

OATHS AND VOWS

Christians Must Be Truthful

Truth in relationships, especially between Christians, is divinely commanded and truth telling is specified as integral to authenticate godliness.

Colossians 3:9

⁹ *Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices*

Psalm 15:1-4

¹ *LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?
Who may live on your holy hill?*

² *He whose walk is blameless
and who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from his heart*

³ *and has no slander on his tongue,
who does his neighbor no wrong
and casts no slur on his fellowman,*

⁴ *who despises a vile man
but honors those who fear the LORD,
who keeps his oath
even when it hurts,*

God forbids lying, deception, and malicious misrepresentation.

Leviticus 19:11

¹¹ *"Do not steal. "Do not lie. "Do not deceive one another.*

Jesus traces lying back to Satan, and those who, like Satan, lie in order to deceive and damage others are condemned in Scripture as being ungodly in a hateful and horrible way.

John 8:44

⁴⁴ *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

One way of acknowledging the dignity of our neighbor, who is God's image-bearer, is to recognize that he or she has a right to the truth. Truth-telling, which shows proper respect for facts, for our neighbor, and for God, thus becomes a fundamental element in true religion and in true love of one's neighbor.

Exodus 20:16

¹⁶ *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

Expounding the ninth commandment, God's prohibition of false witness (Exodus 20:16 above), in terms of the principle that the negative implies the positive, the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 144) says:

Q. 144. *What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?*

A. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Oaths are solemn declarations that invoke God as a witness of one's statements and promises, inviting Him to punish should one be lying. Scripture approves oath-taking as appropriate on solemn occasions (Gen. 24:1-9; Ezra 10:5; 2 Cor. 1:23; Heb. 6:13-17)

Nehemiah 5:12-13

¹² *"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."*

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

At the time of the Reformation the Anabaptists declined the practice of oath taking as part of their rejection of involvement in the life of the secular world.

They appealed to Jesus' condemnation of oaths devised and designed to deceive as if it were a rejection of oath-taking as such rather than a call for honest speech and a warning against the temptation to use words that give a false impression, with manipulation and exploitation as one's real purpose.

Matthew 5:33-37

³³ *"Again, 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.' ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

This passage from the Sermon on the Mount is found in a section (verses 17-48) that has a theme of "Jesus' fulfillment of the law" and contains examples of common superficial observances of the letter of the law which were to give way to the true will of God as taught by Jesus.

The abuse Christ wanted to correct in verses 33-37, was the practice of swearing in common conversation, and especially swearing by created things. In regards to them doing this, He said that they were mistaken in their views of the sacredness of such oaths.

Albert Barnes comments: "Our Savior here evidently had no reference to judicial oaths, or oaths taken in a court of justice. It was merely the foolish and wicked habit of swearing in private conversation; of swearing on every occasion, and by everything, that he condemned. This he does condemn in a most unqualified manner. He himself, however, did not refuse to take an oath in a court of law."

Matthew 26:63-64

⁶³ *But Jesus remained silent.*

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

⁶⁴ *"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Barnes continues, "Oaths were, moreover, prescribed in the law of Moses, and Christ did not come to repeal those laws."

Vows to God are the devotional equivalent of oaths and must be treated with equal seriousness.

Psalm 65:1

¹ *Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion;
to you our vows will be fulfilled.*

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6

⁴ *When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?*

What one swears or vows to do must at all costs be done (See Psalm 15:4 on page 1). God requires us to take seriously not only His words but our own as well. However, "no man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded" (Westminster Confession XXII.7).

Regarding oaths and vows, the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith says the following:

Chapter 23: Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

1. A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein the person swearing in truth, righteousness, and judgment, solemnly calleth God to witness what he swears, and to judge him according to the truth or falseness thereof.
(Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 10:20; Jeremiah 4:2; 2 Chronicles 6:22, 23)
2. The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear; and therein it is to be used, with all holy fear and reverence; therefore to swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and dreadful name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred; yet as in matter of weight and moment, for confirmation of truth, and ending all strife, an oath is warranted by the word of God; so a lawful oath being imposed by lawful authority in such matters, ought to be taken.
(Matthew 5:34, 37; James 5:12; Hebrews 6:16; 2 Corinthians 1:23; Nehemiah 13:25)
3. Whosoever taketh an oath warranted by the Word of God, ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he knoweth to be truth; for that by rash, false, and vain oaths, the Lord is provoked, and for them this land mourns.
(Leviticus 19:12; Jeremiah 23:10)
4. An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation or mental reservation.
(Psalms 24:4) (Ps. 24:4)
5. A vow, which is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone, is to be made and performed with all religious care and faithfulness; but popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.
(Psalms 76:11; Genesis 28:20-22; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9; Ephesians 4:28; Matthew 19:11)

*Most of the foregoing material was taken from “*Concise Theology*” by J. I. Packer and “*Barnes’ Notes: Notes on the New Testament*” by Albert Barnes.