

ON SWEARING,

ADDRESSED TO THOSE WHO DESIRE TO MAINTAIN
THE LORD'S HONOUR.

MATTHEW v. 33.

“AGAIN, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine Oaths:

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven for it is God's Throne; nor by the earth, for it is God's Footstool; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the City of the Great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst make one hair white or black.

But let your communication be, yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

A direction so plain as this, and expressed in terms so absolute with a reason so conclusive, would we might suppose, have left no ground for variation of opinion and disobedience; yet perhaps there is no command more readily broken by the generality of professing Christians. The ground of this being that the words do not absolutely mean all they express, but only refer to swearing on ordinary occasions; while taking an oath, as a serious attestation to truth is alledged to be not objected to by the Lord. The point being one of serious importance, on which any Christian may have to decide by compulsion, before the legal tribunals of this country, it is necessary to examine it, that our conscience may not be stained, by the sin of obeying man rather than God, or be under fear of a charge of resisting legal ordinances, without a sufficient reason; and also that we may be able to give an answer on this point to any who may ask us.

First then, as we have said the words "Swear not at all" are in themselves terms absolute, and it is evident, that unless we deny to our Lord, the liberty and understanding of the right use of words, we must suppose he meant, that it would be positive disobedience to his wishes, if his followers took an oath under any circumstances whatever, for if he ever so much desired it, what words was he to use, or how express himself, if these are not to be so received, no language would find terms to enable him to effect its total abolition among men. In the scope of the whole sermon we find our Lord was not only giving the duties of his disciples, but he so did it as to contrast them with those of the law under which the Jewish followers around had been brought up, and thereby shew the difference between his own principles of Grace and Truth, and the precepts which Moses had given, many of which the latter authorized because of human weakness, and hardness of heart, and therefore fell short of the true dignity and purity of the holy law of God which Moses received on Mount Sinai, Mat. v. 28, as well as the high principles of the gospel. This was the case in matters of Adultery, Divorce, Retaliation and Compensation spoken of just before and after; but the disciples of Christ to whom the Holy Ghost was to be given were expected to exercise a restraint and purity of action worthy of the power supplied.

This is therefore a sufficient answer to those who suppose it impossible that God could never permit a thing essentially wrong. The fact, that what God did by Moses once allow, Jesus forbids, is plain. The arguments and authorities respecting divorce and polygamy are of exactly the same character and it would be just as reasonable to allow more exceptions against the former than the one given, or permit polygamy in any case, as to admit that an oath can be any other than disobedience.

That it was the purpose of Christ to place his disciples on higher principles of action than Moses did is plainly declared in the sermon, "Be ye therefore perfect, he says, even as your Father in heaven is Perfect" John i. 17.

It may not be amiss here to observe, that even under the law, God never allowed vows to be forced by authority but said Deut. xxiii. 22, " But if thou shalt forbear to vow it shall be no sin in thee " What earthly power can rightly alter this. It is that in the law of Moses itself, by which those who refuse to obey an earthly command are justified.

The very character of a vow ought to shew, that if made at all, it must be voluntary, the fact of its being forced, affording an apparent excuse for the breach.

... If we now examine the passage itself by its immediate context, we are left without the least chance of difficulty ; as in it our Lord refers to the law of Moses, repeats what the law said, and then declares the abrogation of its permission to swear, giving a new rule of action, with such explanations respecting the reason of the change as to leave no ground of deviation.

The Lord Jesus desiring to shew the difference between the law, and his own high and holy principles of Grace and Truth, on which the believers' integrity should alone stand, and the folly of weak creatures, who are but dust, professing to have power, forbids it absolutely both in principle and detail.

Nothing from the infinite loftiness of the Throne of Jehovah to the most minute particles of their own nothingness, was to be the subject of a pledge, which they never could be sure of time or power to redeem, and therefore to swear was to suppose a lie ; certain power over the thing pledged without which an oath can be of no value ; evil therefore must be mixed with it in man, however true the intention and effort to support it. - The law of Moses never allowed profane swearing or common blasphemy, but commanded it to be punished at once, with a greater severity than would now be admissible, and the sort of Oath Jesus referred to, was exactly the one which is now sanctioned and practised by the generality of professing Christians, made one of the articles of their discipline by one body, and through their influence the law of the land, with penalties attached

against any who in the clear light of truth see their own duty, and have firmness enough not only to call Christ, Lord, Lord, but shew they understand the term to give him a claim to implicit obedience, by refusing to *swear at all*.

But with the exception of one body, and an occasional honest and simple hearted Christian among others, it is deeply to be regretted, that scarcely any Christians have zeal enough for their masters honour, to obey their Lord, but instead of letting their light to shine among men that he may be glorified, do by their practice and submission, assist in establishing the error, and by their opinions, to take the honour of these holy principles from Jesus's standing and character.

In this sin the Author regrets he has been as much involved as others, but the Lord having graciously opened his eyes to the truth, he now trusts he will support him with power to obey.

We will now examine the grounds on which our opponents pretend to find authority for their opinions, though where persons are determined to maintain an error, or are influenced by fear, worldly mindedness, or any other working of the flesh, there will be always a supposed excuse.

First then we have a narrow idea of the meaning of the word conversation used in the text.

With regard to this, as we have already shewn, it cannot refer to common blasphemy, as that was never allowed in the sayings of old; neither would the command have been required, the disciples knowing it already, nor do we find the word ever used in such a limited sense elsewhere in Scripture, it meant the whole conduct. St. Paul says, let your conversation be without covetousness, does he mean we are to be free from worldly mindedness in private matters, and not in public ones, or can we take an oath without conversing, if not where is the plea, but what is so likely to cause men of the world to doubt a Christians integrity, if he be found acting in disobedience to his profession of duty to Christ, is it not giving a triumph to Satan? and which is the greatest breach of faith.

Another of the supposed authorities for swearing is St. Paul's example, Acts xviii. 18, and his quotation of the Almighty's own act, in Heb. vi. With regard to the former, it was exactly the sort of oath allowed him as a Jew, by that law he had been brought up under, and consequently the very thing Christ forbid, or otherwise the Lord's commands meant nothing, and the distinction between law and Gospel, becomes a distinction without a difference on this subject.

If we enquire how an Apostle could err on the point, although it has nothing to do with the matter the fact being so plain, yet as this Apostle was not one of those who accompanied with Jesus on earth, it is probable he was not yet acquainted with his duty on this head, like all others he had to learn it from the Lord, as he was taught, or had it revealed to him. Vows are also often hasty acts of passion or weakness, and he might as in the case of his rash answer to Ananias, Acts xxiii. have failed under trying circumstances, but the former reason is the most probable. The Apostle himself commands us to follow him only as he followed Christ.

The act of this Apostle in 1 Corinthians ii. 23, is no oath at all, but the calling of God as a witness to an important truth, the expression arising probably from the same cause.

In the other passage in Heb. vi. the Apostle refers to the custom among men of swearing, and the use it was supposed to have, to shew God's purpose in the same act; but what is this more than a repetition of our Lord's acknowledgments, as to what took place in old time, used for illustration.

There is no dispute about the object of oaths, and Jesus knew what it was when he forbid them. The Apostle makes no use of it here to confirm the practice, but merely states the facts, to shew the final character of the promises, God stooping to human weakness in hope of being more readily believed, swearing by himself which he can rightly do, because he has infinite power and truth to keep the oath, and one objection to men swearing is be-

cause they have no such power. This too, was of olden time, to strengthen those who though without Abraham's strong faith, were Abraham's children, and had not yet arrived at the better dispensation. He whose word was law, and whose heart was integrity, did it in condescension and in pity.

But when he appeared on earth in the person of Jesus, not only to act in compassion, but also to be an example of perfect obedience, and the express image of God's *own* Person, establishing thereby with his teaching, the highest moral attributes of God, that Christians might be his children manifestly. Did he ever swear, though he had the same desirable objects to impress on their minds, and as great a measure of unbelief to deal with? No, the object of his example would have been lost, he wished the principles now introduced should prove their heavenly origin, and stand on the pure dictates of truth, placing all his followers on a personal responsibility to him for their maintenance (with the Holy Spirit's help) as an attestation to their Divine Masters glorious system.

The fact of our Lord answering to the adjuration of the High Priest, Matt. xxvi. 64, has I understand, been used as an argument in favour of judicial swearing, this could only be from not understanding legal distinctions, and the fact that Christ took no oath is enough for the common understanding. It would have been useless to lay principles of grace before such a man at such a time, if Caiphas himself had expressed his demand by an oath, but the act of Caiphas was not an oath, or demand on Oath, but a Citation, he had no doubt learning enough in the law, Deut. xxiii. 22, to know he had no authority to compel an answer on oath, but as our Lord refused to plead his own cause for the purpose of defence, Caiphas demands an answer on Jesus own veracity, by the authority he had under the law, to which Jesus who acknowledged the law, could do no other with consistency than then answer. The act is exactly of that character, by which a person unwilling of his own free will to appear at all on

a jury, or as a witness, is adjured in the name of the Sovereign, but to suppose his then doing so is any thing more than an acknowledgment of that authority's right to have an answer, or attendance, or the same thing as taking the Oath to truth afterwards tendered, is a legal absurdity.

If we find the Apostle who was not with our Lord on the Mount, giving way to old Jewish prejudices, we certainly do not those who were present. The language of St. James is as decided as our Lords, chap. v. "*But above all things my brethren swear not.*" What answer can we give to the words, "Above all things." If all causes and reasons are below the importance of obedience to the Lord in this command, must it not be without either to disobey, while no variation of manner might be an excuse, he says "Nor by any other Oath," he takes also the followers place, by giving no reasons for the command, but a very sufficient one for obedience, "Lest ye fall into condemnation."

May we not say as St. Paul did on another occasion to reasoners and cavaliers, "Awake to righteousness and sin not, for some have not the knowledge of God." Has not Divine holiness been measured by the natural understanding, and Divine authority, made to wait on human assent on the propriety of its commands, and thus men fall short of the understanding of God.

How much then must he be grieved when the whole land is full of Oaths, every serious act beginning or ending with it, all professedly by his sanction, through the failure of his professed followers. That Oath too containing every objection named. The most precious thing we possess, pledged, the souls salvation; sealed too, by kissing the holy word of God, the great legacy of Christ to teach his people not to commit sin, and expressly declaring this act to be one.

How necessary then does it become, more necessary than ever, that those who love the Lord should awake to their high calling, and vindicate their masters, by their own obedience, and laying these truths before others, instead of excusing its neglect through fear of being

called on to bear that which should be their greatest joy, suffering for his sake who died for them, looking to him for the joy of his sure support, and expecting while they keep the spotless garments he has committed to their charge, free from stain, to realize his kind promise. "Fear not little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

That the Lord of his infinite love may so revive his work among his people in these latter days, that none of them may have cause to blush for their testimony when he comes again among them, is the humble prayer of the Author.

E. D.

Note.—The civil part of this subject is treated of in a Work addressed to Her Majesty by a Member of the Establishment, whose views are an honour to that body; but my address being to believers on the ground of their profession, I have nothing to do with the subject beyond the point of obedience to the word of Christ.

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