

"Thou Shalt Not Forswear Thyself"

"Again, ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by the heaven, for it is the throne of God; nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, for thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your speech be, Yea, Yea; Nay, Nay: and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one" (Mt. 5:33-37). To these words from Jesus, add the words of James. "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by the heaven, nor by the earth, nor by any other oath: but let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay; that he fall not under judgment" (James 5:12).

The passages Jesus cited were Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2 and Deuteronomy 23:21. Israel was soberly reminded they should fulfill their vows and the wise man spoke of such wisdom which he urged that we should do what we open our mouths to say we should do; to fulfill our vows. What did Jesus mean when He said "Swear not at all..." was He saying it is wrong to take even a solemn oath? He was not.

Let it first be observed that God Himself recognized the value men place upon oaths and that oaths have a proper use at appropriate times. From the Hebrew writer comes the following quote: "For when God made promise to Abraham, since he could swear by none greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee..." (Heb. 6:13f). God did not do wrong when He swore to Abraham that He would surely bless and multiply him.

Second, men endowed with the Holy Spirit and after Jesus said "Swear not at all," did not regard that Jesus prohibited oaths in any form. Paul did, when circumstances demanded it, made an oath of the truthfulness of his words, for examples of which see 2 Corinthians 1:23; 11:31. So then, if Jesus was not forbidding all oaths, what was the thrust of His teaching? Please consider the following thoughts.

Jesus was emphasizing that men should always live so that whenever they spoke of a certain matter, they did not have to make the truthfulness of what they said rest upon the swearing an oath to attest to the truth of their words. Some people seem to delight in leaving hearers in limbo. Was he serious or did he speak with his "tongue in cheek"? Such would do well to remember Jesus' command: "Let your 'yea'

be 'yea' and your 'nay' 'nay.'" When men leave others dangling, pondering whether they were serious or jesting, they are not letting their "yea" be "yea" and their "nay" be "nay."

Jesus addressed the national ill when He said, "Woe unto you, ye blind guides that say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor. Ye fools and blind: for which is greater, the gold, or the temple that hath sanctified the gold?" (Mt. 23:16f). Jesus described the prevalent attitude among Jewish teachers. One could swear by the temple and not be bound to keep his oath, but should he swear by the gold of the temple he was bound to keep it. What folly! These teachers had lost sight of the fact that God requires honesty of us at all times in our speech and dealings with others. We should live by His code: Whenever a thing is yea, it is yea. Whenever it is nay, it is nay.

Paul also addressed this issue of truthfulness at all times in his epistles. To the Ephesians he wrote "speaking truth in love" and "put away falsehood and let each man speak truth with his neighbor" (Eph. 4:15; 4:25). John warns that all liars will have their part in the lake of fire; that those who love a lie will not enter the city (Rev. 21:22; 22:15).

So, let "our yea be yea" and our "nay be nay." And when we may be called upon to swear an oath in court that we will "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," the oath we take is only for the benefit of those who do not know us, we will say nothing different under oath than what we would say if we were not under oath! At all times and in all places our "yea" is "yea" and our "nay" is "nay."

Jim McDonald