# Is Swearing A Sin

*"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.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* [*Mat 5:33-37*].

In the above portion of scripture, Jesus instructs His followers to not swear at all. It appears that Jesus is forbidding oath taking/swearing. James echoes the same sentiment in his letter [*Jas 5:12*]. Many of the things Jesus prohibits, He does so because they are sin. For example, He instructs against looking lustfully at a woman for to do so would be committing adultery in the heart [*Mat 5:27-28*], and adultery is obviously a sin [*Exo 20:14; Deu 5:18*]. You would not see God, His son Jesus, or any holy angel commit adultery, neither would you find God instruct anyone to commit adultery.

Interpreting Jesus’ words on swearing to mean that swearing is a sin appears to create a contradiction because there are examples of righteous people (men and spirits) swearing.

**God Swore** to Abraham at Moriah after Abraham proved he was not going to hold back his hand from sacrificing his son Isaac. God swore in His wrath that the men who saw His wonders on Egypt and the desert yet disobeyed and tested Him would enter into the Promised Land.

*and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD (YAHWEH), that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son.* [*Gen 22:16*]

*The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times-- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.* [*Num 14:20-22*]*.*

*Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn.* [*Ezek 36:7*].

**Jesus swore** when charged under oath by the high priest during His farce of a trial.

*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." " 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. "* [*Mat 26:63-64*].

The mighty **Angel swore by God** in the Revelation to John.

*And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer* [*Rev 10:5-6*].

God commands **Israel as a nation to swear**

*Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.* [*KJV Deu 6:13*].

So there are examples of God, Jesus, and the mighty Angel swearing. There is also an example of God commanding Israel to take oaths in His name. If swearing is a sin, then Jesus makes Himself and God sinners, if it is a sin then God commanded Israel in the Old Testament to sin. It is known from common sense and from scripture that God and His Son cannot sin, and that God cannot command one to sin [*Rom 1:23; 1Cor 14:33; 2Cor 5:21; 2Thess 1:6; 2Tim 2:13; Tit 1:2; Heb 4:15; 6:18; Jas 1:13, 17; 1Pet 2:22; 1Jn 3:8-10*]. Why then would Jesus instruct against swearing and make it appear as if the act is sinful?

# **What are Oaths?**

In order to understand this seeming contradiction, one must first understand the concept of swearing/ oath taking as taught by scripture and doing this might help shed light on how to resolve what appears to be a Biblical contradiction.

Swearing in scripture does not mean to use profanity. This however does not mean that profanity is acceptable to God [*Prov 4:24; Mat 12:36; 15:11; Eph 4:29; 5:4; Col 3:8; 4:6; Jas 3:10*].

Swearing/oath taking is done to confirm what one said as true.

*Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument* [*Heb 6:16*].

Oaths may concern the past; for example, a man may take an oath to confirm that his testimony about someone or an event that he witnessed is true. An oath may also concern the present or the future; for example, a man might swear to confirm that he will do something he said he would do. Whichever be the case, an oath is to confirm what is said as true.

# **Why is An Oath Considered Confirmation of What is Said?**

The reason why an oath is considered as confirmation of what one has said is – as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews said: “***Men swear by someone greater than themselves***” [*Heb 6:16a*]. if someone is greater than you, that means he has some power over you; therefore, the expectation is that you wouldn’t swear or take an oath by someone greater than yourself (i.e., someone who can punish you) if what you are saying is not or proves not to be true. Swearing by one greater than you is putting the reputation of the one in whose name you swore or took an oath on the line, and unless the one whose name is sworn by is vile, he would not overlook the one who “took his name in vain”. This is part of what God means when He commands to not take His name in vain [*Exo 20:7; Deu 5:11*]. Since the one whose name is sworn by is greater than you, to break the oath taken or to swear by his name that what you have said is true when it in fact is false, means that he will punish you. To take an oath in someone else’s name is to call that person to be a witness; therefore if the one who swears is lying, or failed what he promised on oath to do, the one sworn by has the right, duty, and power to punish the one who took the oath, especially seeing as God is just and has to remain so, He would not let His name be dragged in the mud. Men may overlook, but God will not, or He would not be just. To take an oath or swear by God’s name is to call God as a witness

# **The 4 Things by Which We are Not Supposed to Swear According to Jesus**

*"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.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* [*Mat 5:33-37*].

Jesus says we are not supposed to swear by;

1. Heaven
2. The Earth
3. Jerusalem
4. Our heads

These 4 things by which we are not permitted to swear all have one thing in common and that is; **their connection to God**.

* Jesus says not to swear by heaven because it is **God’s** throne.
* We are not to swear by the earth because it is **God’s** footstool.
* We are not to swear by Jerusalem because it is the city of **the Great King (God)**.
* We are not to swear by our own heads because **God** is the one who created our heads.

Since the things by which we are not to swear – as listed by Jesus – are all connected to God, then swearing by them is also swearing by God. This is seen in Jesus prefacing His command to not swear by saying “*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***” [*Mat 5:33*]. He’s saying that swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and our heads is still the same as swearing by God.

It should be noted that Jesus does not explicitly say “do not swear because it is sin to do so”. He instead gives the reason why we should not swear. So, if swearing in itself is a sin (and it is not because, as earlier stated, God, His Son and His holy elect angels will not sin, neither will he command us to sin), it would not matter by what one swears. If swearing is sin, then there would be no need for Jesus to say we should not swear by this and that; He would simply say; “don’t swear because it is sin to do so”. Understanding the reasons for prohibiting swearing by the 4 things listed is important if one is to understand what Jesus teaches about swearing.

# **More Teaching on Swearing from Jesus**

For more insight on what Jesus meant about swearing in His sermon on the mount we look to some of His other teaching on the same subject.

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.* [*Mat 23:15-22*].

In this portion of scripture, Jesus addresses the heresy of the Scribes and Pharisees concerning what made an oath binding or not. According to their error, taking an oath by the temple was not binding, but taking an oath by the temple gold was. The key issue here is whether or not the oath is binding. This error of the Pharisees in practice, meant that a man could break his oath without fear of consequence from God if he swore an oath by the temple. Jesus corrected this lie by teaching that if one swore by the temple, he was not just swearing by the temple but by everything in the temple and the one lives in it. It is evident that the people thought that they could be free from consequence after breaking oaths taken by things like the temple, because in the doctrine taught them by their religious leaders, swearing by the temple was not swearing by God. In His rebuke, Jesus included swearing by heaven, telling them that if they swear by heaven, they would be swearing by God’s throne and by God who sits on it. understanding this, it becomes easier to understand what Jesus means when He says that they were not to swear by heaven, because it was God’s throne [*Mat 5:34*]. He was not teaching that swearing is sin, rather He was teaching that swearing by heaven is not without consequence for those who do so. They were rather to understand that since heaven is God’s throne, the were swearing by God and so their oaths were binding on them. Jesus started with the command that they were to keep their oaths made to God or in His name and said that they were not to swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or their heads. The point is, the people thought that as long as they were not swearing by God, they could break their oaths without consequence from Him. Jesus corrected the falsehood that though they thought they were not bound to keep those oaths made by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or their heads, they were in fact, actually bound by the oaths because the things sworn by are connected to God.

# **How about When People are Unable to Keep Oaths**

People usually think that if they are unable to keep oaths they have made, they are not bound to face any consequence. They believe that God understands. This thinking is very wrong. **An oath is binding regardless of ability or inability to fulfil it**. The Bible counsels that one should not be hasty to take oaths, because God will not accept that it was a mistake. To make a vow and later claim it to be a mistake is an insult to God. It means that one did not take Him seriously. This can be clearly seen even in the Old Testament

*When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. 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?* [*Eccl 5:4-6*].

Jesus means that it is better not to vow at all than to make vows. The passage in *Ecclesiastes* does not say it is a sin to take a vow. David also affirms this when he says:

“*… who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD,* ***who keeps his oath even when it hurts****…”* [*Ps 15:1-4*].

David gives the requirement for entering into God’s Holy Hill (Mount Zion); he lists a couple of things, one of which is a man who keeps his oaths even when it is inconvenient to do so. The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that God anger is against those who do not keep oaths and David tells us that God rewards – with a dwelling place in His Holy Hill – the man who keeps oaths. It is important to keep oaths because they are binding and will not be without consequence for those who break them and will be with reward for those who keep them.

The Jews thought they had found an escape, they probably thought that if they swore by something that is not binding and fail to fulfil the vow or are found to be untruthful (whether intentionally or not), they would not be accountable. Jesus pointed out the falsehood in their reasoning. In *Matthew 23*, Jesus plainly taught that false doctrine regarding oaths made the converts of the Pharisees twice sons of Gehenna than the Pharisees. Jesus said the Pharisees travelled long distances to make converts and by their false teaching, made these new converts twice sons of Gehenna. The first false doctrine of the Pharisees he pointed out right after this weighty statement is the false teaching of the Pharisees on oaths. He said that the Pharisees were making twice sons of Gehenna by teaching them that they could break oaths made by the temple, and the altar. **OATH BREAKING – according to Jesus – MAKES ONE TWICE A SON OF GEHENNA**. This means that those who broke their oaths, who unfortunately had been taught that their oaths were not binding, were actually headed for Gehenna because of the broken oaths. The Pharisees taught them that certain oaths were not binding or not as binding as other oaths; Jesus taught that regardless of the teachings of their leaders, the oaths they made were still binding because when they made them by the things such as the temple and altar, they were making them by God.

So, when Jesus instructs us to let our yes be yes and no be no and that anything more comes from the devil, He’s warning against into falling into the devil’s trap. The point is the devil will tempt people into making oaths they may not be able to keep and end up breaking those oaths and bringing them into the danger of Gehenna. The safest thing is to let yes be yes, and no be no.

# **Conclusion**

Swearing in itself is not a sin, Jesus was not teaching that it was, He was however teaching against thinking that one was not making an oath to God when he broke his oath or lied under oath because he thinks his oath are not by God. Those who break their oaths to God are in danger of hell; in Jesus’ words, they are twice sons of Gehenna, i.e., their going to Gehenna is sure.

It is not just okay for God and angels to swear; anyone can but the best thing is to avoid the devil’s trap by swearing at all.