

SWEARING OF OATHS

Does Matthew 5:34 Forbid Them?



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from
the *King James Version*.

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“You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall swear by His name.”—Deuteronomy 6:13

INTRODUCTION

Those who believe in the God of the Bible do so because they seek to be a part of an eternal life of perfect love, peace, and joy. They place their hopes in the New Covenant, which was founded upon the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ¹. This covenant is a binding agreement between God and His children. It is established by the act of water baptism (and the laying on of hands) whereby God promises eternal life² and the convert swears an oath to love God and keep His commandments (Law)³. But there is a problem. Jesus Christ, as recorded in the book of Matthew, seemingly forbids the swearing of any oath:

MATTHEW 5:34 I /Jesus Christ/ say to you, do not swear at all ...

God’s promise of eternal life is the foundation of the New Covenant but every covenant is established upon an oath⁴. If Jesus Christ forbid the swearing of oaths, then no one can be in covenant with God and no one will receive eternal life! Therefore, it is vital to understand what Scripture says regarding the swearing of oaths.

Covenants and oaths were an accepted and even commanded part of the statutes in the Old Testament. If the record of Matthew is accurate, then Jesus Christ’s command against the swearing of oaths also **eliminates** it from the Law of God given to Moses. This, too, raises a grave concern because Jesus Himself said He did NOT come to abolish or change one jot or tittle of the Law⁵. If Jesus Christ abolished the law regarding the swearing of oaths, it would

¹ Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

² John 3:15-16; Titus 1:2; Heb. 9:15; 1 John 2:25.

³ 1 Cor 7:19; 1 Tim. 6:14; 1 John 2:3-4; 3:22, 24; 5:2-3.

⁴ Gen. 26:28; 29:12-14; 2 Kings 11:4; Ps. 105:9; Ezek. 17:13-19; Hosea 10:4.

⁵ Matthew 5:18.

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be nothing less than a *lie* and that would mean He sinned and cannot be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind!

The eternal life of every Christian is in question as long as the conflict with Matthew 5:34 remains unresolved. The following is scriptural proof and historical evidence of the true meaning and translation of Matthew 5:34 as it pertains to the Law of God, covenants, and the swearing of oaths.

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CHAPTER 1

A discussion of certain terms is necessary to understand their application in Scripture before addressing Matthew 5:34. The following terms and their definitions are used throughout.

Glossary—Promise, Oath, Vow, Swear

An *oath* and *vow* (used as a noun) are one and the same. Both are a solemn promise, which is a serious personal commitment to fulfill certain actions, services, or deeds. *Swearing* is the formal pledging or declaration of an oath or vow. The Bible records many sworn oaths declared by people and even God Himself. All oaths or vows are witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God whether they are sworn to God or between people.

DEFINITIONS

SOLEMN PROMISE = A serious declaration of assurance to a *commitment* to fulfill or perform certain actions, services, or deeds.

OATH = A solemn promise. All oaths are *witnessed* by and fall under the *jurisdiction* of God by statute⁶.

VOW = Noun: same as an *oath*. Verb: same as *swear*.

SWEAR = The formal pledging or declaration of an *oath*.

JURISDICTION = Authority to make *judgments*.

NOTE: A *vow* is the same as an *oath* but *oath* is used throughout for consistency.

Glossary—Covenant, Witness, Testimony

Covenants are binding agreements between two or more parties. A covenant is established whenever two or more parties swear oaths to each other to fulfill or perform certain actions, services, or

⁶ Num. 30:2; esp. Deut. 23:21-23.

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deeds. A covenant is the formal *record* of the oaths made between parties. Covenants can be between people or with God. Since all oaths are witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God, all covenants likewise are witnessed and adjudicated by Him whether they are with other people or with Him.

DEFINITIONS

COVENANT = A **binding agreement** between two or more parties who each *swear an oath* to fulfill certain actions, services, or deeds. Covenants usually require two or more independent witnesses.

WITNESS = Anyone who provides **sworn testimony**.

TESTIMONY = A **solemn attestation or declaration of the truth** of an event or matter given under oath.

Oaths in the Old Testament

Within the Law of God given to Moses are statutes (laws or commandments) that establish the declaration and use of covenants and oaths (vows). They were integral to many aspects of life in ancient times because oaths and covenants were the basis of most legal agreements, treaties, contracts, etc. A covenant recorded the obligations of both parties that they promised in their oaths. In fact, the Bible itself is divided according to the Old and New Testaments, which are the testimony of God regarding the Old and New Covenants. (*Testament* is a record of the testimony that provides evidence of a truth whereas *covenant* is a binding agreement.)

For example, in the covenant with God, Abraham swore to obey God and, in return, God promised him land, children, and an inheritance. Oaths even played a significant part in sacrificial offerings⁷. The following are examples of oaths and covenants

⁷ Lev. 7:16; 22:21; 23:38; Num. 6:2-21; et al.

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involving Abraham. In the first example, Abraham swore an oath he would not deal falsely with Abimelech or his sons:

GENESIS 21:22-24 And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, “God *is* with you in all that you do. 23 “Now therefore, **swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me**, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that **according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me** and to the land in which you have dwelt.” 24 And **Abraham said, “I will swear.”**

A second covenant with Abimelech established Abraham’s rights to a water well that his men had dug:

GENESIS 21:25-32 Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech’s servants had seized. 26 And Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard *of it* until today.” 27 So **Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.** 28 And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. 29 Then Abimelech asked Abraham, “What *is the meaning of* these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?” 30 And he said, “You will take *these* seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.” 31 Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because **the two of them swore an oath there.** 32 Thus **they made a covenant** at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phicol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.

Another oath was sworn by Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, to find a wife for Isaac and not take one from among the Canaanites:

GENESIS 24:2-9 So Abraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had, “Please, put your hand under my thigh, 3 “and **I will make you swear by the LORD**, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell; 4 “but you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” 5 And the servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman will not be

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willing to follow me to this land. Must I take your son back to the land from which you came?" 6 But Abraham said to him, "Beware that you do not take my son back there. 7 "The LORD God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my family, and who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. 8 "**And if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be released from this oath;** only do not take my son back there." 9 So **the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him** concerning this matter.

Many times when oaths are involved, the stipulation is to "swear to me by God." Abimelech asked Abraham to swear by the name of Abraham's God and Eliezer had to "swear **by the LORD.**" What does it mean to swear "by God" or "by the LORD"?

Before answering that question, the phrase "the LORD" needs to be addressed. "The LORD" is a common English substitution for the Hebrew word *Yehovah* (or *Jehovah*, *Yahweh*, et al) which are all anglicized forms of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton YHVH (or YHWH). Because *lord* is the **title** of someone who has a position of power, authority, or influence (i.e., a master or ruler), 'the' was added to satisfy English grammar. To be an accurate translation, it should have been written simply as "LORD." However, the word LORD is also an insufficient and wrong translation. According to Scripture, YHVH is one of the **names** of God—not a *title*:

EXODUS 6:2-3 And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I *am* the LORD: 3 And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, **by the name of God Almighty [E] Shaddai,** but by My name **Jehovah** was I not known to them.

Translating YHVH as "the LORD" was the result of the Jews' wrong notion that the Tetragrammaton (i.e., the name of God) is never to be written or pronounced. Even though YHVH was written in the original biblical manuscripts, the influence of the Jews ensured it was not rightly translated in most English versions. But contrary to the Jews, God actually **commands** that His name,

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YHVH or *Yehovah*, be spoken because all oaths are required to be sworn by the **name of God**:

DEUTERONOMY 6:13 You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and **shall swear by His name**.

DEUTERONOMY 10:20 You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve Him, and you shall hold fast to Him, and **swear by His name**.

Per the statutes of the Old Testament, all oaths are to be sworn by the name of God. God required the ancient Israelites to swear by His name in part because of the influence of the Egyptians and other pagan nations who swore oaths according to their own gods:

JEREMIAH 12:16 “And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, **to swear by My name, ‘As the LORD [Yehovah] lives,’ as they taught My people to swear by Baal**, then they shall be established in the midst of My people.

Oaths at that time were sworn by the name of a pagan deity because that gave them the greatest authenticity. Any oath that was substantiated by the witness of their deity was considered to be one that could not be changed or broken. Swearing by the name of a pagan god gave it the most legitimacy so, that was a common way to provide assurance that an oath would be carried out.

God is above all gods⁸ so swearing “by Yehovah” publicly showed that the oath was not only witnessed by Him but was also under the jurisdiction of the highest Authority in the heavens and earth. *Yehovah* is the name that ensures the greatest assurance of truthfulness of an oath because God is the faithful and true Witness⁹ with the ultimate authority and power to judge matters:

HEBREWS 6:13, 16 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because **He [God] could swear by no one greater**, He swore by Himself, ... 16 For **men indeed swear**

⁸ 1 Chr. 16:25.

⁹ Rev. 3:14.

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by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

The name of God behind an oath removes any suspicions or disputes among the parties of a covenant. In other words, swearing by the name of God established trust and assurance between the covenant parties. Interestingly, even God swears an oath in His own name, as reflected in the phrase “as I live ...”¹⁰

IMPORTANT: Swearing an oath by the name of God provides the greatest assurance to the other party of the covenant that their oath is truthful, legitimate, and will be fulfilled.

Swearing of oaths were a foundational part of covenants among people and with God in Old Testament Scripture. Even though Scripture emphasizes His name in the form of the Hebrew tetragrammaton (YHVH or *Yehovah*), the point of all this is not to suggest oaths require the use of *Yehovah*, *El Shaddai*, etc. Instead, God commanded oaths to be sworn according to Him as the Most High God who is above all. In times past when nations were ruled by monarchs, swearing an oath to “the king” was the same as using the actual name of the king. Likewise, there is no distinction between swearing an oath to *Yehovah* or *God* because both refer to the same Being. Simply put, Scripture records God commanded swearing an oath to Him when entering into a covenant.

False Oaths

An oath that is never fulfilled is a lie. Any oath that is broken is one that was sworn *falsely*:

LEVITICUS 19:12 ‘And **you shall not swear by My name falsely**, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I *am* the LORD.

¹⁰ Also Num. 14:21, 28; Isa. 49:18; Jer. 22:24; 46:18; multiple instances in Ezek. chapters 5; 14; 16-18; 20; 33-35; Zeph. 2:9; Rom. 14:11; Heb 6:13.

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NOTE: This is better understood as, “you shall not **swear falsely** by My name” because *falsely* grammatically links to *swear*, not *name*, as shown in the following scriptures.

NUMBERS 30:2 **“If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”**

PSALM 24:4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, **nor sworn deceitfully.**

ECCLESIASTES 5:4 **When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it;** for *He has no pleasure in fools.* **Pay what you have vowed—**

HOSEA 10:4 They have spoken words, **swearing falsely in making a covenant.** Thus judgment springs up like hemlock in the furrows of the field.

The Hebrew behind the word *false* implies an oath was made untruthfully, fraudulently, deceitfully, in vain, or without a cause. False swearing is pledging an oath that one never intends to fulfill.

For example, Acts 23:12-14 tell of forty plus men who rashly vowed oaths that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. They were never able to carry out their threat because Paul was still alive many months later. So, either they died of thirst and starvation or swore false oaths if they ate or drank to avoid death. Circumstances prevented them from killing Paul but, in the eyes of God, they were still liable for their oaths, even if it meant they would die because of their rash words.

Generally speaking, once an oath is sworn, it must be fulfilled. There are exceptions, however, such as certain oaths made by a daughter or wife as specified in Numbers 30:3-15. Aside from that, all oaths that are broken or never fulfilled are sin:

DEUTERONOMY 23:21-23 **“When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you.”** 22 “But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. 23 **“That which has gone from your lips you**

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shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.

It is important to note that it is never a sin to refuse to swear an oath (verse 22). In fact, given the seriousness of oaths and the fact that God witnesses and has jurisdiction over them, every oath should be well considered before swearing it:

ECCLESIASTES 5:2, 4 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.

For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. ... 4 **When you make a vow to God**, do not delay to pay it; for *He has* no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed—

In a perfect world, the simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ of someone should be enough. Sadly, trust between people is hard to establish because so many are willing to break their promises. Even Paul had to deal with those who doubted his word:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:17-20 Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly? Or **the things I plan**, do I plan according to the flesh, that **with me there should be [wavering between Yes and No]**? 18 But as God *is* faithful, our word to you was not [*wavering between*] Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me, Silvanus, and Timothy—**was not [wavering between] Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. 20 For all the promises of God in Him are Yes**, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

This is also an admonishment of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 5:37 “But **let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’** For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Even in ancient times it was all too common for people to break their word, promises, and oaths. Without truth and honesty, it is impossible to have any trust between people or with God.

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False Oaths Violate the Third Commandment

God does not view oaths lightly, especially those sworn by His name. Invoking the name of God in an oath is a serious matter that also falls under the Third Commandment¹¹:

EXODUS 20:7 “**You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain**, for the LORD will not hold *him* guiltless who takes His name in vain.

Using the name of God in vain means doing so with any *disrespect* or for *deceptive purposes*. Someone who swears an oath by the name of God but never intends to fulfill their obligations is taking “the name of the LORD your God in **vain**”. In fact, it blasphemes the name of God (the meaning of *profane*):

LEVITICUS 19:12 ‘And **you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.**

<p>IMPORTANT: Falsely swearing an oath is not only a sin of lying and deceit but is also a violation of the Third Commandment.</p>

¹¹ Also Deut. 5:11.

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CHAPTER 2

Matthew 5:34—The Problem

The Old Testament records many examples of sworn oaths as well as statutes that establish the practice as acceptable to God. However, many people today believe that Jesus Christ forbid the swearing of oaths. This is mainly the result of one particular verse in the New Testament:

MATTHEW 5:34 "But **I [Jesus Christ] say to you, do not swear at all** ...

But did Jesus really forbid the swearing of all oaths? It is a crucial question because, without oaths, there can be no New Covenant between God and Christians. It also places serious doubt on the sinless life of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5:34—Does it Change the Law?

One of the promises of God is that He accurately preserved His Word forever¹². If the modern Bible is an accurate translation of Jesus Christ words in Matthew 5:34, then He actually **changed the Law of God**. The Old Testament certainly records statutes (laws or commandments) of God that allows for, and approves of, sworn oaths (if they are not broken). If Jesus Christ *did* eliminate oaths from the Law in Matthew 5:34, it is absolutely contrary to what He promised only a few verses prior in the same chapter:

MATTHEW 5:17-18 "**Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.** 18 "For assuredly, I say to you, **till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.**

So, which is it? Are oaths still allowable or were they abolished? Are we to follow the Law of God given to Moses or did Jesus change it? When Jesus said He did not come to abolish or change

¹² Ps. 12:6-7; 119:89; Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35.

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the Law, He was referring to the all the Old Testament because He specified the “Law or the Prophets”—both of which clearly allows for the swearing of oaths.

This presents a serious dilemma. If Jesus Christ did *not* abolish swearing of oaths from the Law, then what did He mean by, “**do not swear** at all”? If Jesus Christ abolished oaths from the Law, then He lied in Matthew 5:17-18, which is an absolute contradiction because God is Truth and cannot lie¹³. All that remains is to conclude that Matthew 5:34 is misunderstood or mistranslated.

Matthew 5:34—Forbidding False Oaths

To understand what Jesus meant when He said, “**do not swear** at all” is vitally important. To that end, it should be possible to reconcile the issue with Scripture itself. First, examine Matthew 5:33 in the context of the Old Testament:

MATTHEW 5:33 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘**You shall not swear falsely**, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’

The Greek word for “falsely” is *epiorkeo*, which means to commit perjury. **Perjury** is the *intentional act of lying* after swearing an oath to tell the truth. In other words, perjury is **swearing falsely**. It is obvious that Matthew 5:33 was a quote from the Old Testament:

LEVITICUS 19:12 ‘And **you shall not swear** by My name **falsely**, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I *am* the LORD.

This is important because it establishes that Jesus Christ was, after all, referring to the Law of God given to Moses. After quoting this, Jesus continued in verse 34 by saying, “But I say to you, **do not swear** at all.” He then gives several examples by which people were swearing: heaven, the earth, Jerusalem, and even one’s head:

¹³ John 17:17; Titus 1:2; et al.

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MATTHEW 5:34-37 “But I say to you, **do not swear at all**: neither **by heaven**, for it is God’s throne; 35 “nor **by the earth**, for it is His footstool; nor **by Jerusalem**, for it is the city of the great King. 36 “Nor shall you swear **by your head**, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Instead of swearing by the name of God, people were swearing by ‘lesser’ things (than God) because they did not want to be held accountable for **not** fulfilling their oaths. People were intentionally lying and deceiving by falsely swearing oaths to things *other than* God to avoid ‘divine’ repercussions. Basically, the scribes and Pharisees thought they had discovered a loophole around Leviticus 19:12. The wording suggests that it is only swearing falsely if an oath is sworn **by the name of God** because it does not specifically prohibit falsely swearing by other things. If they swore by something else, then they believed that God could not judge them for breaking an oath. Swearing by other things was also a way to circumvent the Third Commandment because it specifically warns against taking the name of God in vain. So, by swearing to things other than God, they thought they could not be accused of breaking the Third commandment.

Jesus was addressing the practice of oaths sworn to things other than by the name of God so that they could break their oath. A better wording of these verses might be:

MATTHEW 5:33-34 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘**You shall not swear falsely [by the name of God]**, but shall perform [or fulfill] your oaths to the Lord.’ 34 “But I [Jesus Christ] say to you, **do not swear [falsely by the name of God or anything else] at all ...**

If Jesus Christ was against all oaths, then He would have specifically mentioned oaths sworn **by the name of God** in order to directly counter Deuteronomy 6:13:

DEUTERONOMY 6:13 You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and **shall swear by His name**.

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Jesus was not forbidding oaths sworn by the name of God but forbidding swearing falsely by other things with the intent to break their oaths. In doing so, He quoted the Old Testament statute against FALSE swearing in Leviticus 19:12 and made it clear that no one shall swear falsely regardless of whom or what they swore by. He was **not** forbidding *all* oaths in Matthew 5:34; therefore, Jesus did NOT change the Law of God but, instead, upheld it.

Matthew 23:16-22—Does Not Forbid Swearing

There is additional scriptural evidence that the typical Greek translation of Matthew 5:34 is misunderstood or mistranslated because Jesus Christ later confirmed that swearing oaths is permitted by reinforcing the commandment **not** to swear falsely:

MATTHEW 23:16-22 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, **‘Whoever swears by the temple, it [the oath] is nothing [not binding];** but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he **is obliged to [fulfill the oath].**’ 17 “Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 “And, ‘Whoever **swears by the altar, it [the oath] is nothing [not binding];** but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he **is obliged to [fulfill the oath].**’ 19 “Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 “Therefore **he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it.** 21 **‘He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.** 22 **‘And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.**

Incredibly, the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching people that oaths were “**nothing [not binding]**” if they were sworn by the temple or altar. They claimed that oaths were only binding if they were sworn by the temple gold or an offering. In a severe rebuke, Jesus Christ said that swearing by anything pertaining to the temple is still an oath sworn by the name of God.

Rather than forbidding the swearing of oaths, Jesus commanded that it does not matter by *whom* or *what* an oath is sworn, but that **every oath shall be fulfilled.** If Jesus had forbidden all oaths in Matthew 5:34, then why does He not likewise forbid them in

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Matthew 23? Did He change His mind ... AGAIN? The reality is that these verses are nothing less than an *affirmation* and *declaration* by Jesus Christ that oaths are NOT forbidden because He was addressing FALSE oaths in Matthew 5. He also emphatically said that all oaths are sworn by the name of God regardless of whether or not parts of the temple are invoked!

This, once again, proves that Matthew 5:34 is misunderstood or mistranslated because both the Law of God in the Old Testament and Matthew 23:16-22 support the swearing of oaths. The only alternative is that Jesus not only changed the Law once in Matthew 5:34 but changed it again in Matthew 23:16-22! However, “Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8)¹⁴. The only possible conclusion is that Matthew 5:34 does not prohibit all oaths but only condemns swearing FALSE oaths.

Paul Swore Oaths

Still, there is further scriptural proof that swearing of oaths was never forbidden. Notice that the apostle Paul made a vow (swore an oath) years later:

ACTS 18:18 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had *his* hair cut off at Cenchrea, for **he had taken a vow**.

If Jesus Christ had forbidden the swearing of all oaths, then why would Paul commit such a sinful act? He was a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel¹⁵ so he knew the Law of God like few others. He was later taught by Jesus Christ Himself¹⁶. If Jesus had forbidden the swearing of oaths, then Paul committed a grievous sin because he *knew* the commandments of Jesus from His own mouth. It is impossible to believe that the apostle Paul sinned and then arrogantly documented it for all time. Even so, scripture also

¹⁴ Also Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 46:10; Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17.

¹⁵ Phil 3:5; Acts 22:3—the leading authority among the Sanhedrin during the first century AD. He was the son of Simeon ben Hillel and the grandson of Hillel.

¹⁶ Gal. 1:12.

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records another oath he made when he wrote to the Romans of his continual prayers on their behalf:

ROMANS 1:9 **For God is my witness**, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,

Calling upon God as a witness is the same as saying, “I swear before God that I am telling the truth.” In other words, Paul was giving the Romans *sworn testimony*. Invoking the name of God and saying that God is a witness is actually a sworn oath that he was telling the truth. So, Paul either sinned by swearing an oath at least twice or Jesus Christ never prohibited oaths.

James 5:12—“Do not swear”

Both the Old and New Testament Scriptures prove that Matthew 5:34 should be rendered, “But I [*Jesus Christ*] say to you, **do not swear [falsely] at all.**” But there is one last scripture that needs to be addressed:

JAMES 5:12 But above all, my brethren, **do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment [hypocrisy].**

James seems to uphold the typical Greek text of Matthew 5:34, except that he specifically says not to swear by heaven, earth, or any other thing. Oddly enough, he never included a condemnation of swearing oaths **by the name of God**. Like Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:34, if James was against all oaths, then why did he not specifically mention swearing oaths **by the name of God** in order to directly counter Deuteronomy 6:13? The reason is that he was not forbidding oaths sworn by the name of God (that were fulfilled); only oaths sworn by other things when there was an intent to break them. Obviously, he was *affirming* the statute against FALSE oaths in Leviticus 19:12 when he said that no one shall swear falsely regardless of whom or what they swore by so, James did NOT change the Law but was upholding it.

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There is also an interesting word that James included. He said, “do not swear ... so that you do not fall into **judgment [hypocrisy].**” *Judgment* is the Greek word *hupokrisis*, which means to *act falsely* or *deceitfully*. Even if he was against all oaths, how is it even possible that swearing an oath AND fulfilling it is hypocrisy? Keeping an oath can in no way be hypocritical. That would be completely absurd, like saying it is hypocritical to make and keep a promise.

It is also ridiculous to think that swearing an oath—making a solemn promise—is a sin. There is **no** sin in swearing an oath; only in not **fulfilling** an oath. People often make promises. When they fail to keep a promise it is a sin just as it is a sin to swear a false oath. There is no difference.

Was Paul a hypocrite or sinning because he swore an oath that he kept? No! It is only hypocritical or sin if someone falsely swears an oath or fails to keep it. James not only quoted Matthew 5:34 but upheld what Jesus Christ said in Matthew 23:16-22 where He rebuked the scribes and Pharisees who taught that it is acceptable to swear false oaths as long as they are not sworn in the name of God. It is only hypocritical, deceitful, and sin if someone swears an oath and never intends to keep it.

Matthew 5:34—A Hebrew Translation

The text of Matthew 5:34 in the Greek manuscripts is either misunderstood or mistranslated. Extra-biblical evidence of this can be found in a recent discovery that has gained some recognition and prominence—a Hebrew version of the book of Matthew. It was preserved as an appendix in a 14th century Jewish polemical work against Catholic oppression, written by Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut. Research into this particular Hebrew text was done by a modern Karaite Jew (Hebrew scripturalist opposed to the Pharisaical traditions) named Nehemiah Gordon who has provided evidence that the book of Matthew likely was originally written in Hebrew. Much of his work is captured in his book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. The Greek Jesus*. In it, he provides evidence that

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supports the validity of an original Hebrew writing of the book of Matthew. (It is left to the reader to research the matter further.¹⁷) In contrast to the Greek version of Matthew 5:34, the Shem Tov Hebrew version records this:

[SHEM TOV] MATTHEW 5:33-37 You have further heard what was said by the ancients, 'You shall not swear falsely by my name' but you must pay your vow to YHWH. 34 But I say to you, that **you must not swear by anything falsely**, not by heaven which is the throne of God, 35 nor by the earth which is His footstool, nor by Jerusalem which is His City, 36 nor by your head because you cannot make one hair white or black, 37 But let your yes be yes and your no, no. Anything added to this is evil.

The Hebrew version of Matthew 5 restores one missing, but critically important, word to verse 34 in the Greek translation, "But I say to you, do not swear **falsely**." This is in absolute agreement with the previous scriptural proof that Jesus spoke about FALSE oaths, not all oaths. It is also clearly in support of Leviticus 19:12, Deuteronomy 6:13, Matthew 23:16-22, etc. In conjunction with Scripture itself, there can be no doubt that the Old and New Testaments agree that oaths sworn by the name of God are an allowable practice and, most importantly, removes the implication that Jesus Christ had abolished any statute of the Law!

Oaths—A Hebraic Perspective

When it comes to oaths in the New Testament, there is an interesting comment from at least one Hebrew scholar. In a work titled *The Hebrew Revelation of James and Jude* by Justin and Michael Van Rensburg, there is a footnote included for James 5:12 that states:

"The Torah Commands: "YHWH your Elohim you must fear, and him you must serve and by his name you must swear"

¹⁷ Nehemiah Gordon's book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. The Greek Jesus* can be found here: <https://sabbathreflections.org/resources/books-references/> and his video link here: <https://sabbathreflections.org/resources/documentaries/>.

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(Deut. 6:13). **Whenever 'swear' is condemned or used negatively in the Tanach it always refers to swearing falsely.** See e.g. Zec. 5:3, Ecc. 9:2”

Clearly both ancient and modern Jews recognize that the Law of God given to Moses establishes and allows the swearing of oaths. Ancient Hebrew texts and the modern Jewish perspective of James 5:12 (and Matthew 5:34) consistently regard these scriptures as referring to swearing **false** oaths. This is also consistent with the example of the apostle Paul.

SUMMARY: Scripture absolutely attests that Jesus Christ did not and could not change the Law of God. Furthermore, Jesus Christ *never* forbid the swearing of all oaths, only the swearing *false* oaths! He preserved the Law of God given to Moses by upholding it in the New Testament Scripture, which is also established by Hebrew documents and scholars. In truth, He “fulfilled” the Law, as promised in Matthew 5:17-18, by prohibiting all false oaths regardless of whom or what they were sworn by.

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CHAPTER 3

Oaths Are the Foundation of Covenants

Covenants are binding agreements between two or more parties. A covenant is established whenever two or more parties swear oaths to each other to fulfill or perform certain actions, services, or deeds. A covenant is the formal *record* of the oaths made between parties. Covenants can be between people or with God. Since all oaths are witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God, all covenants likewise fall under His jurisdiction whether they are with other people or with Him.

There are a number of covenants recorded in the Bible and, without exception, all of them are established upon the sworn oaths of the parties involved. This also holds true for all covenants with God¹⁸:

DEUTERONOMY 29:12-15 “that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, 13 “that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and *that* He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 14 “I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, 15 “but with *him* who stands here with us today before the LORD our God, as well as with *him* who *is not here with us today.*”

EZEKIEL 16:8 “When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord GOD.

PSALM 89:3 “I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David:”

¹⁸ Gen. 9:7-17; 26:28; 2 Kings 11:4; 1 Chr. 16:16; Ps. 105:9; Ezek.16:59; 17:13-19; et al.

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JEREMIAH 11:10 “They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; **the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers.**”

JEREMIAH 31:31-32 “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new **covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— 32 “not according to the **covenant** that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, **My covenant which they broke**, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.

EZEKIEL 17:17-18 ‘Nor will Pharaoh with *his* mighty army and great company do anything in the war, when they heap up a siege mound and build a wall to cut off many persons. 18 ‘Since **he despised the oath by breaking the covenant**, and in fact gave his hand and still did all these *things*, he shall not escape.’ “

It is vital to understand that no covenant can exist without sworn oaths. In fact, no *relationship* exists between people and God outside of a covenant. This applies especially to the New Covenant which is established through the blood of Jesus Christ and is the foundation of an eternal relationship with God the Father¹⁹. In truth, everyone who partakes of the Passover must drink wine representing the BLOOD of that covenant:

MATTHEW 26:28 “For this is **My [Jesus Christ’s] blood of the New Covenant**, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

The New Covenant is one in which God makes a solemn promise of eternal life (i.e., *oath*) that He swears by His own name. All those who enter into that covenant also swear an oath to love God and keep His commandments (Law)²⁰. If Jesus Christ had forbidden the swearing of oaths in Matthew 5:34, there could be no New Covenant or any subsequent future resurrection to eternal life.

¹⁹ Also Heb. 13:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

²⁰ 1 John 5:2-3.

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But, in fact, all covenants require sworn oaths including those between people, the most common of which are marital covenants. Marriage between a man and woman is founded upon a marital covenant established by oaths sworn to each other that are witnessed by God. They are solemn promises to love, be faithful, and trust each other until death.

Oaths are a serious matter to God. All who enter into a covenant are required to “count the cost” (Luke 14:28) in order to consider whether or not they are able to fulfill their oath. Entering into a covenant, whether it is for marriage to a spouse or for eternal life with God, is never to be taken lightly.

SUMMARY: Covenants require *sworn oaths*. If oaths were prohibited in Matthew 5:34, covenants could not exist, including the New Covenant for eternal life!

Oaths—Affirming vs. Swearing

Because Matthew 5:34 is so universally misunderstood, ‘doctrines’ against swearing in a court of law have been around for decades. A typical question posed to every witness in a court of law is, “Do you swear or affirm to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” What is the purpose for this question? It is used to instill a sense of moral responsibility and fear of being penalized for perjury when providing testimony as a witness. It is intended to exact a solemn promise from a person to tell the truth. Sadly, these words are meaningless to many people, especially criminals.

As a result of misunderstanding Matthew 5:34, the judicial establishment allows an individual to solemnly promise to give truthful testimony by *affirming* instead of *swearing*. But is there really a difference between the two terms? Like an oath, an affirmation is a solemn promise. Notice this legal definition²¹:

“In law, an affirmation is a solemn declaration allowed to those who conscientiously object to taking an oath. An

²¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affirmation_\(law\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affirmation_(law)).

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affirmation has exactly the same legal effect as an oath but is usually taken to avoid the religious implications of an oath; it is thus legally binding but not considered a religious oath. Some religious adherents hold beliefs that allow them to make legally binding promises but forbid them to swear an oath before a deity.” (*Emphasis added.*)

Even courts of law state that an affirmation is exactly the same as an *oath*. It is wrongly assumed to be only legally binding under man’s laws and subject to punishments accorded in criminal and civil laws. In other words, courts of law claim that an affirmation is not an oath attributable to God. But does an affirmation really bypass God’s judgment? Does God regard an affirmation to be less binding than a sworn oath?

MATTHEW 12:36 “But I [*Jesus Christ*] say to you that for **every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.**

God even judges “idle” words so He absolutely requires both an affirmation and oath to be fulfilled. They are **solemn promises** witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God even if they are not sworn by His name. So, there is no difference in the eyes of God because *every* unfulfilled promise is a lie. Anyone who believes that an affirmation is *not* attributable to God does not understand that God has jurisdiction over every oath and the Law of God spells out the punishment for all intentional lies:

REVELATION 21:8 “...**all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone,** which is the second death.”

Essentially, the legal system has falsely claimed that an affirmation is a ‘lesser’ promise than swearing an oath because it does not include God. In truth, every affirmation is a solemn promise, which is always witnessed by God. This is similar to the deceitful reasonings of the scribes and Pharisees who taught that false oaths were allowed if they were not sworn by the name of God. They were hypocrites who wanted to avoid accountability so they could further their own dishonest ways and escape the consequences.

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So, does it matter whether a person affirms or swears to tell the truth in a court of law? No! They are both solemn promises and witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God. Whether someone says they ‘promise,’ ‘affirm,’ or ‘swear,’ it is only sin when they are broken.

SUMMARY: An **affirmation** and **swearing** are both formal pledges or declarations of an *oath*. All oaths are witnessed by and fall under the jurisdiction of God by statute. There is no difference between saying ‘affirm’ or ‘swear’ when it comes to making an oath. Furthermore, the Bible is absolutely clear that the swearing of oaths is both acceptable and allowable as long as they are fulfilled.

But what if the question does not invoke God? Does it matter when liberal judges in some courtrooms drop the last part of the oath, “so help you God”? The question then becomes, “Do you swear or affirm to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” Does it make any difference if the oath is made without naming God? Again, no—an oath is a solemn promise that is witnessed by and falls under the jurisdiction of God. Broken oaths bring God’s judgment regardless of whether they are affirmed or sworn.

Witnesses

A witness is someone who swears an oath to provide testimony of an event or matter. The oath is a solemn promise to testify **truthfully**. To ensure the verity of a witness, God established the Ninth Commandment:

EXODUS 20:16 “**You shall not bear false witness [testimony]** against your neighbor.

Witnesses should consider the Ninth Commandment when they testify because they are required by God to tell the truth. Does this change whether a person affirms or swears? No, what matters is that they *do* tell the truth because all testimony falls under the judgment of God.

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Courtroom Juries, Witnesses, & Evidence

Everyone who votes or drives a vehicle likely has their name on a list people eligible to be called to serve on a jury. So, is it a sin for believers to testify in court or serve on a jury? Absolutely not. In fact, the people of God should make the best witnesses and jurors. They have sworn an oath to obey the Law of God Most High, which includes not providing false testimony. While it can be difficult considering the judicial systems are many times corrupt, Christians are expected to “judge righteous judgment.”²²

JOHN 7:24 “Do not judge according to appearance, but **judge with righteous judgment.**”

LEVITICUS 19:15 ‘**You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial** to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. **In righteousness you shall judge** your neighbor.

DEUTERONOMY 1:16-17 “Then I [God] commanded your judges at that time, saying, ‘Hear *the cases* between your brethren, and **judge righteously** between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. 17 ‘**You shall not show partiality in judgment;** you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man’s presence, for the judgment *is* God’s. The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.’

1 CORINTHIANS 6:2-3 Do you not know that **the saints will judge the world?** And if the world will be judged by you, **are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters?** 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? **How much more, things that pertain to this life?**

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 6 to admonish brethren who were taking each other to corrupt, worldly courts; however, he never suggested being a witness or juror in a civil court of law is a sin. In fact, far from being a sin who better than believers to rightly judge a matter than those who know Law of God? How can believers *judge* righteous judgment if they never actually *practice* it?

²² John 7:24.

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Everyone who sits on a panel of jurors is required to affirm or swear an oath, which could be similar to the following federal juror's oath²³:

“Do you and each of you solemnly swear that you will well and truly try and a true deliverance make between the United States and [name], the defendant at the bar, and a true verdict render according to the evidence, so help you God?”

Basically, this states a juror swears to righteously judge “according to the evidence.” This sounds simple in concept; however, the reality is far from it. For example, many times evidence is withheld from the jury, such as past behaviors or crimes. For example, someone could have a history of suing companies for non-existent or minor injuries. Attorneys for the plaintiff have successfully argued that such information should be withheld because it might be ‘prejudicial’. But is it? A pattern of behavior can be very important for rendering a righteous judgment as in the case of a woman who manages to slip and fall at every store she visits.

Other times, a judge might direct jurors to base their verdict upon certain facts and not others or they limit the jury to considering very narrowly defined laws or statutes. Because all man-made criminal and civil law is strictly interpreted according to the letter of the law, the verdict can be affected by a poorly written statute. For example, some laws only apply to public or private property so someone who commits a violation on one cannot be punished for doing the same thing on the other.

A serious issue that a jury can face happens when a prosecutor or judge interprets the same laws differently. This has become a very common tactic that has been at the forefront of many cases. One example is freedom of speech, which has been interpreted very loosely by some and severely constrained by others. Some are manipulated by attorneys—especially defense attorneys—who have authority to include or exclude evidence and testimony according to their choosing.

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juror%27s_oath.

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Then there is a serious question of whether or not witnesses provide truthful testimony. Given the unabashed and rampant lying these days, how is it possible to determine whether or not a witness is lying? Or, what happens when the testimony of witnesses is conflicting?

There are other complexities in a trial. At times during deliberation jurors may have questions that they submit to a judge; however, many judges refuse to provide information or answers outside of that which was presented in court. This is especially frustrating when the written law itself is difficult to understand. Judges generally do not provide juries much guidance.

Sadly, the judicial systems of mankind are not about discovering the truth! Instead, courts are a showplace where two parties manipulate testimony and evidence to sway a jury and judge to side with their cause. But this is all the more reason for believers to take the opportunity to serve on juries if they are able.

The Law of God supersedes all others. It is vital, therefore, when serving on a jury to know and understand it. For example, Scripture has this to say about witnesses:

DEUTERONOMY 19:15 “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; **by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.**

The Law of God requires two or more witnesses whose testimony agrees in order to establish a matter. No one is to be convicted with fewer than two witnesses who corroborate each other no matter how believable one of them might be.

But is a witness always a *person* who can provide testimony? What happens if there is only one witness—or none? For those situations, it is important to realize that a ‘witness’ can also be physical **evidence**. For example, the heaven and earth were established as ‘witnesses’:

DEUTERONOMY 4:26 “**I [Moses] call heaven and earth to witness [testify] against you** this day, that you will soon

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utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong *your* days in it, but will be utterly destroyed.

Obviously, the earth is not a living being so how can it testify? Because it is **physical evidence** of the sins of the ancient Israelites! So, in addition to human witnesses, physical evidence can also be a 'witness'. If there is only one human witness whose testimony is corroborated by hard physical evidence, together they fulfill the Law of God regarding two or more witnesses. The same is true if there are multiple pieces of physical evidence; then the testimony of a living witness is not required.

In civil suits, jurors are sometimes asked to establish monetary settlements for medical costs, damages, work compensation, and even punitive awards. Usually these amounts are initially requested by the attorneys for the plaintiff but they can be excessive. Aside from receipts for medical care, damages, or lost work, it is difficult to determine punitive awards. However, once again the Law of God provides guidance. For example, Exodus 22:1 requires a thief to repay five oxen for each ox and four sheep for each sheep that was stolen. Even though it pertains to oxen and sheep, it establishes a principle of compensation and punitive awards.

There are too many statutes in the Law of God to cover in detail so it is left to the reader to learn, know, and understand the Law of God²⁴.

²⁴ Deut. 17:19; 31:11.

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CONCLUSION

Covenants are binding agreements between two or more parties. A covenant is established whenever two or more parties swear oaths to each other to fulfill or perform certain actions, services, or deeds. A covenant is the formal *record* of the oaths made between parties. Covenants can be between people or with God. Since all oaths are witnessed by and under the jurisdiction of God, all covenants likewise fall under His jurisdiction whether they are with other people or with Him.

It is of utmost importance to understand that without sworn oaths, covenants cannot exist. This is a concern because every relationship with God is based upon a covenant, especially the New Covenant that is the promise from God to give eternal life to all those who fulfill their oath to love God and keep His commandments (Law).

But there is an issue with Matthew 5:34 that records Jesus as saying, “I say unto you, **do not swear** at all.” If taken literally, there cannot be a New Covenant with God. That not only runs contrary to the Law of God recorded in Old Testament Scripture, but also denies the New Testament record as well. In fact, if Jesus had actually meant precisely those words in Matthew 5:34, He not only eliminated the possibility of God’s covenant of eternal life but also removed a statute of the Law of God. That alone contradicts His promise not to abolish any of the Law in Matthew 5:17-18. So, if Matthew 5:34 is taken literally and out of context, then Jesus lied, there is no Savior, and there is no New Covenant to eternal life.

However, all the evidence establishes that the true rendering of Matthew 5:34 is against swearing FALSE oaths, not all oaths. In that regard, the text should be understood as, “I say unto you, **do not swear [FALSELY]** at all.” As a result of the facts and evidence presented, the words of Jesus Christ and the Bible remain true.

