

The sergeant barked: "To cross this river, keep your muskets high, your powder dry, and don't lose the ram rods." The soldiers thought he was weird as they lifted their semi-automatic weapons. His archaic expression meant keep the weapons in a usable condition. One of the soldiers wet his weapon. In his defence, he replied that he had not disobeyed. He had no musket, powder, or ram rod!

In the Old Testament, God had given his people clear instructions about being honest, and doing what they promised.

God said in Leviticus 19:11-12, *you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.* And in Numbers 30:2 *When a man makes 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.*

And in Deuteronomy 23:21-23 *If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. Whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth.*

His intention is that we are to be honest and trustworthy, whether we make a vow or not. That is like the order to keep the muskets high, powder dry, and do not lose the ram rods.

But by the time of Jesus, pedants ruled in Jewish Law. The Mishnah is a series of documents detailing how Jews understood the Law.

A whole section of the Mishnah concerns Oaths.

The Pharisees had very pedantically rearranged the intention of the Law. They used the law to get out of a sticky promise. They developed a system of oaths which ranged in stickability. Jesus argued against their system, here and in Matthew 23, where he details more of it.

Here is an example of the type of oaths they lived with.

If a Jewish man said to you 'By Jerusalem I will deliver your camel tomorrow at 9am' then be prepared for a long wait. For the oath 'By Jerusalem' was not binding, but if he had said 'Towards Jerusalem I will deliver your camel tomorrow at 9am', then expect it at 9am tomorrow.

Much time and effort went into learning and arguing over what oaths were binding. Matthew 23:16-22 *Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? and you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.*

Like the soldier, the Pharisees thought they could disobey.

But Jesus showed their hypocrisy. And showed God's intentions about how honestly we promise things in Matthew 5:33-37-

*Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 one hair white or black. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' or 'No', 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

God's desire is that we be people of our word. Honest and trustworthy. Not trying to weasel out of promises, but speaking the truth. They used oaths as a way of covering up the truth.

How are your words? Do you mean what you say, or are your promises scattered in tiny pieces like some politicians. They justify broken promises by saying things like they did not have all the facts. Who does except God? Every decision that is made, and every promise that is made is missing some of the facts. That is one of the facts of life that imperfect humans have to cope with.

Your failed promises cannot be waived away, whether in a cloud of fake oaths, or under other excuses designed to side step the truth of our failure.

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We all have a bad record because we are not God, and we cannot see all possible conditions which may stop us keeping our promises, BUT Jesus slammed shut the oaths which allowed people to deliberately mislead. NO oaths!

However, there are times when we are asked to swear to the truth. What should we do?

Hebrews 6:17 says *when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath...*

God himself swore by oaths at significant points of history, to allow His people to have great confidence that he was speaking the truth and could be trusted. In Matthew 26:63-64, we're told that during his trial, Jesus testified under oath.

In Romans 1:9, 2 Corinthians 1:23, and 1 Thessalonians 2:5 and 10, the apostle Paul made oaths while testifying about his personal attitudes.

Since God made oaths, Jesus testified under them, and the apostle Paul had a limited use of them, it helps us understand that a literal understanding of Matthew 5:33-37 is not the intention of Jesus. In fact, a literal understanding may make us as pedantic as the soldier or Pharisees. The last of the 39 Articles of Faith says that we may swear an oath in court without disobeying Jesus' command.

The intention of his command in Matthew 5:33-37 is 2-fold.

[1] He convicts us of our failures in keeping our promises, and forces us to trust in the forgiveness promised by our trustworthy God, which we have in Christ. And,

[2] He gives us the guideline to strive for honesty in our speech, with no oaths normally, unless the situation demands it. However, even when we must, it should make no difference to our attitudes to keeping our word. The benefit of an oath is for the hearer, not for the speaker.

How are our promises? Are we people of our Word?