

Is it ever okay to make promises or take oaths?

A. Passages which teach “Don’t make promises”:

1. *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. – **Matt 5:33-37 (ESV)***
- ◇ **Background – what the Pharisees were doing with oaths:** *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. – **Matt 23:16-22 (ESV)***
2. *But above all, my brothers, do not SWEAR, either by heaven or by earth or by any other OATH, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. – **James 5:12 (ESV)***

B. Passages which teach us to be CAREFUL about making promises (also known as ‘oaths’ and/or ‘vows’):

1. *It is a snare to say rashly, “It is holy,” and to reflect only after making vows. – **Prov 20:25 (ESV)***
2. *When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. – **Eccl 5:4 (ESV)***
3. *It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. – **Eccl 5:5 (ESV)***

C. Passages which contradict the command not to make promises:

1. **God Himself makes promises – would God ever do something which was inherently immoral?**
 - a) **God swore and oath to Abraham:**
 - 1) *For when God made a PROMISE to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he SWORE by himself,¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the PROMISE.¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the PROMISE the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an OATH,¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. – **Heb 6:13-20 (ESV)***
 - 2) *And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have SWORN, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. – **Gen 22:15-18 (ESV)***
 - 3) *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people . . .⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,⁷³ the OATH THAT HE SWORE to our father*

Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear . . . – Lk 1:68-74 (ESV)

4)

b) God swore an oath to David:

- 1) Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had SWORN WITH AN OATH to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. – Acts 2:29-31 (ESV)

c) God made a promise to Noah and all of mankind after the flood:

- ◆ Covenants and contracts are no different than oaths and promises. A covenant is a promise; a contract is a promise.
- 1) Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my COVENANT with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my COVENANT with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the COVENANT that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the COVENANT between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my COVENANT that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting COVENANT between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the COVENANT that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” – Gen 9:8-17 (ESV)
- 2) This is like the days of Noah to me: as I SWORE that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have SWORN that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. – Isa 54:9 (ESV)

d) Other oaths made by God, or by angels on God’s behalf:

- 1) The New Covenant is guaranteed because of an oath God made to Jesus: *And it was not without an OATH. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, ²¹ but this one was made a priest with an OATH by the one who said to him: “The Lord has SWORN and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’”* ²² This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. – Heb 7:20-22 (ESV)
- 2) And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.” ⁵ And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶ and SWORE by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, ⁷ but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. – Rev 10:4-7 (ESV)

2. The apostle Paul and other early church leaders made promises (also known as ‘oaths’ and/or ‘vows’):

- a) I put you under OATH before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. – 1 Thess 5:27 (ESV)
- b) After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was UNDER A VOW. – Acts 18:18 (ESV)

c) *When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.*¹⁸ *On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.*¹⁹ *After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.*²⁰ *And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are UNDER A VOW;²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. – Acts 21:17-24 (ESV)*

3. The Psalms frequently promote the making of vows (good vows) – would the Psalms promote something which was inherently immoral?

- ◇ *From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him. – Psalm 22:25 (ESV)*
- ◇ *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High . . . – Psalm 50:14 (ESV)*
- ◇ *I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. – Psalm 56:12 (ESV)*
- ◇ *For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. – Psalm 61:5 (ESV)*
- ◇ *So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day. – Psalm 61:8 (ESV)*
- ◇ *Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed. – Psalm 65:1 (ESV)*
- ◇ *I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will perform my vows to you . . . – Psalm 66:13 (ESV)*
- ◇ *Make your vows to the LORD your God and perform them; let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared . . . – Psalm 76:11 (ESV)*
- ◇ *I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. – Psalm 116:14 (ESV)*
- ◇ *I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people . . . – Psalm 116:18 (ESV)*

D. Conclusion: When Jesus forbid the taking of oaths in Matthew 5 He was not trying to forbid a person from ever making a promise, or signing a contract, or taking an oath. He was preaching against the *abuse of oaths* that the Pharisees were teaching, which was, they believed it was okay to break your promises and go back on your commitments if you hadn't bound yourself with the *correct* oath. For example, they taught that if a person 'swore by the temple' they could break that promise (Mt 23:16); but if that person 'swore by the gold in the temple' they were then obligated to keep that promise (Mt 23:16b). Jesus rebuked them for these shenanigans, and laid out God's standard of integrity – your 'yes' should always mean 'yes' and your 'no' should always mean 'no' (Mt 5:37), regardless of which oath is taken. If you say you're going to do something, you do it, whether you make an oath or not! James the apostle echoed this teaching in James 5:12.