

DEVOTIONAL AID FOR 22 FEBRUARY 2021 – 28 FEBRUARY 2021



**UPPER
HUNTER**
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dear church family,

Last week we looked at the Third Commandment about not misusing God's name. This week, the Catechism takes us to a topic we might not often think about: Taking oaths. All our words must be truthful, all our promises kept. Especially for Christians who have bear the name of Christ who is the Truth-Teller and Promise-Keeper. Yet, living in the fallen world with our sinful nature still clinging to us, there are times when oath-taking enables both Christians and non-Christians to promote truth and even get a glimpse of God's truthful character.

However, during the Reformation (and today too), some groups of Christians thought swearing an oath was not allowed for Christians at all. They obviously had a couple of Bible passages to appeal to: Matthew 5:33-37 and James 5:12. These two passages seem to forbid Christians from swearing oaths completely. Jesus in Matthew 5:34 says, "But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all". However, the Catechism defends the use of oaths, just as the vast majority of Reformers in the 16th and 17th century. Kevin DeYoung gives three reasons why we as Christians can swear oaths:

- 1) Seen in the context, Jesus's words in Matthew 5:34 is about removing the human tradition of taking false oaths. This is because people of Jesus's time used to swear by the heavens or Jerusalem, etc, thinking this does not dishonour God's name as much as swearing an oath by God's name directly (see Matthew 5:34-36). In reality, Jesus was exposing the hypocrisy of people who attempt to give an appearance of honesty when they were only trying to find a way to be dishonest without facing consequences. So it was about the false oath-taking, rather than the true oath-taking.
- 2) Given the numerous and frequent use of oaths in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New, Matthew 5 and James 5 are unlikely to intend complete prohibitions on all oaths. Many examples of oath taking are found: Abraham in Genesis 14:22 and Genesis 21:24, Abraham's servant in Genesis 24:2-9, Jacob in Genesis 31:53, Ruth in Ruth 1:17, Boaz in Ruth 3:13, David in 1 Kings 1:29-30, Paul calling on God as witness in Romans 1:9; 9:1; 2 Corinthians 1:23; Philippians 1:8, etc. Even Jesus repeatedly emphasises His own words by saying, "truly, truly", and also accepts swearing the truth about His own identity as Christ in Matthew 26:63-64. And in Hebrews 6:13, we learn that God swear an oath by Himself. Given these examples, Matthew 5 and James 5 should not be taken as a simplistic total prohibition on all oaths.
- 3) When used sparingly and in the right context, oaths can glorify God. When Christians take oaths, we are witnessing to the world that only God is reliable witness to the secrets of our thoughts and hearts. No other persons or things in creation can take God's place.

I hope this week's Catechism questions and answers encourage you to take your own words seriously, to say what we mean and mean what we say in all circumstances, and especially when we are called upon to speak in a formal setting, whether that be in a law-court before a judge, or taking a public office, or signing your name on some dotted line.¹

Yours in Christ,

Timothy Lee

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¹ This week's introduction to the Catechism has been largely adopted from Kevin DeYoung's *The Good News We Almost Forgot*, p175-177.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM²

Lord's Day 37

Q101) But may we swear an oath in God's name if we do it reverently?

A) Yes, when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote truth and trustworthiness for God's glory and our neighbour's good. Such oaths are approved in God's Word and were rightly used by Old and New Testament believers.

Q102) May we swear by saints or other creatures?

A) No. A legitimate oath means calling upon God as the one who knows my heart to witness to my truthfulness and to punish me if I swear falsely. No creature is worthy of such honour.

RUTH 1:15–17

Ruth 1:15 And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

Here we see one example of swearing an oath. When Naomi (Ruth's mother-in-law) tells Ruth to return to her own country, Ruth refuses. Instead, she speaks boldly and strongly to stay with Naomi, claiming her faith in Naomi's God, the God of Israel. Then in verse 17, to make it even clearer to Naomi, Ruth swears by Naomi's God (and now Ruth's too), the LORD. Was Ruth wrong to do so? The rest of the story in the book of Ruth suggests that Ruth was not wrong to take the oath. She turns out to be one of the very few characters in the Bible who is praised almost without any qualification (eg., see Ruth 3:11 as well as the rest of the story). Of course, this does not mean any and all oath-taking is good. We are not meant to take oaths unthinkingly or too frequently, cheapening the value of God's name. But here is one example where it can bring glory to God.

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father,

Please help me to speak truth and keep my promises. When I am called to take an oath, please search my heart and guide my thoughts so I may not misuse your holy name. I pray in Jesus's name, amen.

MATTHEW 5:33-37

Matt 5:33 "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.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, Jesus here teaches not to pretend to be truthful by swearing on created things, but we simply need to be truthful whenever we speak. There will be occasions where we are called to swear an oath, eg., before a judge in a court. In such a situation, of all people, we, Christians, must honour God by telling the truth even when it's costly for us.

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father,

I want to honour your holy name. When I need to swear an oath, please make me wise and bold in order to speak the truth even when it's costly. Also, in everyday speech, please guard my mouth that I may speak in a way that brings glory to your name and grace to people I talk to. In Jesus's name, I pray. Amen.

² The text of the Catechism is usually from <https://threeforms.org/heidelberg-catechism/>, but time to time, for the sake of clarity, I have also adopted the translation used in *The Good News We Almost Forgot* by Kevin DeYoung.