie. **The LORD** has never had any standard other than absolute truthfulness. Consequently, the Word of **God** says that the child of **God**, under all circumstances, should be trustworthy.

If we begin to feel comfortable with our dishonesty, we can easily deceive ourselves as well as others. We may never see the patterns of sin in our lives that are blocking **God's** love and our growth in holiness. We can never deceive **God**; however, who is able to look into our hearts and know what lies there. Honesty is the lifeblood of our relationship with **Him**.

Our honesty and consistent faithfulness to biblical standards can be a powerful witness to a world that is skeptical and ready to find hypocrisy among those who profess to be believers. When we call ourselves followers of **Christ**, we say, in effect, that we will follow the standards that **He** established. We can bear witness to the gospel with more than words; our lifestyles and our actions reveal to the world the true depth of our faith.⁵³⁵ Saint Francis



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of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."

***Lord Jesus**, I want to be **Your** witness to an unbelieving world. Please cleanse me of the sin that causes my inconsistencies. Wash me with **Your** blood so that I may be more faithful to you and a more credible witness to others. Send **Your Holy Spirit** to give me the strength and desire to live out my calling as one of **Your Holy** ones.*