

ST. SIMEON ANGLICAN CHURCH, OFF FUTA ROAD, AKURE

BIBLE STUDY, 15/10/2008

STUDY 19

THE OATH

Matthew 5:33 – 37

In the preceding study, an exposition of above verses was given, in which it was shown how our Lord condemned the wicked devices of the scribes and the evil practices of the Pharisees and their followers. Now, this study treats the subject topically, for there is real need today for a scriptural enforcement of the whole subject. "*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain*" (Ex. 20:7). This is the fundamental precept of God upon the matter of oaths, and the scope of its prohibition and the range of its meaning are far more extensive than is now commonly supposed. "*Thy commandment is exceeding broad*" (Ps. 119:96), declared David of old, and clearly was it made manifest in Christ's teaching. The *design* of an oath consists in a solemn confirmation of what we affirm or deny by a religious invocation of the name of God, as One that knows and owns the truth.

An oath in the Hebrew is called *shebuah*. There are two things observable about it. First, that the verb "to swear" is used only in a passive conjugation which implies that we should be passive in swearing; that is, we should not take an oath unless called upon to do so, or at least unless circumstances morally oblige us thereunto. Most significantly the Hebrew word is taken from a root that signifies "seven," which perhaps implies that it should be taken before many witnesses, and seven being the sacred and complete number, the name of an oath may be derived from it because it is appointed to put a complete end to differences. The Greeks called it *horkos*, most probably from a root signifying "to bind or strengthen," for by an oath a man takes a bond on his soul which cannot be loosed ordinarily.

1. The nature of an oath

Matthew 5:33–37; Hebrews 6:16; Exodus 23:13; Deuteronomy 29:12; Genesis 42:15; II Samuel 11:11; 14:19; Matthew 23:16–23; 26:63–64; James 5:12

Every oath contains two elements, namely, an affirmation, or promise, and an appeal to God as omniscient and the punisher of falsehoods. An oath is a religious and necessary confirmation of things doubtful by calling God to be a Witness of truth and a Revenger of falsehood. That it is confirmation is clear from Hebrews 6:16, where the Holy Spirit expressly affirms the same. That it is a religious confirmation appears from the fact that it is a part of Divine worship, God Himself being invoked therein: in Isaiah 19:18, "*swear to the Lord of hosts*" is used for the whole of His worship. The one who thus swears acknowledges the Divine perfections, appealing to Him as the God of truth and the hater of lies.

In an oath there are four things. First, a formal *asseveration* of the truth, which should always be spoken even when no oath be taken. Second, a *confession* of the omnipotent presence of the thrice holy Lord God, whereby we do most solemnly acknowledge Him as Witness, Judge, and Revenger of falsehood. Third, an *invocation* whereby God is called upon to bear witness to our conscience that what we swear to is nothing but the truth. Fourth, an *imprecation*, in which the swearer asks God to be the Revenger of all lies, binding himself to Divine punishment if he swear falsely. Therefore it clearly follows that an oath is not to be lightly entered into, that one is not to be taken at all except in matters of real importance, and that it must be taken in the most solemn manner, otherwise we violate the third commandment and are guilty of the awful sin of taking the holy name of the Lord God in vain.

2. The characteristics of a lawful oath

Matthew 5:33–37; Jeremiah 4:2; Genesis 22:16; Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Deuteronomy 19:16–19; Psalms 15:4; Jeremiah 5:2; 7:9; Ezekiel 16:59; Hosea 10:4; Zechariah 8:17

The characteristics of lawful oaths are clearly expressed by the prophet, so that nothing needs to be added to them, and nothing must be taken from them. "*Thou shalt swear, The Lord liveth, in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness*" (Jeremiah 4:2). "*Truth*" is required in it, in opposition unto guile and falsehood; for where this obtains not, God is called to be Witness unto a lie, which is to deny His very being. It must be "*in judgment*" we swear: not lightly, not rashly, not without a just and sufficient cause. There must be discernment and careful discretion in exercise, both in connection with the thing in question which is to be confirmed, and also of the solemn nature of an oath and of the issue of the same. "*In righteousness*" we must swear, namely that it be equity which we wish to confirm, tending to the glory of God and the good of our fellows.

When the above characteristics are complied with and where matters are in controversy among men and the peace of human society in general or particular depends upon the rightful determination of them, it is meet and proper for a believer, being lawfully called, to confirm the truth which he knows by the invocation of God, with the design of putting an end to strife.

3. The Christian and the oath

Matthew 5:33–37; Hebrews 6:18, 13; James 5:10–13; I Kings 8:31–32; Jeremiah 5:7–9; Zechariah 5:4

"*An oath for confirmation is the end of strife*". Oaths are to be used only to put an end to contradiction in disputes and for confirmation of solemn promises. God, in condescension to man's mode of confirming covenants, confirmed His word by oath; by these "*two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong consolation who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.*" And "*because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself.*" Jesus Himself accepted the high priest's adjuration (Matthew 26:63). Paul often calls God to witness the truth of his assertions (Acts 26:29; Romans 1:9; 9:1; 2 Corinthians 1:23; 11:31; Galatians 1:20; Philippians 1:8). So the angel, Revelation 10:6. Those who walked the closest with God centuries before the giving of the Law at Sinai did solemnly swear one to another when occasion did require it, and when they were legitimately warranted in so doing. Thus Abraham swore to Abimelech (Genesis 21:23, 24), and required an oath to be taken by his servant (Genesis 24:8, 9). In like manner Jacob swore with Laban (Genesis 31:53). And Joseph also swore to his father (Genesis 47:31).

In the perfect Christian state all oaths would be needless, for distrust of another's word and untruth would not exist. Meantime, they are needed on solemn occasions. But men do not escape the guilt of "*taking God's name in vain*". The meaning of our Lord's interdiction of swearing (Matthew 5:33-37) was that Christianity should know no oath at all. To the consciousness of the Christian, God should always be so vividly present that, to him and others in the Christian community, his yea and nay are, in point of reliability, equivalent to an oath. His yea and nay are oath enough.

The connection in James 5:12 is, Swear not through impatience to which trials may tempt us (James 5:10–11); in contrast stands the proper use of the tongue, James 5:13. To appeal to a pagan god by oath is to acknowledge his deity, and is therefore forbidden (Joshua 23:7; Jeremiah 5:7; 12:16; Amos 8:14), as in swearing to appeal to God is recognising Him (Deuteronomy 6:13; Isaiah 19:18; 65:16). An oath even to a pagan king is so binding that Jehovah's chief reason for dethroning Zedekiah and giving him over to die in Babylon was his violating his oath to Nebuchadnezzar (Ezekiel 17:13–20; II Chronicles 36:13). We should regulate our oaths in such a manner that they be not rash or inconsiderate, wanton or frivolous, but used in cases of real necessity. The awful solemnity of an oath appears from I Kings 8:31, 32 and we too should duly lay to heart the fearful judgments of God which came upon Israel of old when they were guilty of breaking the third commandment (Jeremiah 5:7–9; Zechariah 5:4).