

Permission to Swear

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
September 28, 2008*

Matthew 5:33-37; 23:16-22

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. From there, Jesus continues with exhortations and lessons on a wide range of subjects, including the swearing of oaths.

You have heard that it was said to the people of long ago, “You shall not swear falsely, but you shall fulfil your oaths to the Lord.” But I tell you not to not swear at all, neither by heaven, since it is God’s throne, nor by the earth, since it is his footstool, nor by Jerusalem, since it is the great king’s city. And don’t swear by your own head, since you can’t make a single hair light or dark. But let your word be just “Yes” or “No.” Anything more than that is from the evil one.

That wasn’t the only word of Jesus on the subject, nor was it his last. While in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus pronounces blessings, Holy Week found him pronouncing woes, including this one, regarding the swearing of oaths.

Woe to you, [scribes and Pharisees,] blind guides! You say, “If anyone swears by the sanctuary, it’s nothing. But anyone who swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound.” How blind and foolish you are! Which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that made the gold sacred? And you say, “If anyone swears by the altar, it’s nothing. But anyone who swears by the gift upon it is bound.” How blind you are! Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything upon it. Whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who sits upon it.

Heidelberg Catechism

101Q: May we swear an oath in God’s name if we do it reverently?

A: Yes, when the government demands it,
or when necessity requires it,
in order to maintain and promote truth and trustworthiness
for God’s glory and our neighbor’s good.

Such oaths are approved in God’s Word
and were rightly used by Old and New Testament believers.

102Q: May we swear by saints or other creatures?

A: No.
A legitimate oath means calling upon God
as the one who knows my heart
to witness to my truthfulness
and to punish me if I swear falsely.
No creature is worthy of such honor.

Sermon

Disorder in the Court is one of my favorite Three Stooges episodes. In one scene, Curly is about to testify in a court of law. First, however, he has a promise to make. When Curly can't understand the bailiff, the judge himself puts the question to him. "Will you swear . . . ?" the judge asks. To which Curly replies, "No, but I know all the words!"

It's very common to swear an oath in a court of law. And that's just the sort of thing the Heidelberg Catechism has in mind when it says we may swear oaths, "when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it." The Heidelberg Catechism, in other words, gives us permission to swear. Jesus, on the other hand, gives us no such permission. He says, "I tell you not to swear at all." So, which is it? Do we have permission to swear? Or not?

The Old Testament encourages the swearing of oaths – though not without restriction. The encouragement comes in the form of examples. Abraham swears an oath to Abimelech (Genesis 21:24). Israel's leaders swear an oath to the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:15). David swears an oath to Bathsheba (1 Kings 1:29). More significantly, the LORD swears an oath to Abraham: After Abraham proved willing to offer up his son Isaac, the LORD said to him, "By my own self, I swear . . . I will bless you . . . I will multiply your descendants . . . [etc.]"

The encouragement to swear oaths was also present in the form of general cultural expectations. In the ancient Near East, swearing an oath was a way of lending weight to a statement one made, a way of saying, "I will certainly do what I am saying." An oath summoned a greater power or entity to serve as witness, as guarantor, as judge, so there would be no slipping out of one's obligations.

In terms of the general culture, then, and its own example, the Old Testament encourages the swearing of oaths. But oaths were not to be sworn willy-nilly; there were restrictions.

First of all, oaths were to be sworn only in the name of the LORD. Swearing in the name of some substitute, rather than naming the LORD, is only a pious fiction. Swear by heaven? That is the LORD's throne. Swear by the earth? That is the LORD's footstool. There is no avoiding it: Whatever the words, God is the witness and judge of your oath. And if you choose to swear by some other god or, like John Michael Montgomery, "by the moon and the stars in the sky," that only dishonors God by giving undeserved honor to that which is not God at all. So, first restriction, oaths are to be sworn only in the name of the LORD.

Then there was a second restriction. Oaths were to be kept, not broken. From the Pentateuch to the Prophets, the message of the Old Testament is clear. False testimony, given under oath, is a gross violation of God's Law. There is a commandment against it! And failing to keep an oath, by not doing what was promised, was also unacceptable. It brought the LORD's name into shame. It associated the LORD with dishonesty and untrustworthiness, though the LORD himself is both truth and troth.

So, the Old Testament encourages oaths, rightly sworn and faithfully kept. Oaths are also part of our culture. I've already mentioned giving testimony in a court of law. Oaths are also expected when you give a legal deposition.

Some years ago, I was being deposed at the Delaware County Courthouse. The case concerned my former employer in Michigan. The attorneys wanted me to appear in Kalamazoo County for the deposition. Roger P. told me I didn't have to go if I didn't want to. So I didn't. Instead, I made the legal teams come to me here in Ohio.

Before giving my testimony, I was asked to swear an oath. That made me uncomfortable. I remembered Jesus' words. I remembered what the Heidelberg Catechism says about "when necessary." When I asked if I had another option, I was told that, instead of swearing an oath, I could affirm the truth of my testimony. That's what I did.

By the way, do you know that the President of the United States does not have to swear an oath? The Constitution permits a president either to swear an oath or to make an affirmation. Most presidents have sworn an oath. Herbert Hoover, however, a Quaker, did not. And do you know that the presidential oath

of office makes no mention of God? Come January 20, you'll probably hear President Obama or President McCain (or President Nader???) say, "So help me God." But that's not in the Constitution.

Oaths are part of our culture. From time to time, you'll hear someone say, "I'll swear to it on a stack of Bibles." Apparently they think that piling up Bibles makes a difference. President Nixon swore his oath of office using two Bibles. It didn't work.

A related cultural habit to the swearing of oaths is the making of promises. Politicians are always accused of making promises but not keeping them. There are two things, at least, to say about that. First, as Bill L. pointed out at Men's Breakfast yesterday, there is always the fine print to every political promise, the fine print that says, "I will do such and so, *if circumstances and political realities allow.*" And, second, to my recollection politicians don't actually say, "I promise," not in those words. Or if they do use that language, they don't use it very often.

But we do make promises in everyday life: "I promise to have the report ready by Tuesday." "I promise to be home by midnight." "I promise to take care of the hamster, if you'll, please, buy me one." I tend to think that these kinds of promises are unnecessary and unwise. They cheapen serious promises. And they actually call into question the trustworthiness of the one who is making the promise. Who needs to make a promise about something so trivial, unless she has a habit of not being true to her word? So I have always told our girls, "Don't say, 'I promise' – not about something like that. Just say, 'Yes.' Just say, 'I will.' Then do what you say." For this, I have Jesus on my side. He said, "Let your word be just 'Yes' or 'No.'"

Speaking of Jesus, he seems quite opposed both to our cultural habits and to Old Testament patterns. "I tell you not to swear at all," Jesus says. Jesus recognizes the fictions and disguises that mask our oaths. Oaths are serious business, whether we recognize that or not. They are serious because God is in the oath – whether God is named explicitly or not. Heaven is God's throne. The earth is God's footstool. Jerusalem is God's city. Your head, your hair, your life are in God's hands. The sanctuary and its gold belong to God. The altar and the sacrifice upon it belong to God. God is Lord of everything, therefore to swear an oath by anything is to invoke God. Oaths are serious business.

Jesus sees evil lurking behind oaths and swearing. "Anything more than 'yes' or 'no' is from the evil one," Jesus says, though he doesn't exactly explain the connection. Here's one way, however, to think about that connection: Oaths, by their very nature, use and potentially misuse the name of God. Sometimes the name of God is invoked in an oath ("so help me God") or godly things are used in an oath (there's that stack of Bibles again) in order to lend a religious veneer to your statements, in order to suggest divine approval for your intentions, when you're the President of the United States or one of the Three Stooges.

But to use God or godly things for your own purposes is sin. It's idolatry. It's the Israelites carrying the Ark of the Covenant before them into battle as a box of magic that will guaranty their victory. That displeases God greatly. And Jesus says, "No," to that. "Don't swear at all," he says. "Make it just 'Yes' or 'No.'"

But is there a time for promises, a time even for swearing an oath? Our tradition says, "Yes." And we're not alone in that. Permission to swear is at least as old as St. Augustine in the early fifth century. Honestly, though, that permission is probably more a concession to political reality than the result of solid biblical interpretation.

During the Reformation, the issue of swearing oaths became prominent again. Radical groups – Quakers, Mennonites, Amish (you think of the Amish as radicals, don't you?) – radical groups rejected the swearing of oaths. Our tradition didn't want to be lumped together with those radicals. That was a politically dangerous place to be. So we made allowances for the swearing of oaths. You see those allowances in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Those allowances were minimal, however. Old liturgical forms for ordination, for marriage, for baptism contained no oaths. The expected answer to the various questions was a simple, “I do.” This changed in the Christian Reformed Church by 1979 or so with the adoption of new liturgical forms that replaced the simple “I do” with these words that will sound very familiar to you: “I do, God helping me” or “We do, God helping us.” Those additional words seem to be an acknowledgment of our powerlessness, of our constant need for God’s help. But that probably goes without saying. And the older forms seem more closely to follow the words of Jesus. So perhaps some caution is in order.

What about promises? When do we make promises? I’ve told our girls that promises are for certain, significant occasions. Getting married, for instance. Or presenting a child for baptism.

Another occasion for promises is when you publicly profess your faith in Jesus Christ. That’s a significant occasion. It’s a public declaration of your allegiance and loyalty to Jesus Christ, to his kingdom, and to his church. It’s a public acknowledgment of your sinfulness and of your need for God’s mercy. And it’s a public commitment to follow Jesus.

We’re a small congregation, so we don’t see many public professions of faith here. You kids and young people have seen very few. I guess that means some extra encouragement is in order. So, let me encourage you – grown-ups, young people, and kids, too. Stand up for Jesus. Stand up and make some promises, public promises, that reflect your faith and commitment. Talk to me. We’ll get you prepared for it. And really, we should all prepare for that. Publicly professing our faith is a seal, a punctuation mark, on our life-long vocation to follow Jesus. Never fear, though. You won’t have to swear an oath. A simple “Yes” will do.

One final word: If you are asked to swear an oath, in a court of law perhaps, find out if there’s another option. That’s one of the blessings we have in this country. Rather than swearing an oath, we can instead affirm our trustworthiness and so refrain from abusing God’s name or abusing God’s word, whether by placing a hand on one Bible or on a stack of them.

And, of course, the best way to affirm our trustworthiness, whether in court or in school, whether on the job or at home – the best way to affirm our trustworthiness is simply to let our “Yes” be yes and to let our “No” be no. For that kind of speech and for that kind of life, we always have permission.