

## Promises Meant for Keeping

Matthew 5: 33-37 and James 5: 12

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Each of us have seen this scene either during a television show or perhaps even in an actual courtroom. A witness is summoned and stands before the judge. Placing his or her hand on a Bible, the individual states, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God." What has transpired? That individual standing before the judge has sworn an oath, invoking God's name as a witness to the truthfulness of what he or she is about to say. Today, in many courtrooms people no longer place their hands on a Bible or declare, "So help me God." Nevertheless, the practice of taking an oath is an ancient one, dating all the way back into antiquity. In almost every culture, especially in the Middle East, people frequently used the name of their god when making a promise to do something for someone. It was a way of saying, "You can count on me. I will keep my word and my god is a witness to what I'm promising. If I swear falsely, if I do not intend to do what I promised, then I will be in big trouble not only with you but with my god."

So oath taking, invoking the name of a deity, was commonly used and that was also true of the Jewish people. They were warned, however, that using God's name in an oath carelessly, especially if they were not being truthful in what they had promised, was strictly forbidden. For example, in the Ten Commandments the third one declared, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Leviticus 19:12 was more explicit. It stated, "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD." In like manner, the prophets also condemned the practice of making false oaths, using God's name as a silent witness to what had been promised, but which would never be fulfilled.

Unfortunately by the time of Jesus, oath taking had gotten way out of hand. Oaths were made in such a way that you were never quite sure if they were rock solid. If God's name was actually invoked, you were on pretty sure footing. You could probably be assured that the oath was legitimate. To break it would be an offense not only against you, but against God Himself. But, if for example, a person made an oath with these words, "By heaven's glory" or "by the earth's abundance, I will do such and such," that oath was questionable, not necessarily binding. It assumed the presence and oversight of God, but since His name was not expressly stated, the person making the oath was not absolutely bound to keep it. As you can well imagine, things got a bit complicated. Or to express it a vernacular way, a man's handshake was not always as good as his word.

That's why Jesus cut to the chase in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, 'Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:33-37). In other words, deceptive oath taking is the handiwork of the devil. It does not represent the way in which God desires for us to live with one another.

James echoes Jesus' words in his letter. As usual, he is speaking sparingly. He has reduced the four verses in the Sermon on the Mount to just one, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned" (James 5:12). That pretty well sums it up. Oath taking, especially if it requires a divine affirmation of validity, is definitely out. In fact, it even goes beyond that. False oaths deserve the condemnation of God and here's why. God's people are filled with His Spirit. He's present whenever they make a promise. He's automatically a witness to what they are promising and He's automatically the One who is stating, "This person is one of my disciples. He or she is reliable. You can depend on them." God is also saying, "If they don't keep their word, it's a negative reflection on my own nature and character. Their conduct indicates that they are either disobeying my instruction and guidance, or I have become like them, an unreliable sovereign of the universe. Either way I don't like and will not be a party to that kind of deceptive behavior."

So what does all of this talk about oath taking have to say to you and me? Let me share a personal illustration with you. In one of the churches I served, there was a musician who was not only a gifted soloist, but a maestro with an acoustic guitar. His guitar was a beautiful instrument and he played it quite well. There was just one problem. One day someone told me that he had not paid for the guitar. He had purchased the guitar and promised to pay for it with monthly installments. He claimed to be a spirit filled Christian, but it soon became evident that he had no intention of ever fulfilling his promise to pay for the instrument that he used to praise the Lord. It was a serious infraction of Christian conduct that would have negative consequences for him, for our church and most importantly for the kingdom of God. People would say, "That's just another example of how Christians use their faith to take advantage of people." I came to the conclusion that this was just like one of those false oath taking situations that Jesus and James talked about. That young man never played his guitar in our church again.

For Christians keeping a promise is a sacred obligation. It's like making an oath. God is present. He is not only a witness to what was promised, but He is also the one who guarantees its truthfulness, that the person who made the promise intends to fulfill it. Therefore, we need to be careful about making promises we will not, or cannot keep.

When we say we will pray for someone, do we pray for them? When we say we will visit someone, do we keep that appointment? When we tell someone that they can depend upon us, can they? When we agree to meet someone at a certain time, can they count on our timely arrival? When we forget to keep a promise, are we eager to apologize and fulfill that obligation? These are the kind of questions we need to ask ourselves, because we are Christians and because we represent a God who keeps His promises.

With that in mind let me close with this heart-warming story about Elizabeth, a 26 year old nurse working at a health care facility in England. One day she sat down and had lunch with an elderly patient named Alice. Alice, who usually sat by herself, was delighted to meet someone who wanted to have lunch with her. Meeting together for lunch became an everyday routine. But Alice, who was quite forgetful, was also fearful. She was terribly distraught and frightened that Elizabeth wouldn't come back, that she would forget about her. So Elizabeth decided to do something to allay her fears. She composed a Promise Card which stated, "I promise I will come and have lunch with you tomorrow." After their noontime meal she entrusted the promise card into Alice's care. The next day when Elizabeth arrived at noon, her elderly friend held up the card with a great big smile on her face and said, "You remembered." Perhaps all of us need to write a promise card every now and then. The world would be a much better and kinder place in which to live.