

Oaths and Vows

As a boy I heard the fabled account of George Washington and the cherry tree. When young George was [confronted](#) by his distressed father concerning the wanton destruction of a cherry tree, the boy said, “I cannot tell a lie; I cut down the tree.”

It took me years to figure out that Washington’s [confession](#) was in fact a lie. To say “I cannot tell a lie” is to lie about one’s ability to lie. There were many things George Washington could not do: he could not fly; he could not be in more than one place at the same time, etc. But George Washington could tell a lie. He was a man. All human beings are capable of telling lies. Scripture declares that “all men are liars” (Psalm 116:11). This does not mean that everyone lies all the time. We also have the ability to tell the truth. The problem arises when we are called upon to trust someone’s word, and we do not know for sure if he is telling the truth.

To emphasize the importance of truth in the making of promises and the giving of important testimonies, we resort to the swearing of oaths and vows. Before offering testimony in a courtroom, the witness is sworn in. He or she promises to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

In the vow, appeal is made to God and to God alone as the supreme witness of the statement. God is the guardian of vows, oaths, and promises. He Himself is the fountainhead of all truth and is incapable of lying. What is false about George Washington is true of God; He cannot tell a lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:17-18). Neither can God abide with liars. He warns against taking rash or false vows: “Pay what you have vowed—better not to vow than to vow and not pay” (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). The [Ten Commandments](#) include a law against bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16).

Since our entire relationship to God is based upon [covenant](#) promises, God sanctifies the matter of vows, oaths, and promises. Trust in human relationships (such as marriage and business agreements) is necessary for the welfare of society. A lawful oath is a part of worship wherein people, seeking to assure the veracity of what they speak, call upon God as a witness of what they assert and promise. The implication is that if those taking oaths are found to be lying, God will punish them with swiftness and severity.

The [Christian church](#) has always affirmed the value of oaths and vows. The Westminster divines listed the following scriptural boundaries and stipulations,

The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name, or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.

An additional stipulation is that an oath should not be made with equivocation or mental reservation. God does not accept crossed fingers, but expects honesty. An oath is not to be taken lightly. It should be saved for solemn occasions, for solemn promises. Even governments recognize this in insisting on oaths for weddings and before the giving of legal testimony. Even in less solemn instances, moreover, a believer is called to honesty—that one's yes be yes, and one's no be no. That is the responsibility of a faithful disciple of Christ.

Summary

1. Human beings have a capacity for telling lies.
2. God, the source of truth, cannot lie and is the guardian of truth.

3. Oaths and [vows](#) are a lawful part of worship.
4. Oaths should be sworn by God alone. No creature can be the ultimate witness of truth.
5. [Vows](#) should not be made rashly or with reservations.

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