

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue No. 29

Ye have heard ... Swearing On Oath

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 5:33

by Maurice Barratt

“Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by 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 ... But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”
(Matthew 5:33-37)

Six times Jesus repeats the same phrase: “Ye have heard that it was said...”. He is clearly trying to stress an important point. Jesus goes out of his way to not say, “God said...”, or, “The Law says...”. This is not about what God says. It is about what man thinks God has said. It is about the way we interpret what God has said. It is about the way dead tradition and legalism take over the living words of God. Jesus will not allow us to believe that we have the living words of God, if we only have the dead letter. Without the heart and spirit of the law, all we have is a tradition, an old saying, amounting to nothing.

Jesus probably had Numbers 30:2 in mind: “If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.”

Why Swear?

Why would someone want to swear on oath? After all, it puts you under obligation to keep what you have said. You put yourself under a curse if you don't keep it. Why would people take such a risk?

Firstly, it can be to make a rod for our own back, because we're weak. Without an oath or a promise, we feel we might not have the strength of will to keep to what we've said, but the fact that we've made an oath makes us feel more obliged to keep it. We do this in a minor way when we say “I'll do that — I promise I'll do it!” or if we make New Year resolutions.

But there is a problem here. If we are weak-willed, that very fact means that taking an oath is a more dangerous risk. We may be sincere in our vow, but what if we are too weak-willed to keep the oath? Then we're really in trouble. The problem is that we are propping up a weakness instead of dealing with it. New Year resolutions invariably fail, because they don't deal with the roots. They're a vain attempt to prop up a weak will. Christianity is never about props. It isn't a rod for your back to help you be good. Christianity is about dealing with roots. Christianity mends your back so you don't need a rod!

Secondly, you may swear on oath to convince someone of your integrity and sincerity, that is, to back up your own name and prove what an honest and reliable and truthful person you are.

The strange thing about this is that people who do habitually back up their words with declarations of their own sincerity usually give exactly the opposite impression. They arouse our suspicion. When a person says to you, “No, really, honestly! I’m telling you the truth, no kidding! Would I tell you a lie? I swear it!” — what is your reaction?

Straight, honest words, “Yea or Nay”, are far more likely to convince. You don’t need to be a Christian to know that. As soon as you start to emphasize your sincerity, you actually call your sincerity into question.

A third reason to swear with an oath is to deliberately deceive others, to be two-faced, to make use of the seriousness of the oath to convince others that you are telling the truth when in fact you are telling a lie. This shows up the fatal flaw in the system, that the very thing which is supposed to safeguard the truth can be used to deceive and propagate lies. All laws — even God’s laws — fall down here. This is why Jesus has to take us beyond the letter of the law, the “Ye have heard”, to the spirit and heart of the law, the truth which needs no binding oath to confirm it.

Four Examples

Jesus now gives us four examples of oaths, and shows us that we have no right to make them.

1. Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne ... That is to say, you have no right to swear by heaven, for it is not yours but God’s. Jesus’ principle in all of the following examples is that you cannot swear by something over which you have no power, something which is not your own.

2. ... Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool ...

All creation is covered by these first two examples. We cannot swear by anything in heaven or earth, for all creation is God’s.

3. ... Neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King ... We cannot swear by holy things. The Jews also used to swear by the temple. But it’s God’s city, not ours; God’s temple, not ours.

4. ... Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. It is playing at God to say that we have power over our own life. Jesus is saying, How can you swear by something over which you have no power? They are not yours, not in your power, you cannot change or alter them.

An oath has to be by something greater than yourself. But if the only things we can swear by are things over which we have power, our oath loses all its meaning, because we have no power over things greater than ourselves.

What Jesus Says

“But I say unto you ...” Now Jesus is telling us how to fulfil the law, not just keep the letter of it. An oath binds you, and Jesus says that we should not bind ourselves or put ourselves under any legal

obligation. No promises, no resolutions, no binding oaths. Just a simple yes or no is enough for the Christian.

Several times in scripture there are references to oaths which God made. (See Luke 1:73, Hebrews 6:13, Psalm 110:4.) Why would God want to swear? Does he need a rod for his back? Is he in danger of breaking his promise? Can God ever break his promise and go back on his word? It may seem like a crazy question, but the answer will surprise you. God has broken his promise in the past.

After God led Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness, Moses sent twelve spies to search out the promised land. Ten of the twelve brought back a bad report of the land, and all the people murmured against Moses, saying, "Would God we had died in the land of Egypt!" God became angry and said to Moses, "Because all those men which have seen my glory... have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers..." (Numbers 14:2, 22-23). In verse 34 God told them, "Ye shall know my breach of promise." God actually broke his promise and would not let that generation into the promised land.

So I would like to suggest, not that God cannot keep his promise, but that God is vulnerable because he has feelings, and that he therefore needs to make an oath to make his promise secure. How can God be vulnerable? Because God loves. To love always puts you in a position of vulnerability. It means you can be swayed. God is not a doctrine or a machine, he is a personality. God can't be pinned down like a doctrine. Doctrines don't change. No-one would pray to a doctrine or a machine, because it wouldn't make any difference. But we pray to God, because we want to move him, and because he actually asks us to do so.

God's Repentance

God is not so legalistically unflinching that he cannot change his mind. He is not inflexible and unmoveable. He has feelings and emotions. God repents, that is to say, he changes his mind. In my concordance, out of the first fifteen appearances of the word "repented" in the bible, twelve of them are instances of God repenting!

Perhaps the thought that God can be vulnerable disturbs you. Is God not all-powerful? Does he not say that his word is faithful? If he is not faithful, how can we trust him? How can our salvation be assured? But our salvation is sure, because God confirmed it by an oath. As Hebrews says, "God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast..." (Hebrews 6:17-19).

God confirmed his word with an oath for our sake, according to the scripture: he did it because he was "willing to more abundantly show to us the immutability (unchangeableness) of his counsel". God, for our sakes, or even for his own sake, can confirm his promise with an oath — but that doesn't mean that we can. For us to make an oath is to play at God.

Swearing In Court

English law requires a witness to swear on oath “by Almighty God that I shall tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” This may seem at first to be a godly thing to do, but in fact it is a terrible thing, for several reasons. The first and most obvious is that it is expressly forbidden by Jesus in the verses we are studying. It’s extraordinary that it is justified by Christians.

The second reason is that we cannot know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and therefore we are taking an oath we cannot possibly keep. The best we can honestly say is that we can tell what we sincerely believe to be the truth, but unless we are all-knowing, we must admit that we cannot know the whole truth. We may be sincere and honest, but this is nothing to do with telling the truth. Only God can ever know the whole truth.

Thirdly, I have come to realise that truth and lies are never properties of a statement, either in speech or writing. In other words, we can never say that a spoken or written statement in itself is “the truth”, because truth and lies are primarily motives in the heart. Truth or lies is the purpose for which we make a statement, not the statement itself. If I tell someone “the truth” with the intent to deceive them, then that “truth” is a lie. Even the “true” words of scripture can become lies if they are used with a wrong motive. When the devil quoted scripture to Jesus in the wilderness, although he quoted Deuteronomy word for word, it was actually a lie, because Satan’s motive was deceitful — his purpose in quoting “God’s Word” was actually against God.

Truth Is A Person

Essentially, then, there is no such thing as “a true statement”. Truth, down at its deepest source, is Jesus Christ himself, the way, the truth and the life. Truth is a person, Jesus, the only person who has ever had completely pure motives and a completely pure heart. So to swear that we will tell the truth is in itself a false promise.

Many false cults and secret societies take oaths upon initiation. The Mormons and the Masons are two examples. The purpose of these oaths is to bind people, to hold them by fear from ever betraying the secrets of the society or cult. This is not God’s way, it is the devil’s way. The occult is full of oaths, promises and initiation rites. It is an extraordinary thing that God asks us to make no promises when we become Christians. He only asks us to believe his promises to us. Certainly, he tells us “You are not your own, you are bought with a price”, and it is clear that we ought to dedicate ourselves to God just as much as if we were to bind ourselves with an oath, but God never demands this or forces it from us. He wants our wholehearted allegiance, but it is always to be out of our free will, never constrained by an oath, or by anything else except love.

Common Swearing

What we commonly call “swear words” are often derived from oaths. Sometimes what seem to be the mildest “swear words” are the worst. To say “Damn you” or “Go to hell” is a diabolical and terrible curse. These expressions are used lightly and taken to be of no consequence these days. But no Christian should ever pronounce such a terrible curse on anyone. Such a thing is far worse than

the worst obscenities. The obscenities which we call swear words are nothing to do with swearing in the sense of oaths. They are really just rough, vulgar, uncouth language. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why they should not be a part of Christian conversation. Often they are an expression of anger — they betray something wrong in the heart. Often they are used as insults, as a mark of hatred. Often they are used to make fun of people and demean them. Such language is always symptomatic of something wrong in the heart.

God always deals with roots. There should never be any necessity for a Christian to either make an oath or to use “common swearing” language. There’s something wrong if we do. Yes or no should be enough. We should examine our motives. Jesus wants us to be free, but we can so easily trap ourselves. James has a warning for us exactly in line with what Jesus says: “But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea: and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation” (James 5:12).

By making an oath we are coming out of Christian freedom and putting ourselves back under the letter or the law. We are trusting in our own righteousness, putting a false confidence in our ability to tell the absolute truth, or taking power into our hands which we do not possess. Jesus does not want us to trap ourselves, but he knows that if we make binding oaths and promises, we will fall into condemnation, we will trap ourselves. His advice is simple: save yourself the problem. Just say yes, just say no.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Talk Is Cheap - Practice Is Costly

I know I still have an awful lot of the "old nature" to be dealt with, but I can't stand it when someone promises to do something for me, or with me, and they don't keep their word. It probably stems from my childhood, but whenever people fail to do what they say to me, I feel terribly let down. My brother reminded me not so long ago of my attitude as a child. Sometimes my mother was so short of money that she was unable to give me pocket money and would say that she'd give it to me the next week. Because I took her word as gospel I would not let her forget. I would add up all the weeks she had missed and present her with a bill!

Honesty was something my parents taught me to be scrupulous about. I found it terribly difficult to lie and would blush even when telling a half truth. I could never say sorry unless I genuinely and in all honesty felt that it was my fault. And I would never make a promise if there was the slightest hint that I couldn't keep to it, hence I could never promise to be good! I was very grateful of the fact I was born British because at one time our laws were based on biblical principles. Our rules followed quite closely the ten commandments, and Christianity was the basis for our education in schools. Principles like 'An Englishman's home is his castle' and 'An Englishman's word is his bond' sounded

like real ideals to me, and I am quite appalled at the decline in our national standards since my childhood.

Trust

It is classed as utter foolishness nowadays to trust people without first having proof of their reliability. When Maurice and I travel around the churches to minister we take a selection of books and cassettes to sell. Invariably someone will offer to pay by cheque, and after filling in the front of the cheque they often ask if we would like to see their bankers card to take a note of their number ensuring payment, but I always refuse on principle. Sometimes people will say that they would really love to purchase our material but they had come financially unprepared. I always tell these people to take whatever it is they wanted to buy and send a cheque on to us later. Often they will offer to give me a note of their name and address, but as we have no intention of running after their payment, this seems a pointless exercise, and besides, it proves to us and them whether or not they are truly Christians.

Because Jesus tells us not to swear at all, and just to let our 'yes' be 'yes' and our 'no' be 'no', I wonder whether he is in actual fact just telling us to learn to have integrity. On so many occasions I have made up my mind to do something and for a time have been doing fine, but because I was afraid my will would weaken I have told someone - just to give me a 'rod for my back' in the hope that this would strengthen my resolve. But how rotten I've felt when my weak will has been exposed not only to myself, but also to the person I told, because I couldn't carry through what I'd originally purposed to do. This has applied to so many areas of my life and I've noted it in others too ...

Broken Promises

I once knew a godly woman who said that God had told her to grow her hair long. She was elderly and had difficulty looking after her hair anyway, but she said that this is what God had told her to do. After about 8 months, when her hair became too difficult for her to manage, she had it cut short again, but it left me with real questions about whether she had heard God in the first place, and if she had then how she could possibly rebel against something He had told her to do. Another couple I knew for years had said that God had told them to trust him and not use contraception. But after their 4th child and 2 'accidental' ones, they decided to call it a day and make sure they had no more. God obviously didn't know what was best for them!

I've sometimes been impressed to fast for something and have started to put my thought into action. But once I mention my intention to someone else it seems that my resolve is weakened, and I lose all will power to carry out what I had purposed in my heart to do. It doesn't only seem to occur when we are trying to do something godly either ... I hadn't seen my friend for quite a while and when I did I commented on how well she looked after losing some weight. She was very pleased at the compliment and told me that she was counting calories and, even though she still had a few more stones to lose, she had done exceptionally well so far and felt confident she would at last make her goal. The next time I spoke to her on the phone I asked how her dieting was going and she said

that it had all 'gone to pot' .I had been the first person she had told about her calorie counting, but after she had told me everything seemed to go wrong.

Esau

I realise we are not all made the same way. Some of us have the problem of keeping to our word and so our promises are empty and worthless. We can also promise something rashly and bring terrible consequences upon ourselves if our promise is taken seriously by the person to whom we have made it. Esau promised Jacob his birthright because at that particular point in his life he was famished and just needed food - now! But because Jacob stubbornly refused to let go of the promise which he knew he had unfairly forced his brother to make, Esau lost everything that was important and valuable to him.

Jephthah

On the other hand, there are those who are built the other way and would keep to their promise, no matter how rash or foolish it may be. Jephthah promised God that he would sacrifice the first thing that came from his house to greet him after his victory in battle, and was grief stricken when his daughter, his only child, proved to be the one he had to sacrifice. It seems that keeping promises can get us into as many problems as not keeping them can, if they are made without much consideration and deliberation. But I think Jephthah must have been on the safer side, especially as he was actually mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as being part of that great cloud of witnesses for his faith!

Keeping Your Counsel

I honestly think that God is looking for people who can keep their own counsel and not tell their intentions to other people. I can't help thinking of how highly favoured Mary the mother of Jesus was. She was given the greatest honour to bear the Son of God himself, yet when Joseph, her fiancé, found she was pregnant she didn't tell him the circumstances of her condition until God had revealed it personally to Joseph. The Bible records that she 'hid all these things in her heart' and never mentioned any of the strange incidents that happened - hence we know so little about the childhood of Jesus. Jesus, too, was very closed about his mission on earth. The bible records that 'he wouldn't give himself to anyone because he knew what was in the heart of man'. It would be of far greater value to us if we could learn to be trustworthy to ourselves and live up to our own high standards before telling the world in an effort to impress others. For unless we have learned to accept the consequences of our intended decisions thoroughly, we just expose our lack of integrity and are seen as good talkers with big ideas, but are not believed or taken seriously!