

“Swearing an oath was a religious act, and doing so by a false god was tantamount to recognition of that deity. Swearing by the Lord’s name, on the other hand, is sometimes described as the sum of true religion (Ps. 63:12 [Eng. 11]). This shows the centrality of these prohibitions (cf. Jer. 12:16). The other nations are teaching Israel to swear by the name of their gods. However, when they turn to the Lord they themselves will begin to swear by his name. Thus the separation enjoined here may have a positive end in providing an ethnic entity in which the true name is revered, so that others may come to acknowledge it.” [NICOT]

The passages in Deuteronomy occur right before Israel enters their first REAL TEST of fidelity to YHWH – in the commands to avoid all OTHER “gods”.

So the context of Deut 6.13 shows this clearly. The command is about not swearing in OTHER GODS’ names – not about swearing itself:

“And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, 11 and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, 12 then take care **lest you forget the LORD**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 13 **It is the LORD your God** you shall fear. **Him** you shall serve and **by his name** you shall swear. 14 You shall not go **after other gods**, the **gods of the peoples who are around you**—

“swear only by his name Swearing by the Lord’s name is an **expression of loyalty** to Him, and **swearing by the name of another god** would indicate a belief that that god is effective and has authority (see Comment to 5:11). The Bible therefore considers it a test of fidelity that the Israelite swear by YHVH alone. When foreign nations in the future recognize the Lord exclusively, they too will swear by Him alone. Like much else in biblical theology and law, this expression of loyalty to God is **comparable to the ways of showing loyalty to a king**; in a Sumerian prayer the writer **denies that he has sworn an oath by a foreign king**. [JPS]

And in Deut 10:17ff, this is repeated in a **loyalty** context (quite beautiful):

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. 18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and **loves** the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. 19 Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve **him** and hold fast to **him**, and by **his** name you shall swear.”

This is just a call to monotheism. God is the core, and anything involving a god (like swearing) could only be done with YHWH.

Again, it is no different than saying that when you have to swear to testify in court, you cannot say “I swear to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help me Zeus”. You have to say “so help me God”. It is not telling you to go out making countless oaths, but just that the oaths are regulated.

There is a special case of swearing allegiance to God (or a king). This still involves an oath and is even going to be a (theologically legitimate) part of the eschatological future:

- Isaiah 19:18 -- In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and **swear allegiance to the LORD** of hosts. One of these will be called the City of Destruction.
- Isaiah 65:16 -- so that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall **swear by the God of truth**; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes.
- Isaiah 45:23 -- By myself I have **sworn**; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall **swear allegiance**.'

Notice that this last verse is repeated in the NT (albeit translated a bit differently):

- Romans 14:11 -- for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

Philippians 2:10–11 -- so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In the Romans passage, the 'swear allegiance' is stated as a 'confess [loyalty]' as it is in Philippians.

So:

1. Vows were never commanded,
2. When a vow was made, it must be faithfully done
3. When you were required to swear in civil or religious ceremony, it could only be done invoking YHWH as enforcer (and not another god)
4. When you chose to create a legally-binding and theologically enforced covenant-level verbal commitment, it could only be done invoking YHWH as enforcer (not another god).
5. Any swearing by YHWH's name must be absolutely truthful and performed (if a commitment).
6. Any swearing could only be in YHWH's name, in opposition to the names of other gods.

With that background and looking at the passage now, the OT statement Jesus gives is this:

You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.

Where does this come from?

- The closest parallel to the FIRST HALF ('shall not swear falsely') is this:

Leviticus 19:12: You shall not steal; you shall not deal **falsely**; you shall not **lie** to one another. 12 You **shall not swear by my name falsely**, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."

- The closest parallel to the SECOND HALF ('perform your oaths to the Lord') are these:

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, "This is what the LORD has commanded. 2 **If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge**, he shall not break his word. He **shall do** according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30.1-2)

"If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. 22 **But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.** 23 You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have **voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.** [Deut 23.21ff]

"When you **vow a vow to God**, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 **It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay** [Eccl 5.4-5]

So, the verses pointed to by the **first half** are about **NOT** swearing – avoiding deceit – and there is no 'command' to swear there at all. (There are other situations in judicial proceedings that require it, of course.).

And the verses pointed to in the **second half** explicitly say that the Israelites were NOT COMMANDED to make oaths/vows to YHWH.

So, it might be considered a false claim to say that "YHWH commanded oaths to be taken", whether in His name or not.

So, whatever Jesus is referring to in this "but I say to you" statement, it cannot be considered a repudiation (or vilification) of the two statements about oaths/vows referred to in the opening slide.

So, what WAS His antithesis about?

Taking into consideration all the historical data between Moses and Jesus, we see a strong parallel to His antithesis on **divorce**.

In that one, He says the '*you have said – give a writ of divorce – but I say to you—anybody who divorces does something bad*'.

In that case, the 'concession' made by God in the law was due to the 'hardness of heart' and by the time we get to Jesus' time, the abuses of that concession were horrendous. The ability to dump a life-long wife for a younger woman reeked of our 'Las Vegas weddings and divorce weekends'. So, Jesus – pointing to the spirit of the law -- strengthened the law CONSIDERABLY, eliminating loopholes that were exploited by men.

In our case, the abuses of swearing had also proliferated hugely, even from OT times.

Swearing falsely can only be done when you 'swear' and Jesus was cutting off much (but not all) of that abuse.

In the OT, we see YHWH's displeasure at such deceit 'in His name':

- Psalm 24:4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and **does not swear deceitfully.**
- Is 45:48 Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and who came from the waters of Judah, **who swear by the name of the LORD** and confess the God of Israel, **but not in truth or right.**
- Jeremiah 4:2 and **if you swear, 'As the LORD lives,' in truth, in justice, and in righteousness,** then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory."

- Jeremiah 5:2 Though they say, “As the LORD lives,” **yet they swear falsely**.
- Jeremiah 7:9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, **swear falsely**, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,
- Hosea 4:15 Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-aven, and **swear not, “As the LORD lives.”** [NOTICE that this is worded as an absolute PROHIBITION, just like JESUS seemed to be saying.]
- Malachi 3:5 “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, **against those who swear falsely**, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. [Notice that swearing falsely is right up there in YHWH’s eyes as oppression and road bandits!]
- Zechariah 8:17 do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, **and love no false oath**, for all these things I **hate**, declares the LORD.”

So, these things were problems in the OT itself, and between the testaments this growing use of oaths and deceptive use of oaths was noted in the literature:

“The closest intertestamental parallel seems to be *Sir. 23:11*: “The one who swears many oaths is full of iniquity, and the scourge will not leave his house. If he swears in error, his sin remains on him, and if he disregards it he sins doubly; if he swears a false oath, he will not be justified, for his house will be filled with calamities.” (...) *Second Enoch 49:1–2* **twice swears that it is good not to have to swear!** Josephus (J.W. 2.135) contends that the **Essenes avoid oaths and that what they say is firmer than an oath**, but we have no such command from the Dead Sea literature itself. The entire mishnaic tractate *Šebu‘ot* is given over to **detailed casuistic legislation** on making and keeping oaths, while the tractate *Nedarim* devotes extensive attention to vows. [Commentary on the NT use of the OT]

So, at the time of Jesus we have a parallel situation to that of divorce: abuse of what was a basic staple of covenant, court, legal, and diplomatic life: the oath, with an appeal to God for witness and enforcement.

“Oaths were permitted in the OT hence the legislation to insist on keeping one’s oaths quoted here. Now Jesus seems to be excluding them altogether. But, second, **there are other NT texts that call into question an approach that would absolutize Jesus’ words** to the same degree as in the first set of antitheses (...). Paul twice invokes God’s name to assure the truth of his claims (Gal. 1:20; 2 Cor. 1:23), while Heb. 6:13–14 refers to God himself “swearing” in his own name. In Matt. 26:63–64, Jesus will reply to the high priest’s question “under oath.” **The context in Matthew (5:34–36) explains the kind of swearing that Jesus is prohibiting: that in which at least some of the Jewish leaders were caught up, establishing an elaborate casuistry of which kinds of oaths were binding and which were not, so that it became difficult ever to take certain people at their word.** The goal for believers is to be so trustworthy in keeping their promises that oaths prove unnecessary (5:37). France (1985: 124) explains, “An oath is needed only if a person’s word alone is unreliable; it is an admission of failure in truthfulness.” Jesus expands on several of these sentiments in Matt. 23:16–22. James 5:12 either alludes to or actually quotes Matt. 5:37. [Commentary on the NT use of the OT]

[The same motif can be seen in YHWH’s frequent condemnation of ‘empty’ or ‘manipulative’ **sacrifices** in the OT. Sacrifices offered with pure hands and heart were accepted and honored; Israelites that offered sacrifices in malice or deception were ordered to NO LONGER bring them. No contradiction—just a conditional.]

When we look at the fuller quote in Matthew, we see some additional verbiage added:

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by **heaven**, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the **earth**, for it is his footstool, or by **Jerusalem**, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your **head**, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

[Not sure I understand why somebody would swear by their ‘head’ back then. This doesn’t fit the pattern of the first 3, nor does it show up in the OT. The closest meaning might be something like “I swear by my life”—meaning you can TAKE my life (as collateral?) if I am false. But the ‘you cannot make one hair white or black’ I find confusing too. Maybe because it is not THEIRS to offer--?—since they cannot control the tiniest feature?]

This criticism is supplemented by His comments in 23:16ff:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ 17 You blind fools! **For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?** 18 And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ 19 You blind men! **For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?** 20 **So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”**

Notice that this is similar to His words in the ‘no oaths’ passage, but in this passage He seems to UPHOLD the practice of oath-taking, stating that such oaths are binding.

- “In the third woe Jesus pointed out the tricky character of the leaders. (In the first two woes Jesus spoke of the leaders’ effects on others; in the other five woes He spoke of the leaders’ own characters and actions.) **When taking oaths, they made fine lines of distinction that could possibly invalidate their oaths.** If one swore by the temple, or by the altar of the temple, it meant nothing to them. **While thus appearing to be making a binding oath, they inwardly had no intention of keeping it.** But if one swore by the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, he would be bound by the oath. But Jesus said they were wrong in suggesting that gold was greater than the temple and a gift greater than the altar. Jesus pointed out that any oath based on the temple or things in it **was binding** for behind the temple was the One who dwelt in it. This was parallel to making an oath by God’s throne, for that oath was also binding because of the One who sat on the throne. **Such distinctions by the religious leaders were condemned by Jesus, for they were clearly deceptive and dishonest.** Jesus denounced those leaders as blind guides (v. 16), blind fools (v. 17), and blind men (v. 19; cf. vv. 24, 26). [BKC]
- “The discussion here is at first a **surprise** after Mt. 5:33–37, with its ‘You are not to swear [an oath] at all’. But in both cases part of the **concern is to assert the need to take full personal responsibility for one’s own word** (whether supported by an oath or not). Whereas the discussion in Mt. 5 is about whether one should (voluntarily) make oaths, the discussion in Mt. 23 is about the binding nature of oaths once they have been taken. [NICGNT]

- “Saul Lieberman (Greek in Jewish Palestine [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1942], pp. 115–43), after studying the difficult and conflicting Jewish evidence, argues that the rabbis fought the abuses of oaths and vows among the unlearned masses. This is doubtless so. **But the way they fought them was by differentiating between what was binding and what was not.** In that sense, wittingly or unwittingly they encouraged evasive oaths and therefore lying. Jesus cut through these complexities by insisting that men must tell the truth. ... Some writers have supposed that 5:33–37—which, formally at least, abolishes oaths—contradicts 23:20–22, which maintains that all oaths are binding but does not abolish them. In fact, however, vv. 20–22 provide the rationale for 5:33–37. All oaths are in some way related to God. All are therefore binding, **and thus evasive oaths are disallowed.** On the other hand, the heart of the issue is telling the truth; and it **is probably a new kind of casuistry that, failing to see this, insists that Jesus in 5:33–37 abolishes all oaths of every kind.** [EBC1]
- “This casuistry of the Pharisees amounted to an **evasion of duty** before God and was roundly condemned. **Two different loopholes** involving empty distinctions are exposed, one in 23:16–17 concerning the Temple and gold within it, and another in 23:18–19, involving the altar and what is sacrificed on it. Although the scribes and Pharisees viewed some oaths as binding and others as non-binding, Jesus taught that this distinction was meaningless and **that all oaths are valid** (23:20–22). He totally rejected their halakhic distinctions on valid and invalid oaths. Previously in this Gospel, Jesus flatly denied the need for any oaths at all (5:33–37). It is well known that the halakha on oaths and vows was very important in Second Temple Judaism (m. Nedarim and CD 15). [CBC]

And this heightening of the law’s intent was **not in itself a new law**, because we noted earlier that Jesus accepted the high priest’s order to swear under oath, that there are several legitimate oaths by believers in the NT, and that there will be oaths of allegiance in the Kingdom of the Son. And we should note that Jesus’ own use of “*amen*” -- (“truly, I say unto you”) even sounds more than a simple “YES” or “NO” – and looks like a ‘solemn’ marker. Why did he use that word in front of simple statements—instead of just the simple statements THEMSELVES? Why say “Truly, I say to you...” instead of “I say to you...”?

“Despite the differences with the first three antitheses noted above, Jesus continues to be the law’s sovereign interpreter. He also opposes a system of legal interpretation that introduces loopholes or exceptions into moral commands that vitiate the original intent of those commands. **At the same time, he is not replacing one law with another; contemporary application will have to be sensitive to each individual context** [CNTOT]

Okay, last points:

Jesus never actually said that those OT **laws themselves were authored** by the Evil one—only that anybody using such devices in His time would be creating LESS TRUTH (e.g. evil) than simply being honest.

In fact, the Greek construction there is **not clear on whether the reference is to “general evil” or to “General Evil** – i.e. satan), so it is presumptuous to say that it is a CLEAR reference to SATAN, when the text itself is not so precise:

- “*Tou ponērou* could be rendered **either** “of evil” or “of the evil one” (“the father of lies,” John 8:44). The **same ambiguity** recurs at Mt 5:39; 6:13; 13:38. [EBC1]
- “*Let your word be, ‘Yes, yes’, ‘No, no’; what is [more] ‘abundant’ than this is of evil [origin]* .Anything beyond the bare assertion takes away from the consistent transparent truthfulness to which Jesus calls, and inasmuch as it does this it is the product of **an evil impulse**. [footnote here: “A reference to the **Evil One is less likely**, but not impossible.”; NIGTC]

- “Jesus’ prohibition of swearing is based on the assumption that God requires truthfulness. A simple Yes or No should be all that is needed. As soon as it is necessary to bolster it with an oath in order to persuade others to believe what is said, the ideal of transparent truthfulness has been compromised. The need for such an addition is “from evil: [footnote 129: “Cf. *Sir* 23:11: “The one who swears many oaths is full of iniquity.” *Sir* 23:9–11 is a strong invective against swearing as inevitably linked with sinfulness.”] it betrays our failure to live up to God’s standard of truthfulness. **The option of translating “from the Evil One” (see p. 193, n. 55) would not essentially change the sense:** whether the moral failure is blamed on an abstract principle of “evil” or on the personal intervention of the devil (the “father of lies,” John 8:44) does not affect its evil character. The context here gives us no obvious reason for preferring the personal to the abstract sense. [NICNT]
- “The tendency to take oaths concedes to prevarication and thus originates in evil, which **may subtly refer** to Satan, the originator of deception. [BECNT]

A good summary of how this is understood – as being the higher plane of ethics versus the compromises of reality—are highlighted in the comparison with divorce:

“A more pertinent question for us is **whether Jesus’ words here are intended as a literal regulation for all human circumstances**, including **oaths of political allegiance** or the oath required in **many courts of law**: should Christians refuse to take such oaths? The issue is **similar to that with regard to divorce: Jesus’ absolute pronouncement sets out the true will of God, but in human life that will is not always followed, and there is still a place for legal oaths** (as for divorce regulations) to cope with the actual untruthfulness of people, even sadly sometimes of disciples. They **should** not be needed, but in practice they **serve a remedial purpose in a world** where the ethics of the kingdom of heaven are not always followed. **Refusal to take a required oath can in such circumstances convey quite the wrong impression.** Jesus’ illustrations of the “greater righteousness” are not to be treated as if they were a new set of literal regulations to replace those of the scribes and Pharisees. For Jesus’ own response when “put on oath” by the high priest see below on 26:63–64, and for other NT oaths cf. 2 Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20; 1 Thess 5:27.” [NICNT]

At the end of the day, the data indicates that Jesus was neither nullifying the use of oaths in required settings, nor was He somehow vilifying the YHWH of the OT in this passage. Like the divorce antithesis and the retaliation antithesis, He was calling people back to the core VALUES in the OT passages—truthfulness/transparency, fidelity/loyalty to one’s spouse, and pre-emptive goodness as a deterrent to social evil—instead of ‘instant revenge’.

We will see this pattern in the upcoming issues too – but here I remind you to prayerfully submit to the Word, in your search to know the Living, loving, faithful Father—

On to the next – when I can – my prayers are with you (and I hope you ask Father to help me in my interactions with His Word too-thanks.