

Yes, Yes, No, No!

Dinner looks great and the food tastes wonderful. Mom sure knows how to cook. I always enjoy mom's cooking. Well, I guess I enjoy food. Dad just finished talking about his work again. He talks about work every night. This time he was all excited about his new responsibilities. I wish Mimi would not talk about her girl friend Leah. I never get a chance to talk. Mom and Mimi do all of the talking at dinner and they are always doing things together. I sure wish Mom would do something with me. She is always promising to take me somewhere but she never does. Always something more important happens . . . Is this true in your family? Is this what Jesus was talking about when He said,

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD. But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God . . ." (NASB) Matthew 5:33-37

MAKING OATHS. This is the third time in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus says, "You have heard" and then quotes part of the Old Testament. This time He is talking about oaths or what we, today, would call a promise. Oaths, vows and covenants are part of every culture and were common in the Jewish culture. An oath declares something to be true or makes a promise. A vow is usually a promise with conditions attached, and a covenant is an oath or promise between two

people. A vow is the result of an oath. So it is not surprising the NASB, NIV and NKJV Bibles have Jesus saying different things,

YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS (NASB)

Do not break your oath (NIV)

You shall not swear falsely (NKJV)

OATHS AND VOWS

"Oaths are of two types: assertory and promissory. Assertory oaths are taken to clear oneself of a charge . . . Promissory oaths, the more prevalent type, impose an obligation upon the oath taker . . . A covenant . . . is a promissory oath."

"Vows are promissory . . . but they differ from promissory oaths in that they are conditional. They are to be fulfilled. For example, if Jacob returns home safely (Genesis 28:20-21), or if Israel is victorious over the Canaanites (Num. 21:2) . . .

Milgrom, Jacob. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, New York., 1990, p. 488.

But Jesus used only one word for “break your oath” or “false vows.” The Greek word Jesus used was *epiorkeo*. It means “to swear falsely” or “to promise and not fulfill.” He may have been referring to the following passages,

And you shall not swear falsely by My name . . . (NASB) Lev. 19:12

If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (NASB) Num. 30:2

When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. (NASB) Deut. 23:21

Jesus was correcting the false meanings given to God’s Word by the Jewish religious leaders.

YOU HAVE HEARD. The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes taught that there were oaths that were binding and then there were oaths that were not binding. They taught that an oath made by “heaven and earth,” or by “Jerusalem” was not binding (Nedarim, 1.3, Shabout, 4.13); but if the oath was made while facing Jerusalem, the oath was binding. Shabout 4.13 says that an oath by God’s name was binding, but vows of incitement, of exaggeration, of error and under constraint were not binding. They declared that vows made by the Torah were nothing, but vows made by the words

written in the Torah were binding. Vows in which the words “temple” and “altar” occurred were also binding; and the list of examples goes on.

BUT I SAY. Having reminded them about what they had heard, Jesus emphatically warns them to not make an oath by heaven, earth, Jerusalem or by your head, but to let your word be “Yes, yes No, no” (Matthew 5:37). Some have taken Jesus’ words to mean that Christians should not make oaths such as an oath to one’s country, or to sign a contract. But that is not what Jesus is saying. In the Old Testament, God never said, “Do not make vows, oaths or covenants.” In fact, God made an oath to Abraham in Gen. 15:1-6, Gen, 22:15-18, and Gen. 26:3-5. Later in Hebrews 6:13 we are told this was a promise from God,

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself. (NASB) Heb. 6:13

MAKE OATHS & VOWS. Acts 18:8 tells us the apostle Paul had made an oath of a different kind - a short term Nazirite vow. If Jesus was prohibiting oaths and vows, why did the apostle make a Nazirite vow and has God made oaths? The answer is that Jesus was not saying, “Do not make an oath.”

Jesus was rejecting the Jewish religious leaders’ teaching that some oaths, vows or promises did not really count. For example, if you made a promise or vow to your manager at work, the Pharisees might say that that one counts but not the one to your spouse, daughter or son. The promise

Making Oaths - The Mishnah

“I swear I won’t eat,” and he ate a piece of bread made of wheat, a piece of bread made of barley, and a piece of bread made of spelt, he is liable on one count only . . .

“I swear that I won’t eat a piece of bread made of wheat, a piece of bread made of barley, and a piece of bread made of spelt,” and he ate - he is liable to on each and every count. - Shabout, 3.2

you made to your credit card company or to your mortgage company is not as important as the one you made to your church. Or, the commitment you made to your mother or father is not really as important as that football game, the conversation with your girl friend, or that movie that you want to see. For others the marriage vow is an old, tired idea - something like a vow made to Jerusalem while your back was turned.

But Jesus said let your yes be yes and your no be no. If you say it, do it. God expects you not to lie,

. . . those who fear the LORD; He swears to his own hurt, and does not change. (NASB) Ps. 15:4

CONCLUSION. Jephath is an extreme example of one

who kept a horrible oath (Judges 11:29-40). Jephath promised that if God would grant him victory over the nation of Ammon, he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house when he returned. It was a rash vow because it was his daughter who came out to welcome him home.

We have all promised to do something and then not kept the promise. Some of us make promises never intending to do what we say. Others make promises and are forever canceling obligations, or making one excuse after another. The excuse may be a good one, but God says, we should “swear to our own hurt.” What kind of promises do you make?

Our words show that our plans and promises depend on God with the intent that we will fulfill our obligation to our own hurt. D. Bonhoeffer comments, “The disciple is called to be light even in his word” (The Cost of Discipleship).