

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 18: The Fourth Antithesis—Christ’s Teaching on Oaths

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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; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (Mt. 5:33-37).

In the fourth antithesis, Jesus focuses His attention on the scribes’ and Pharisees’ abuse of oaths. As the vast majority of rabbis in the days of our Lord had a very elastic concept of divorce, they also had developed a permissive concept of oaths. They had come up with clever methods for making certain oaths non-binding. This, of course, was a great perversion of the third commandment because all oaths ultimately rest upon God’s holy name. It also relates to the ninth commandment, which demands honesty in speech. This topic is important in our day when dishonesty and vow-breaking has become an accepted part of our culture. Not only do most people lie when it suits them, but they do not even think that it is wrong. Before we analyze the scribes’ and Pharisees’ abuse of oaths, there are some things that we need to consider.

First, once again Christ says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old” (v. 33). We must not make the mistake of thinking the Savior is critiquing the Old Testament law, when He is actually exposing the false doctrine of the scribe and Pharisees. He is continuing His contrast of what His disciples must be, compared to what was the acceptable popular religion of the day. The cumulative effect of hammering away at the Jewish religious leaders must have been powerful. Outwardly, to the people of that time, they appeared very respectable; in actuality, they were humanistic and hypocritical.

Second, the saying attributed to the ancients is not a direct quote of any one Old Testament passage, but is a summary of the letter of the law concerning oaths. It is a crystallization of God’s teaching on the topic. The phrase, “You shall not swear falsely,” (v. 33) sounds like an abbreviated form of Leviticus 19:12: “You shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.” The second part of the saying is similar to Numbers 30:2: “If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (cf. Deuteronomy 23:21, “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you.”). The verb that the Savior uses, *epiorkeo*, translated “forswear thyself” in the KJV, can be translated “swear falsely” or “break one’s oath,” which essentially refer to the same thing.

Third, in order to better understand our Lord’s teaching we need to define what an oath or swearing is. When we think of swearing today we usually think of cursing or using profane or blasphemous language. All such activity, however, is the abuse of swearing. To swear in biblical terms means to utter a solemn declaration with an appeal to God for the truth of what is affirmed.

In our courts, people who are about to testify are required to place their right hand on a Bible and are asked, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” The point of swearing in such situations is to bolster the truth of what is said by essentially calling down God’s wrath upon the person because their lie is attached to an appeal to God’s name. An oath is the same as swearing. It can be attached to testimony or to a promise to do something in the future. David says that a godly man is one “who swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Ps. 15:4). That is, he keeps his promissory oath, even though circumstances have arisen that render the original oath disadvantageous to him. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus is focusing on the abuse of promissory oaths.

In a religious society such as existed in Christ’s day, oaths should have been considered a very serious thing. The oath was used to call special attention to the fact that God Himself was a witness to the act of swearing in His name. Thus, to violate the oath was to break the third commandment: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain” (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). “All such improper uses of God’s name have suspended over them a warning, *for the LORD will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.*”¹

The Scribes’ and Pharisees’ Perversion of Oaths

All of this raises the question: How exactly were the scribes and Pharisees abusing oaths? If we compare Matthew 5:34-37 with our Lord’s expression of contempt for this same abuse later in the gospel, we will understand what was happening:

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which 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 whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (Mt. 23:16-22)

They were guilty of the following serious errors.

First, we see that the rabbis had developed a whole system of different formulas that went beyond Scripture. They were swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, the gold of the temple and even on their own head. None of this came from God’s Word; it all came in by way of human traditions. If we look at Old Testament oaths, men would swear by God (Gen. 21:23), by or to the Lord (Gen. 24:3; Num. 30:2; 1 Sam. 24:21; 2 Sam. 19:7), by Jehovah’s name (Lev. 19:12; Dt. 6:13; 10:20); to the LORD your God (Dt. 23:21), to the LORD of hosts (Isa. 19:18). Even God “because He could swear by one greater...swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13; cf. Gen. 22:16; Isa. 45:23; Amos 6:8; Ezek. 17:19; Jer. 44:26). In some situations the appeal to God is there, but is more indirect. For example, in Jacob’s covenant with Laban the patriarch says, “Although no man is with us—see, God is witness between you and me!” (Gen. 31:50). A man who was concerned to demonstrate the truthfulness and sincerity of his statement could also use the formula “As the LORD lives” (1 Sam. 14:39; 19:6; 20:3; 2 Sam. 15:21). “God again was

¹ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 156.

called upon as a witness in an oath and the result was that the man's word was taken as inviolable."² In the oath, vow or covenant the appeal is always made to God because God is omniscient, all powerful, perfectly just and thus will judge the person who does not speak the truth. God witnesses what takes place and will pass judgment on the parties involved for good or ill. This truth is especially brought out in Jeremiah 42:5 where the remnant says to the prophet, "Let the LORD be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not do according to everything which the LORD your God sends us by you." When the Jews made all sorts of different oaths to different objects, they were entering the realm of superstition. Further, in the final analysis, all oaths are made to God and are binding or else they are idolatrous.

Second, the whole purpose of the different formulas in the matter of oaths was to be able to make promises that could be broken. In the thinking of the scribes and Pharisees, there were different degrees of oaths. An oath sworn to the Lord was the highest form and must be kept; but, there were all sorts of lesser oaths that could be broken if necessary or expedient. As with most man-made traditions, this gave the religious leaders greater power over others. The rabbis could make grandiose promises that people would naturally expect them to carry out. But with their sophisticated rabbinic casuistry they could break these promises, all the while thinking they had not violated the ninth commandment. Thus, in their perverted logic, oaths which were designed to increase the likelihood of truth-telling and faithfulness became instruments of dishonesty and fraud. Oaths which were supposed to add solemnity and guarantee reliability became flippant, profane and hypocritical. By making oaths into a sort of game (like the child who believes it is okay to lie when his fingers are crossed behind his back), the scribes and Pharisees became like the devil and caused all promises to be called into question.

Third, the scribes and Pharisees were using oaths for dramatic effect, "to make an impression and to spice daily conversations."³ Thus, they were using oaths all the time for trivial matters that were not very important. If we look at God's holy law, oaths, vows and covenants were serious affairs that were not to be entered into lightly. Consequently, oaths were actually quite rare. Oaths were used in civil court in matters of theft (Ex. 22:10, 11; Lev. 6:3) and suspicion of adultery (Num. 5:11-28). They were used in important business transactions and crucial duties. For example, when Abraham sent out his chief servant to find a bride for Isaac he made him swear not to get a wife from the Canaanites, but rather from his own family (Gen. 24:3-4). The rare, serious oath-taking under the law had been replaced by the rabbis with glib, frivolous oath-taking similar to what one hears today among pagan children.

Christ's Corrective Teaching

Jesus corrects the scribes' and Pharisees' hypocritical hair-splitting: "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Mt. 5:34-37). This antithesis raises a number of questions.

First, when Christ says, "do not swear at all," is He teaching that all oaths have been abolished for believers in the New Covenant era? This is an important question because: a) our

² T. M. Gregory, "Oath" in Merrill Tenney, Gen. Ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 4:477.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 308.

Lord's statement appears to be strong and unambiguous; and b) this statement was a proof-text for many of the sixteenth century Anabaptists and for the Quakers (the Society of Friends). The Anabaptists would refuse to swear allegiance to any city or state in a time when allegiances were crucial for the Reformation. The Quakers would not take any oath, even in a court of law. If we examine the Savior's statement in the broad context of Scripture, it is obvious that He is only forbidding the frivolous use and abuse of oaths so prevalent at that time. Note the following reasons:

(1) Jesus is not refuting, rejecting or replacing God's holy law (i.e. the law that the pre-incarnate Son of God Himself gave), but is dealing with the perverted traditions of the scribes and Pharisees. God's law not only allowed for oaths, but (as noted) required them under certain circumstances (e.g., trials, religious covenants, etc.). Oaths are certainly implied in the marriage covenant, the sacraments and church membership. Indeed, God Himself made an oath with Abraham (Gen. 15:7-21; 22:16; Heb. 6:13-18). Obviously then, Jesus is saying, "Don't make *this kind of oath* at all"; that is, the phony oaths of the rabbis.

(2) Throughout the Old Testament the godly are seen making oaths with no disapprobation on the part of God at all. "It was with an oath that Abraham confirmed his promises to the king of Sodom and to Abimelech (Gen. 14:22-24; 21:23, 24). Abraham also required an oath of his servant (24:3, 9). The oath is mentioned also in connection with Isaac (26:31), Jacob (31:53; cf. 28:20-22), Joseph (47:31, 50:5), 'the princes of the congregation' (Josh. 9:15), and the children of Israel (Judg. 21:5). See also Ruth 1:16-18, 2 Sam. 15:21; 1 Kings 18:10; and 2 Chron. 15:14, 15."⁴

(3) When Jesus was placed under an oath at His trial before the Sanhedrin He did not refuse to answer, but openly declared Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God (Mt. 26:63-64). If the Redeemer believed that all oaths were wrong, then obviously He would have refused to answer. "He did not denounce it on such an occasion, but seemed to regard it as perfectly legitimate."⁵ In Galatians 1:20 Paul takes an oath before God as to the truth of the things he writes, "I write to you, indeed before God, I do not lie." He also takes oaths in 2 Corinthians 1:23 and Philippians 1:8. Surely Paul, writing by divine inspiration, would not take oaths if they had been forbidden under all circumstances by Christ. The author of Hebrews bases an argument about God's faithfulness in making an oath to Abraham on the fact that lawful oaths between men confirm the truth and set aside all dispute about the thing or things promised. "For indeed men swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute" (Heb. 6:16). "To swear by God, 'who never lies' (Ti. 1:2), or, in other words, to call God to witness that one is speaking the truth and acting honorably, is the highest affirmation of trustworthiness that any man can make."⁶ If Jesus had forbade all oaths as wrong such an argument would be completely inappropriate. Therefore, given the testimony of Scripture, oath-taking is lawful as long as it is not based on human tradition or abused. Because of man's fall into sin and his corrupt tendency to lie, oaths are necessary on certain occasions to keep the temptation to dishonesty in check by adding seriousness, authority and a greater threat of judgment by God.

Second, what are the distinctions that Jesus speaks of and why are they absurd? According to the teaching of the ancient rabbis, swearing by heaven and earth meant to swear by the hosts of heaven and the hosts on earth (Mishna, Shebuot, c. 4. sect. 13). The Jewish writer Philo says it refers to the sun, stars and the whole earth. Since the Jews regarded these things as

⁴ Ibid, 309.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:268.

⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 232.

part of the created realm and not God Himself, they did not look upon such a promise as a binding oath. Violating such an oath was not considered wrong (Maimon. Hilch. Shebuot, c. 12 sect. 3). They would also swear by Jerusalem because it was the holy city. In the Genara we read, “He that says as Jerusalem, does not say any thing, till he has made his vow concerning a thing, which is offered up in Jerusalem” [T. Bab. Narim, fol. 11.1.]”⁷ To swear by one’s head meant to swear by one’s own life. In other words, “If I do not carry out my promise may my life come to an end.” We have a similar oath today: “Cross my heart and hope to die.” In Matthew 23 we hear of more absurd oaths. They would swear by the altar, by the offering on the altar and the Temple.

Christ points out that every one of these oaths is wrong because each ultimately invokes God Himself. If a person swears by heaven he is ultimately swearing by God’s own throne—the place where God sits and the glory of His majesty shines forth. Such an oath is a double sin because oaths are not to be made to aspects of creation and because God is tacitly brought into this vain oath anyway. The person who swears by the earth needs to understand that earth is God’s footstool (see Isa. 66:1; Ps. 11:4; 99:5; La. 2:1). Jehovah’s presence is also on the earth and in the world He manifests His glory. One cannot escape God’s omniscience and power by an appeal to the created realm. The oath to Jerusalem is wrong because it is the city of the great King (cf. Ps. 48:2, and “the city of our God” in 48:1). This is not a reference to the kingship of David, but to the King of kings, the LORD of hosts. It was the place of Jehovah’s special presence, the place where He was worshipped in the central sanctuary. Once again, such an oath cannot escape God’s all-seeing presence. One must not even swear by one’s own head because no one has the power to make one hair white or black. In other words, God is sovereign over what happens to us, even in the minutest, insignificant things. Therefore, it is wrong to swear by that which is not in our control. And since our heads are under God’s control such an oath is still under God’s authority and thus possesses an absolute character. The scribal attempt to compartmentalize oaths (in which God is involved in some, but not in others) is impossible. It contradicts God’s nature. The sinful attempt to exalt human autonomy by dividing life into different spheres where supposedly some of which God holds no sway is always a failure because God is sovereign. The scribes’ and Pharisees’ teaching on oaths was an implicit denial of the doctrine of God. It was exceedingly rebellious, pagan and humanistic. It reminds us of the teaching of the Syrians who believed that Jehovah was God of the hills, but not of the plains (1 Kings 20:23, 28).

Third, our Lord offers the solution to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ multiplication and compartmentalization of oaths in common speech by saying, “Swear not at all.... but let your communication be, Yea, Yea; Nay, nay.” As noted, this is not a prohibition of all oaths, such as the oath of a courtroom or the vow of a marriage ceremony. Jesus is forbidding the use of oaths in everyday, ordinary conversation. Christians should be honest and, thus, there should be no need for oaths. As followers of the One who is truth itself, every utterance of our lips must be completely trustworthy. Of believers Paul says, “We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth” (2 Cor. 13:8). Christians should be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,’ for we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). The cure for the Pharisaical use of oaths to obscure the truth and break promises is to completely avoid using oaths for things that do not merit them and speak the plain truth. We must say exactly what we mean without any ambiguity or equivocation. We must speak simply and honestly. We must keep all of our promises, without seeking loopholes or

⁷ As quoted in John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:49.

excuses to slip out of them. Interestingly, often it is the people who are the most dishonest who multiply oaths because they are attempting to induce people to believe their lies.

Fourth, the Savior gives a reason as to why speaking the simple truth is crucial and necessary. He says, “For whatever is more than these is from the evil one” (Mt. 5:37). The devil is a liar and is the originator of all lies (cf. Jn. 8:44); thus, to tell a lie is to imitate Satan. Dishonesty is a sin which makes people most like the devil. Lying is the foundation of all opposition to God, Christ and the truth. Christians are to believe in the truth (2 Thess. 2:12-13; 1 Tim. 2:4), live the truth (1 Jn. 3:18), love the truth (2 Thess. 2:10), and be of the truth (1 Jn. 3:19). We must be dedicated to the truth because the truth sanctifies us (Jn. 17:17) and sets us free (Jn. 8:32). To act like the scribes and Pharisees, who not only tolerated lying but developed a whole sophisticated method of excusing it, is to place ourselves on the side of the devil and this darkened world. All non-Christian worldviews are based on suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18) and changing the truth of God into a lie (Rom. 1:25).

This subject of speaking the truth is very important because we are all born liars (Ps. 58:3) and the tongue is not an easy instrument to control (Jas. 3:3ff.). Therefore, we must fight against the corruption of our nature, our fleshly inner deceitfulness and the bad habits of lying that we may have developed before our conversion. “Note, Christians should, for the credit of their religion, avoid not only that which is in itself evil, *but that which cometh of evil*, and has the *appearance of it*. That may be suspected as a bad thing, which comes from a bad cause.”⁸

There are a number of additional reasons given in Scripture why we must not lie. (1) Lying is strictly forbidden by God’s law. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:17). “Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked” (Ex. 23:7). (2) Lying is completely contrary to who we are in Christ. “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds” (Col. 3:9). (3) Lying is an abomination to Jehovah. “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight” (Pr. 12:22). (4) God will surely punish those who lie. “A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies will not escape” (Pr. 19:5). “You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man” (Ps. 5:6). (5) All unrepentant liars will be cast into hell. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8). (6) Lying about one’s neighbor is described in Scripture as evil. “He who is walking uprightly...and speaking truth in his heart. He hath not slandered by his tongue, he hath not done to his friend evil; and reproach he hath not lifted up against his neighbor” (Ps. 15:2, 3, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*). (7) Additionally, we could add that lying breaks down trust between individuals, family members and society in general. When lying becomes an accepted practice in a culture, everything that is said is taken with a grain of salt. Everyone comes to expect lies so that when the truth does come people will not believe it. The flip side of a culture full of lies is that many people will be willing to believe anything except the truth.

Applications

Jesus teaches that Christians must speak the truth; that a “yes” should always mean “yes” and a “no” should always mean “no.” If we are always honest in our dealings with others, then

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:64.

there is no need for us to appeal to God as a witness in the everyday matters of life. Unfortunately, the state of professing Christianity today is one of such serious declension that the word of many professing believers is worth no more than the rank heathen around them. Therefore, we must carefully heed the words of our Savior and apply them to our own lives. There are a number of areas where we must watch ourselves regarding speaking the truth.

First, it is important that we take our time and be very slow, careful and thoughtful before we agree to do anything for another person. In other words we must not make careless promises that we will be unable to carry out or that we will be tempted not to fulfill. "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles" (Pr. 21:23). "The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil" (Pr. 15:28). "A man devoid of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend" (Pr. 17:18). Rash engagements can become a great snare when things do not turn out as expected and we are forced into a situation where it is very difficult to keep our word. It is wise to keep our mouths shut in such situations. If people are pressing for an answer or commitment, then we need to remain calm and ask for more time to meditate on the matter at hand. If the person or persons keep pressing the issue, then it is best just to politely say "no." It is not a sin to say "no," but it is a sin to say "yes" and then break one's word.

Second, Christians must be careful to avoid the careless use of exaggerations in their speech. Exaggerating is dishonest because it communicates a false impression of what occurred. A person who is prone to stretching the truth will soon be discovered and his word will no longer carry any weight. The use of exaggeration has become a large part of Christian television and evangelistic fundraising appeals. Many American evangelical ministries are so obsessed with looking prosperous and successful that they continually misrepresent statistics as they brag to raise money. Believers who are prone to exaggeration need to learn to habitually practice accuracy of speech.

Third, we must keep in mind the serious nature of oath-taking and thus not break promises that we think are not important. This is necessary because we live in a culture where oaths and promises mean little to nothing. When most people get married today they take a vow "till death do us part." Yet, this statement is more an empty tradition than a reality. That is because oaths and vows today are not viewed theocentrically, but anthropocentrically. When a person holds a humanistic understanding of oaths, they believe oaths can be broken when it is in the best interest of man. This is one reason that political treaties today are essentially meaningless. After being repeatedly betrayed by agreements with the Soviet Union, certain administrations in the United States adopted a system where treaties would only be entered on important matters when empirical observers would be utilized to make sure that the Soviets were not lying. The Communists, however, justified their lies on the basis of the necessity to win the Cold War.

Tragically, the humanistic concept of oaths has permeated modern churches to an extent and thus vows of church membership are often meaningless. Many people view church membership as membership in a supper club or golf course. Therefore, if they decide to leave for unbiblical or frivolous reasons, then, in their eyes, they have done nothing amiss. But when a person takes an oath or vow, they promise to abide by their word and covenant obligations. When such a person has no regard for his oath, or subscribes to an oath or vow with no intention of abiding by the agreement and Reformed churches condone this behavior by accepting such people into membership as if nothing wrong has occurred, then ecclesiastical anarchy and declension ensue. In a culture permeated with lies and a humanistic concept of oaths and vows

we need to view oaths as exceptionally serious. False oaths are a barometer of church declension and social degeneration.

Fourth, if we are being honest in all our dealings it is crucial that we do not align ourselves with liars. For example, if a Christian goes into business with a dishonest man and that man breaks agreements and doesn't fulfill contracts, then the believer is guilty by association. This same principle applies in the religious sphere. If a pastor is teaching heresy and lying from the pulpit as many ministers do in our day, then to support that man is to participate in his sins. Some will say, "Yes, but he is the one who lied. He is the one who does not care about truth or justice. I did not do anything wrong." But you give that man tacit approval by being in league with him. This point even applies on the personal level. If a young man hangs out with liars and covenant breakers and does not speak out against them and leave, then he too is guilty of their corruptions. "Evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Fifth, it is also important that we promote the truth by refusing to listen to gossip and slander about others. In other words, we must not only refrain from raising a false report about a brother, we must also refuse to receive false, slanderous or unproven reports. "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you stand against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:16). "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter" (Pr. 11:13). "You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.... Keep yourself far from a false matter" (Ex. 23:1, 7). Calvin writes,

...[S]in may be committed in two ways: either when the wicked invent false accusations, or when other overcredulous persons eagerly associate themselves with them.... A lie would soon come to nothing from its own emptiness, and fall to the ground, if it were not taken up and supported by the unrighteous consent of others...the false witness kills with his tongue just as the executioner kills with his sword.... [Therefore] [w]e must close our ears against false and evil speaking; since he is just as injurious to his brother who eagerly listens to sinister reports respecting him, as he who exercises his tongue in maligning him.... The volubility of the tongue causes us to think it a light transgression to inflict a deadly and disgraceful wound on our brother, to whom, nevertheless, his good name is of more importance than his life.⁹

To listen to gossip and slander is to give it currency. Such behavior is a wicked act of hatred; Christians must never participate in it. If an accusation is raised the first thing one should ask is: has the Matthew 18 process been carefully followed? In the case of an elder or minister we should include 1 Timothy 5:19 in this question. Gossip and slander on the part of wicked malcontents has done incredible harm to the body of Christ.

Further, the man with a lying tongue and the person who listens to the false report will both be biased and unjust regarding the person or dispute at hand. Interestingly, it is the personal experience of many that people who refuse to listen to slander shut the mouths of the talebearers. A sinning tongue needs a willing ear to spread its vile deceit. This issue is so important that David clearly implies that the man who slanders or backbites with his tongue and does evil to his neighbor is not fit to approach God in public worship (cf. Ps. 15:1-3).

Sixth, it is important not to place ourselves in situations where we will be tempted to lie to cover our misdeeds. In other words, backsliding is the handmaid of deception. The man who commits adultery or looks at pornography will deceive his wife to cover his tracks. The woman

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:181, 183.

who has a drinking problem must lie to escape detection. Children who are disobedient and know that they have committed an infraction that merits stripes will sometimes lie to avoid the consequences of their behavior. There have been a number of prominent evangelical and Pentecostal ministers who have attempted to lie about scandalous behavior that has been revealed. The result has been sin added to sin. We must avoid doing things that are sinful, that we would be ashamed of if they ever become public. And if we do fall into sin we must repent and pray instead of trying to lie our way out of it.

Seventh, we must completely avoid what are called “little white lies.” This is the idea that it is okay to lie under certain circumstances to avoid hurting another person’s feelings. While it is a good thing to avoid hurting someone’s feelings, one should not have to use deception to do so. Moreover, if one gets into the habit of lying about “little things,” will it not be easy to lie about other things as well? God expects truth of His children at all times. Jesus said let your “yes” really mean “yes” and your “no” really mean “no.” He did not allow exceptions for the trivial matters in life. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say. Our Lord warned us that even our idle chatter will come under the purview of God’s judgment. “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12:36).

Eighth, we must shun implicit deception. This is when something written or said has the appearance of truth, yet when analyzed is not the whole truth. For example, a number of “conservative” Presbyterian denominations advertise themselves as holding to the Westminster Standards when the truth of the matter is that many sections of the Standards are no longer believed or followed (e.g., strict Sabbatarianism, a six literal day creation, the regulative principle of worship, the establishment principle, no holy days except the Sabbath, exclusive psalmody, etc.). Members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America still call themselves Covenanters even though they abandoned the old view of covenanting over a hundred years ago. It is also quite common in Presbyterian courts to ignore the truth and skirt justice by ignoring Scripture in procedure and skillfully using technicalities in their book of church order. By doing so men violate the spirit of God’s law, while on the surface they attempt to follow the letter of the law. It’s all a big scam and many people know it, but the corrupt presbyters pat themselves on the back and call it a day.

Ninth, we must never use the name of the Lord lightly or as a method of cursing. The scribes’ and Pharisees’ frivolous use of oaths was disrespectful to God. If we have a holy awe and reverence for God, then we will appeal to His name only when it is absolutely necessary. A flippant, profane, irreverent use of the name of God is a violation of the third commandment. The very common practice in modern America of using God’s name and the Son of God’s name and titles to curse is an abominable practice. People who use such curse words do so in direct defiance of God. “[U]ngodly swearing is a deliberate profanation of the purpose of the oath or vow; it is a light use of it, a contemptuous use of it, to express a contempt for God.”¹⁰ When the heathen in our currently post-Christian culture take the Lord’s name in vain by swearing, they often mingle their defiance of God with curse words relating to sexual practices and excrement. This is the satanic attempt to pull God off His holy throne where He dwells in unapproachable light, holiness and majesty and place Him under humanistic autonomous man as refuse. It is an expression of extreme hatred and rebellion. Thus, such profanity must never ever be found on the lips of a Christian. Believers must also diligently shun the modern supposedly acceptable substitutes for divine names and titles (e.g., God—“Gosh,” Jesus—“Geesh,” Jesus Christ—“Judas Priest,” etc.). Hopkins writes, “When we speak of God, without considering how great,

¹⁰ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 108.

how glorious, and excellent a being he is, how holy, just, and powerful, we do but make him a bye-word; which is the highest indignity, that can be cast upon him.”¹¹ Therefore, let us be very cautious in how we use God’s name. Let us at all times demonstrate love toward our Maker and Savior by a holy awe, reverence and fear of the Divine Majesty.

In our study of Jesus’ teaching on oaths and honesty, we have seen that profane swearing, oaths on trivial matters and lying of any kind is explicitly forbidden by the law of the kingdom of heaven. This is an area in which we need to examine ourselves; for, generally speaking, the modern church has a very poor record in this matter. Whenever we speak, we must keep in mind that we are always under the watchful eye of our Lord. If we claim that we follow the One who is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn. 14:6) and are indwelt by “the Spirit of truth” (Jn. 16:13), then we must live and speak the truth at all times. May God enable us to speak the truth at all times. May He cause us to speak the truth in love and be a shining witness of the truth of the gospel.

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¹¹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, [1874] 1995), 349.