

Homily 7: Making and Breaking Oaths

The third commandment is: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

The ninth commandment is: You shall not bear false witness.

What are some ways you can break each of them?

How might you break both of those commandments in one shot?

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

“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.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

Identify some of the reasons Jesus tells us not to take oaths. What is his concern?

I. The Radical Reformation’s rejection of oathtaking

II. The Introduction to the Homily on Making and Breaking Oaths

“So that his most holy name should be honoured and evermore magnified by the people, Almighty God commanded that no one should take his name in their mouth vainly. He threatened punishment to those who irreverently abuse it by swearing, perjury, and blasphemy. So that this commandment may be better known and kept, it shall be declared to you both how it is lawful for Christian people to swear an oath, and also what peril and danger it is vainly to swear such oaths, or to commit perjury.”

III. Lawful v. Unlawful kinds of Oathtaking

Lawful Swearing:

“...when judges require oaths of people for declaration of the truth or for execution of justice, this manner of swearing is lawful.*

**It is also lawful when people make faithful promises, calling to witness the name of God, to keep covenants, honest promises, statutes, laws, and good customs as Christian rulers do in their conclusions of peace, for the conservation of common wealth, and private persons promise their fidelity in marriage, or one to another in honesty and true friendship.*

**It is lawful for all when they swear to keep common laws, and local statutes, and good customs, for due order to be had and continued among people. It is lawful when subjects swear to be true and faithful to their rulers and countries, and when judges, magistrates, and officers swear truly to execute their offices.*

**It is lawful when a person would affirm the truth in setting forth God’s glory (for the salvation of the people) in open preaching of the gospel, or in giving good counsel privately for their soul’s health. All these ways of swearing, for necessary and honest causes, are lawful.”*

Do you think this instruction would lead a person do disobey Jesus’ command above, why or why not?

What is the purpose of the oaths described above?

Unlawful Swearing

“...But when people swear out of custom, in reasoning, buying and selling, or other daily communications (and many are common and great swearers) such swearing is ungodly, unlawful, and prohibited by the commandment of God. For such swearing is nothing else but the taking of God’s holy name in vain.”

What is the most common form of swearing you hear (or that you engage in)?

What do you think is meant by “buying and selling” and “other daily communications”?

How do these take “God’s holy name in vain”?

IV On what biblical basis does the homily rest the assertion that some swearing can be “legal” given Jesus’ command never to swear an oath?

“Here it should be noted that lawful swearing is not forbidden, but commanded by Almighty God. For we have examples of Christ, and godly men, in holy scripture, who swore themselves and required oaths of others likewise.

**And God’s commandment is, “You shall fear the Lord your God, and shall swear by his name” (Deuteronomy 6:13).*

**And Almighty God says by his prophet David, “all who swear by God will glory in him” (Psalm 63:11). *In this way our Saviour Christ swore several times, saying, “Truly truly” (e.g. John 3:3, 11).*

**And St Paul swears thus: “I call God as my witness” (2 Corinthians 1:23).*

**And Abraham (as he was getting old) required an oath of his servant, that he would find a wife for his son Isaac, who should come from his own kindred; and the servant swore that he would perform his master’s will (Genesis 24:1-9).*

**Abraham also swore to Abimelech the king of Gerar, when he required him to, that he would not hurt him or his posterity, and likewise did Abimelech swear to Abraham (Genesis 21:22-31).*

**And David swore to be and continue a faithful friend to Jonathan, and Jonathan swore to become a faithful friend to David (1 Samuel 18:3, 20:12-17, 42).*

**God once commanded that if a thing was given in pledge to someone, or left with them to keep, if the same thing were stolen or lost then the keeper of it should be sworn before judges, that they did not convey it away, or use any deceit in causing the same to be carried away, by their consent or knowledge (Exodus 22:10-11).*

**And St Paul says that in all matters of controversy between two people, if one says yes and the other no, yet no due proof of the truth can be found, the end of every such controversy must be an oath administered by a judge (Hebrews 6:16).”*

What principle of biblical interpretation does the homilist employ here?

Do you think the argument is correct?

V. How to Take an Oath Rightly

“God by the prophet Jeremiah says, “You shall swear, ‘The Lord lives’, in truth, in judgment, in righteousness” (Jeremiah 4:2). So that whoever swears when they are required to by a judge, let

them be sure in their conscience that their oath has these three conditions, and they shall never need to be afraid of perjury.

First, the one who swears may swear truly, that is, they must (setting apart all favour and affection to the parties involved) have the truth only before their eyes. For love of truth they must say and speak that which they know to be truth, and no further.

Second, the one who takes an oath must do it with judgment, not rashly and unadvisedly, but soberly, considering what an oath is.

Thirdly, the one who swears must swear in righteousness, that is, for the very zeal and love which they have for the defence of innocence, to the maintenance of the truth, and of the righteousness of the matter or cause. All profit, loss, all love and favour to the person for friendship or kindred should be laid aside. Thus an oath (if it has with it these three conditions) is a part of God's glory, which we are bound by his commandments to give to him."

*What are some circumstances in which it might be difficult to take an oath rightly?

*Have you ever had to tell the truth in a situation in which the truth would harm a friend?

*What does the homilist see as the reason why you should be willing to tell the truth, even if it means that a friend is implicated in some wrongdoing?

Benefits of rightly taking oaths:

"...by lawful promises and covenants confirmed by oaths, rulers and their countries are confirmed in common tranquillity and peace. By holy promises, with calling on the name of God to witness, we are made living members of Christ when we profess his religion, receiving the sacrament of baptism. By a similar holy promise, marriage knits together man and wife in perpetual love, so that they do not desire to be separated in any adversities. By lawful oaths, which rulers, judges, and magistrates swear, common laws are kept undamaged; justice is impartially administered; innocent persons, fatherless children, widows, and the poor are defended from murderers, oppressors, and thieves, so that they suffer no wrong or harm. By lawful oaths, mutual society, friendly relations, and good order are continually kept in all communities such as boroughs, cities, towns, and villages. And by lawful oaths, criminals are searched out, wrongdoers are punished, and those who sustain wrong are restored to their right. Therefore lawful swearing cannot be evil, since it brings to us so many godly, good, and necessary advantages."

Do you agree, why or why not?

VI. Answers to Excuses

"Therefore, when Christ so earnestly forbade swearing, it should not be understood as though he forbade all oaths. But he forbids all vain swearing and perjury both in the name of God, and in his creatures, such as the common use of swearing in buying, selling, and in our daily communication, to the intent that every Christian's word should be as well regarded in such matters as if they should confirm their communication with an oath. Perhaps some will say, "I am compelled to swear, or else those who live with me, or buy and sell with me will not believe me." To this, St Chrysostom answered that whoever says this shows themselves to be an unjust and a deceitful person. For if they were a trustworthy person, and their deeds taken to agree with their words, they would not need to swear at all. For the one who uses truth and plainness in their bargaining and communication shall have no need of such vain swearing to make

themselves credible with their neighbours so they will not mistrust their words. If their credence is really so lost that they think no one will believe them without such oaths, then they may well think that their credibility has completely gone. For it is true (as Theophylact writes) that “no one is less trusted than the one who swears so much.” And Almighty God by the wise man says, “That person who swears much shall be full of sin, and the scourge of God shall not depart from their house”.

Might there be exceptions to this rule? If so, name them and explain why they are good exceptions.

“But here, some will excuse the many oaths in their daily talk by saying, “Why should I not swear, when I swear truly?”

To such people it may be said that although they swear truly, yet in swearing often unadvisedly, for trifles, without necessity, and when they should not swear; they are not without fault, but take God’s most holy name in vain. Much more ungodly and unwise are those who abuse God’s most holy name, not only in buying and selling of small things daily in all places, but also in eating, drinking, playing, talking, and reasoning. As if none of these things might be done without commonly using and abusing the most holy name of God, vainly and irreverently talking and swearing. This breaks God’s commandment and procures his indignation.”

VII. Breaking Oaths and Swearing Wrongly:

“There are two notable punishments which we read of in scripture for those who do not regard their godly promises bound by an oath, but who wittingly and wilfully break them.

First, Joshua and the people of Israel made a league and faithful promise of perpetual amity and friendship with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:3-15). Despite this, afterwards in the days of wicked Saul many of these Gibeonites were murdered, contrary to this faithful promise made. Almighty God was so very displeased with this, that he sent a universal famine on the whole country, which continued for the space of three years. And God would not withdraw his punishment until the offence was avenged by the death of seven sons or kinsmen of King Saul (2 Samuel 21:1-14). Second, when Zedekiah, King of Jerusalem, promised fidelity to the King of Babylon, but afterwards (contrary to his oath and allegiance) rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar: this unbelieving king, by God’s permission and sufferance, invaded the land of Judah and, besieging the city of Jerusalem, compelled King Zedekiah to flee. And as Zedekiah fled, Nebuchadnezzar took him prisoner, slaughtered his sons before his face, and put out both his eyes; and binding him with chains, he led him as a prisoner miserably into Babylon (2 Kings 24:17-25:7). In this way, God shows plainly how much he abhors breakers of honest promises bound by an oath made in his name.”

Why do you think God is so zealous to punish oathbreakers?
What does that tell us about his character?

“We also have examples in the scriptures of those who make wicked promises by an oath, and do carry them out: chiefly Herod, certain wicked Jews, and Jephthah. Herod promised by an oath to the girl who danced before him, to give her whatever she asked for. When she was instructed by her wicked mother to ask for the head of John the Baptist, Herod, as he had taken a wicked oath, so he more wickedly carried it out, and cruelly killed the most holy prophet (Matthew 14:6-11).

In the same way, some malicious Jews made an oath, cursing themselves if they either ate or drank, until they had slain St Paul (Acts 23:12). And Jephthah, when God had given to him victory over the children of Ammon, promised to God (in an act of foolish devotion) to offer for a sacrifice to him whatever came out of the doors of his house to meet him after his return home. By force of which foolish and ill-advised oath, he killed his one and only daughter, who came out of his house with mirth and joy to welcome him home (Judges 11:30-39). Thus the promise which he made (most foolishly) to God, against God's everlasting will and the law of nature, he most cruelly performed, thus committing against God a double offence."

Have you ever sworn an oath that you regretted swearing?
Would it have been better for Jephthah and Herod to break their oaths?

VIII. Against Perjury

"...people lay their hands on the gospel book, and swear truly to enquire and to make a true presentation of things they are charged with, and not to hold back from saying the truth, and doing truly, for favour, love, dread, or malice towards any person, as God and the holy contents of that book may help them. They must consider that in that book is contained God's everlasting truth, his most holy and eternal word, by which we have forgiveness of our sins and are made inheritors of heaven, to live for ever with God's angels and saints in joy and gladness. In the gospel book are also contained God's terrible threats to obstinate sinners who will not amend their lives or believe the truth of God's holy word, and the everlasting pain prepared in hell for idolaters, hypocrites, for false and vain swearers, for perjured people, for false witness bearers, for false condemners of the innocent and guiltless, and for those who for favour, hide the crimes of evildoers so that they are not punished. So whoever wilfully lies and perjures themselves on Christ's holy gospel, utterly forsakes God's mercy, goodness, and truth, as well as the merits of our Saviour Christ's nativity, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. They refuse the forgiveness of sins promised to all penitent sinners, the joys of heaven, and the company of angels and saints for ever. All these benefits and comforts are promised to true Christians in the gospel. But they, lying on the gospel, give themselves over to the service of the Devil—the master of all lies, falsehood, deceit, and perjury—provoking the great indignation and curse of God against them in this life, and the terrible wrath and judgment of our Saviour Christ at the great day of the last judgment, when he shall justly judge both the living and the dead, according to their works. For whoever forsakes the truth—for the love or displeasure of anyone, or for cash and profit to themselves—forsakes Christ and, with Judas, betrays him. And even if such perjured people's falsehood is now kept secret, yet it shall be exposed at the last day, when the secrets of all our hearts shall be revealed to all the world. And then the truth shall appear, and accuse them; and their own conscience, with all the blessed company of heaven, shall bear witness truly against them. And Christ the righteous judge shall then justly condemn them to everlasting shame and death."

The homilist equates perjury with apostasy, do you agree? Why or why not?
Do you think perjury can be forgiven? Why or why not?