

Jesus said, "Do not swear at all." When I was in third grade I discovered one day during class time that if I bent a straight pin in half I could use a rubber band to shoot it so that it would stick into things. Without any malice whatsoever and with the objectivity of a scientist about to test a hypothesis I drew back and fired the pin into the leg of Bob Bell who was sitting next to me. It stuck. The silence of that peaceful classroom was suddenly pierced with a loud "Damn" issueing from the lips of Bob. Up until then I had always liked Bob and thought he was a real nice guy. But when I heard him utter that terrible swear word my estimation of his moral character dropped precipitously. From that moment on I had serious doubts as to whether Bob Bell was a Christian since he swore. It never occurred to me that he may have been thinking the same of me for shooting him in the leg with a pin.

In my home I was taught by word and example that Christians should not swear or use profanity. I can remember my mother washing out my mouth with soapy water on one occasion for uttering some oath. I never heard my mother swear or use the name of God in a frivolous way. The strongest oath my father usually uttered in my hear-

ing was "Rats". I did hear him say "damn" once. It was such a shock that until this day I can remember the time and place he uttered it and the way he sheepishly glanced at me to see if I had heard.

When I was in high school and college my thinking about swearing changed a little bit. I thought, "What harm can it be to say a few swear words every once in a while. Isn't the prohibition of swearing a little petty when the world has so many more serious ethical and moral problems. I was turned off by pious people who were blind to racism and poverty but who never swore. I was impressed by seminary professors who swore because they were angry about injustice. I thought, "How hypocritical it is to think that saying, 'Damn' in a moment of intense pain is worse than shooting a pin into a friend's leg." Jesus condemned the pharisees for taking seriously a lot of petty things while neglecting the weightier matters of the law such as justice and mercy.

But now that I am an adult my thinking about swearing has changed again. When I think about it my parents' strict beliefs and consistent behavior which prohibited swearing were one of the greatest subtle influences on my

faith in God today. Words and the way they are used were extremely important to them. Words like "God", "Hell", and "Damn" really meant something to them. They believed in the reality behind those words. It wasn't simply politeness that made them refrain from using them. Without their being aware of it they were communicating to me that God is present with us all the time. He takes what we say seriously. I learned from them the truth of what Jesus once said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter...." My parents were telling me indirectly that they really believe in God as a daily reality in their lives who is concerned with even the things we say. And if he is concerned even with my petty words how much more concerned he must be with the weightier matters of the law such as injustice, poverty, and hunger. My parents example in this matter influenced me to believe in the God of the Bible who cares about me and who is present with me all the time.

But the main issue in our Scripture Lesson is not the use of profanity. Jesus was talking about the ancient practice of swearing oaths. According to one biblical

an oath is "primarily" a "self-cursing should one not be telling the truth. It strengthens the human word and is meant to give an assurance that what is said is true." You see, the oaths and the swear words which so many of use meaninglessly today were once taken seriously. Today many of us use the words "God" and "damn" and "hell" in a absolutely meaningless way, as expletives. But they are called swear words because throughout the ages men and women have called upon God to bear witness to their word and promises. They have invited God to damn them and send them to hell if they break their word and promise. It was a serious thing to take an oath.

In the Old Testament God gave his people laws regulating swearing. First, the children of Israel were to swear by the name of God alone. They were not to follow the pagan practice of swearing to non-existent gods and goddesses. An oath therefore for the ancient Jew bore witness to the reality and presence of a personal God who hears what we say and judges us for our lies and broken promises. And we, as Christians, still believe that God continues to hear what we say and continues to judge us.

Secondly, God commanded, "You shall not swear falsely." In other words, God is saying, "If you are so bold to call me to bear witness to your word you had better tell the truth." To tell a lie under oath exposed a person to the wrath of God in the Old Testament thinking. Everyone who swore an oath would invite God to curse him or her if the truth were not told. And there is no reason why we, as Christians, should believe otherwise.

Thirdly, God commanded, "When a man or a woman vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." Promises are sacred. And unless we have promised to do something that is sinful we have a solemn obligation before God to keep our promises, even when it hurts. King David, in Psalm 15, extolled the character of anyone who "swaureth to his own hurt, and changeth not." All of us who were married in the church or who have had babies baptised; all of us who have joined the church; we have taken solemn vows in the presence of God to perform certain duties. And it's discouraging to see how lightly so many of us take those vows and how lightly we break them. Today I will be asking the newly elected elders to make certain promises. I'll be asking them a total of 9 questions

and you, the congregation, will also be asked questions. For many people the act of ordination is one of the most sacred and memorable events in their lives. These are solemn and sacred promises that we are making. We are bound to perform them.

The Old Testament Law of God, therefore, permitted oaths if they were sworn to the one true God. And such an oath bound a person to tell the truth or to keep a promise upon threat of a curse. Now Jesus did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it. And we have to interpret the words of our Scripture Lesson in that context; in the total context of the Sermon on the Mount. But the scribes and pharisees of Jesus' day found a way to get around God's holy law. They taught that if a person swore by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one's own head, the promise could be broken or ~~a~~lie could be told since God wasn't really called upon to bear witness. It was kind of like justifying a lie because you had your fingers crossed. So the scribes and pharisees countenanced lies and deception and broken promises through a verbal technicality. They gave people the impression that the only time you have to tell the truth or keep a promise is when you swear an oath to God. In every other situation you are free to

tell lies and make promises you have no intention of performing.

This whole hypocritical attitude made Jesus furious. He totally rejected the teaching of the scribes and pharisees concerning oaths. We might paraphrase Jesus to say, in our Scripture Lesson, "The scribes and pharisees think that they are bound to tell the truth only when they have sworn an oath to God. That's absolutely ridiculous. We are always bound to tell the truth and to keep our promises whether or not we have taken a formal oath. There are no areas of our lives where God is absent. Every moment we live we are in the presence of God. You should considered yourself to be on oath, in the presence of God, whenever you speak. So swear not at all because in so doing people will think you are no different from the scribes and pharisees. In contrast to them your lies should be so honest that a simple "yes" or "no" should be all that's needed to verify the truth of what you are saying or to assure someone that you are sincere in your promise."

Some people have interpreted these words of Jesus to forbid an oath taken in the court-room to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. My own personal

opinion is that that's a kind of legalistic interpretation of this passage. The whole point of the Sermon on the Mount is to expose the legalism which enables and encourages us to break the Law of God in Spirit while keeping it outwardly to the letter. The purpose of Jesus was to expose this legalism and teach that the law of God must be kept in our hearts as well as outwardly. Someone might refuse to take an oath on the basis of this passage and still lie. That person might pat himself on his back and say to himself, "Well, I've been true to the Word of God. I refused to take an oath." But if he lied anyway he is guilty of the very thing the parisees were doing. It's clear to me that when Jesus prohibited swearing his concern was to teach us that every word we say and every promise that we make should be as binding as an oath. Because is always present, because he hears our every word, and even knows our thoughts and the intent of our heart everything we say is ~~spoken~~ in God's presence. Every word is as binding as an oath. Every promise is binding.

I have to confess these verses really got to me personally. And if we could all experience the ever-present reality of God in our lives we would quickly see how prone we are to lie and deceive. And when you think about it

isn't most of the trouble in the world caused by words; by lies and deception. Treaties are broken and ignored. Think of all the broken treaties and broken promises the U.S. government has made to the native American Indians. It's a disgrace on our nation. Think of the political embarrassment President Carter faces because of his promise, "I will never lie to you." Knowing what I do about my own human nature that is a promise I could not make. Last week in Time magazine I read a review of a new book about the Alger Hiss trial, and how the evidence seems to support the accusation that he was lying and that he perjured himself. What a terrible thing perjury is to us. But to tell a lie is as bad as perjury for a Christian. Because if it's a terrible thing to perjure yourself before a judge and jury, how much more terrible it is to perjure ourselves before the Judge of Heaven and Earth.

The words of Jesus made me do a lot of soul-searching. How serious do I take what I say? How often do I countenance or encourage little white lies? Ask yourself the same questions. How many of the problems and anxieties in your life can be traced to your being less than honest with your husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, friend or neighbor? How scrupulous are you in your ~~life~~

business practices? How honestly do you prepare your income tax forms? If you are like me you need to go to Christ for forgiveness. We need to repent and recognise that we live in God's presence every moment of our lives. God is our judge and we are oath all the time and every lie and deception perjures us in the sight of the One who will come again to judge the quick and the dead.

We need to follow the lead of the apostle Peter. Remember how, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took a solemn oath denying that he ever knew Jesus? Matthew tells us Peter denied Jesus three times. When asked the second time if he were a disciple we read, "He denied it with an oath." The third time he was asked he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." Then Peter remembered ~~remember~~ the promise he had made to Jesus, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And he went out into the night and wept bitterly. Like Peter we need to let the Spirit of God search and melt our heart in repentance. We need to ask the risen Lord to make us honest men and women and young people, in whom there is no guile; men and women who mean what we say and say what we mean.

AMEN