Swearing and Oaths

"But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation."
James 5:12

Introduction:

1. Many of you just read Exodus in private reading programs, where you encountered the Ten Commandments.
2. The third commandment is a threatening prohibition of taking the name of the Lord God in vain (Ex 20:7).
3. We studied divorce on Sunday evening, and we saw that both Jesus and Paul need to be read in context; and this is particularly true when studying our Lord opposing various excesses of the Pharisees (Matt 5:19-20).
4. Some of you have encountered Mennonites or Jehovah's Witnesses and their absolute rejection of oaths.

What is swearing?

A. **Swear**. To make a solemn declaration or statement with an appeal to God or a supreme being, or to some sacred object, in confirmation of what is said; to take an oath. (OED.)
B. The Bible explains that swearing is an appeal to a higher power to confirm your word and/or put an end to an argument or controversy (Hebrews 6:16).
C. God swore to Abraham to give further confirmation of the certainty of His promise (Heb 6:17-18).
D. Swearing is an act of worship when done properly, for it names Jehovah as the supreme God of all.
E. God told Israel's judges to swear witnesses to tell the whole truth (Ex 22:11; Lev 5:1; I Kings 8:31).
F. When giving testimony in court in America, it is still generally required, "I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."
G. When talking public office in America, it is still generally required, "I solemnly swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America … so help me God."
H. Wicked men, in their perpetual devilish pursuit of ungodly inventions, swear whenever they are angry, hurt, wishing to impress someone, or wishing to hurt someone (Eccl 7:29).

Why study swearing?

A. The subject is a wonderful exercise in rightly dividing the word of truth and understanding Scripture.
B. It is our high and holy ambition to seek the sense of Scripture and not merely the sound of its words.
C. Misunderstanding this subject leads to heretical conclusions, wherein all swearing of any sort is strictly forbidden, including oaths in court, which is true of Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.
D. It is a great way to examine our speech habits and make sure we are not offending God with words.
E. It is a great way to provoke our souls to holier living, since we took the name of Christ (II Tim 2:19).
F. It is a topic of conversation in our nation, as atheists and humanists want oaths for public office and court hearings removed; and Christians wonder if we should be using the Lord's name that way.

What is the problem?

A. Two texts with absolute and universal language sound like swearing is always, entirely condemned.
    1. Jesus Christ taught to not swear at all and that more than yes or no is of evil (Matthew 5:33-37).
    2. James taught the same thing with a warning of condemnation for those disobeying (James 5:12).
    3. Those going by the sound of words are entirely confident with these two passages in their ears.
B. However, the rest of Scripture presents a proper place for swearing and oaths with many examples.
    1. Moses' law required fear and service of God and swearing by His name (Deut 6:13; 10:20).
    2. Remember, Jesus said He did not come to change or destroy Moses' law (Matthew 5:17-19).
    3. A common form of using Jehovah's name was, "As the LORD liveth," (Judges 8:19; Ruth 3:13).
    4. Swearing is an act of worship when done properly, for it names Jehovah as supreme God of all.
    5. It is our duty to study the scriptures to reconcile the commendations with the condemnations!

C. The Bible is full of examples of both godly men and God Himself swearing and vowing in truth.
   1. God Himself swore in making promises to Abraham and Israel (Gen 22:16; Is 45:23; Jer 49:13).
   2. God even swore in His wrath on at least once occasion (Num 14:28; Ps 95:11; Heb 3:11; 4:3).
   3. Consider Abraham and his servant swearing together about a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1-9).
   4. David, the man after God's own heart, swore often (I Sam 26:10; II Sam 14:11; II Kgs 1:28-31).
   5. The whole nation of Israel swore together (Numbers 21:2; II Chron 15:14; Neh 5:13; 10:29).
   6. Paul swore on several occasions to confirm his ministry (Rom 1:9; 9:1; II Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20).
   7. Jesus answered the proper use of swearing in His trial (Matt 26:59-64; Lev 5:1; I Peter 2:21).
   8. An angel will be commissioned at the last day to swear that time is fulfilled (Rev 10:5-7).

How do we solve it?

A. There are no contradictions in the Bible, so it is our blessed privilege to reconcile it all (II Pet 1:20).
   1. Therefore, we must find what Jesus and James prohibited, so God and godly men are guiltless.
   2. This process of study is laborious; it is much easier to take one side and ignore the other verses.
   3. But to learn wisdom and discover the mind of the Lord, we must take the long road to truth.
   4. If a minister cheats in his duties, he will be shamed and not approved by God (II Timothy 2:15).
B. We interpret Scripture with Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to resolve the matter (I Cor 2:13).
   1. The abuse of swearing Jesus Christ was condemning is explained elsewhere (Matthew 23:16-22).
   2. Pharisees taught the wrong religion, wrong objects, wrong occasions, and wrong actions in oaths.
   3. It was the excesses in these four areas of proper swearing that our Lord Jesus was condemning.
   4. Remember that James was also writing to the Jews, like Jesus (James 1:1; Gal 2:9; Acts 15:13).
C. We must consider the context to fully appreciate the scope and intent of the words (Matt 5:17-20).
D. We determine whether a passage is intended with absolute or relative force (Matt 5:39; 6:34; 7:1).
E. Remember to place obvious limitations on general or universal statements if called for (I Cor 9:22).

Godly swearing must have the RIGHT RELIGION!

A. The right religion is living a faithful and holy life to please God and keep His commandments.
B. Since we have taken the name of Christ, we must depart from iniquity (II Tim 2:19; Acts 11:26).
C. We must avoid both the sin of denying God and that of taking His name in vain (Proverbs 30:9).
D. The right object without the right religion is sinful to God, for He cannot stand men using His name without living according to His commandments (Hosea 4:15; Isaiah 48:1; Jer 5:2; Ezek 20:39).

Godly swearing must have the RIGHT OBJECT!

A. Any other object than the LORD Jehovah Himself is an offence against His jealousy (Exodus 34:14).
B. Swearing is done by the greatest object possible to add confirmation and force to an oath (Heb 6:16).
C. Swearing is an act of worship when done properly, for it names Jehovah as supreme God of all.
D. Let us be thankful we live in a nation that adds, "So help me God," to oaths of testimony and office.
E. God's name includes His attributes, so beware of swearing ignorantly (Isaiah 57:15; Ex 34:6); there is no excuse for "holy cow" or "my goodness," as only God has either trait (Ps 111:9; Matt 19:17)!
F. Why would anyone appeal to "My lands," when God made the heavens, the earth, and the sea!
G. Why does anyone say, "For heaven's sake," when Jesus forbid swearing by heaven (Mat 23:21-22)!
H. Beware of euphemisms: goll, golly, gee, geez, gee whiz, gosh, darn, dang, dog gone, dognabbit! Each one of these examples stand for God, Jesus, Jesus Christ, damn, God damn, and God damn it.
I. Men today swear by sex acts, sex organs, and human and animal excrement, showing their utter depravity and perversity; for remember, men swear by the greater to confirm their word (Heb 6:16)!
J. In avoiding reference to excrement as an appeal, reject "crap!" or "sugar!" as euphemistic oaths.
K. All foolish and filthy speech is to be rejected by the sons of God (Eph 4:29; 5:4; Col 3:8; II Pet 2:7).
L. There is a sober way to use words like dung, but they should be used guardedly for value (Phil 3:8).
M. There is never an occasion to use such words or any other object but the Lord Himself for an oath!

Godly swearing must have the RIGHT OCCASION!

A. Swearing is only appropriate to settle severe strife or make confirmation in very important matters.
B. Let your personal conduct be such that you do not need confirmation of your word in most cases.
C. Haste in swearing can bring great error and regret (Josh 9:15-27; Judges 11:30-40; I Sam 14:24-45).
D. Be afraid of swearing so that you will not engage in it lightly (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7; Deut 6:13).
E. Swearing is not appropriate action for stubbing your toe or hitting your finger with a hammer!
F. Swearing is not appropriate action for impressing another person or hurting them in a fit of anger!
G. Young men often sin with the last two lines, for their hearts are full of folly (Eccl 11:10; Titus 2:6)!
H. There is never any excuse for jokes about God, heaven, sin, or related subjects (Pr 14:9; Eph 5:3-5).
I. We shall give an account of every idle word, so it behooves us to speak guardedly (Matthew 12:36).

Godly swearing must have the RIGHT ACTION!

A. Keep your vows to a minimum and avoid being a fool by not fulfilling your vows and oaths in the name of the Lord (Deut 23:21-23; Eccl 5:4-6; Prov 29:20).
B. The commandment of God prohibits swearing falsely; you had better perform your oath (Lev 19:12).
C. The commandment of God includes disclosing all you know when you are sworn in court (Pr 29:24).
D. Even if keeping an oath will cause you hurt, you are to keep it anyway for the Lord (Psalm 15:1,4).

Can you summarize Godly swearing?

A. "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 20:7).
B. **Vain**. Devoid of real value, worth, or significance; idle, unprofitable, useless, worthless.
C. "And thou shalt swear, The LORD liveth, in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; and the nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory" (Jer 4:2).
D. Pharisees lived the wrong religion, swore by the wrong objects, swore at the wrong occasions, and followed their oaths with wrong actions; the Lord Jesus and James were condemning these excesses, when they blasted against anything more than yes or no (Matt 5:33-37; 23:16-22; Jas 5:12).
E. The name of THE LORD THY GOD is a glorious and fearful name (Deuteronomy 28:58; Ps 111:9).

Conclusion:

1. By rightly dividing the word of truth, we arrive at a precious understanding of God's wisdom (II Tim 2:15).
2. The Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others are very confused in rejecting proper oaths in God's name.
3. Make sure you avoid with holy hatred any vain or light use of God's name or things pertaining to Him.
4. Ministers of the gospel should be exemplary in their use of language before all men (I Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7).
5. Consider your baptism! It was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! Are you living worthy of His name, His death, and His resurrection? Or have you taken His name in vain in that public act?
6. If you were arrested and tried for being a Christian, is there enough evidence to convict you? Consider it!
7. Everything in life should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with thanksgiving (Colossians 3:17).

For further study:

1. Commentary on Proverb 29:24 about being sworn to testify, http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Proverbs/29_24.htm.
2. Commentary on Proverb 14:9 about making a mock of sin, http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Proverbs/14_09.htm.
3. Sermon about ruling the tongue, http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Sermons/pdf/RulingtheTongue.pdf.