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‘NOT TO SWEAR AT ALL’

MATTHEW V, 34

IT is recorded in the Sermon on the Mount : ‘You have heard that it was said to them of old, “Thou shalt not forswear thyself”, but “Thou shalt perform thy oaths to the Lord” ; but I say to you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God, nor by the earth for it is his footstool, nor by Jerusalem for it is the city of the great king ; neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your speech be “Yea, yea ; no, no”. And that which is over and above these is of evil’ Matt. v, 33—37. ‘I say to you not to swear at all.’ In form this is an unqualified prohibition ; but does our Lord in fact forbid all taking of oaths ? In the first place, He does not say that a strengthening of a simple affirmation or denial by an oath is evil—but is ‘of evil,’ that is springs from evil. That is to say that the use of oaths is due to man’s fallen nature. If men were entirely innocent and always spoke the truth, there would be no need of oaths. Men would always believe each other. It is because we are prone to evil that when there might be a temptation to lie concerning some important matter, an oath is used that its sanctity and the wickedness of its violation may help to secure the utterance of the truth. In the second place, Scripture records oaths taken by God Himself : ‘God making promise to Abraham, because He had no one greater by whom he might swear, swore by himself’, Heb. vi, 13, and again ‘But this with an oath, by him that said unto him “The Lord hath sworn and he will not repent : Thou art a priest for ever” ’, Heb. vii, 21 quoting Ps. 109 : 4. The Apostles, who knew our Lord’s teaching, had no scruple in having recourse to an oath when the occasion required it : ‘What I write to you, behold, before God, I lie not’, Gal. i, 20. And again, ‘I call God to witness upon my soul that to spare you I came not any more to Corinth’, II Cor. i, 23. And see further I Cor. xv, 31, Rom. i, 9, Phil. i, 8. These instances suffice to show that our Lord did not prohibit oaths altogether in spite of the apparently absolute form of the words.

How then are His words to be explained ? Here we are helped by recalling the audience our Lord was addressing and the rabbinical teaching on the validity of oaths. In Deut. vi, 13, it is laid down that ‘Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God and serve him only, and thou shalt swear by his name’. From this the Rabbis deduced that only those oaths were of binding force in which the name of God is invoked or some equivalent such as ‘the Merciful One’. This is explicitly laid down in the Mishnah and the Talmud (*Shebu’oth* IV, 13 ; Babylonian Talmud *ibid.* 35a—b). *As a corollary of this it is recognized in the same passages that oaths by heaven and earth are not binding.* To such teaching our

Lord opposes the words of Scripture: ‘Heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool’, Is. lxvi, 1, and the name given to Jerusalem in Ps. 47, 3 ‘the city of the great king’. The argument that the Rabbis used of oaths by heaven, earth, and Jerusalem would, if valid, apply also to oaths by one’s head, and we may deduce from our Lord’s words that such oaths were in use by his contemporaries but considered to be of no binding force. To this He replies in effect that the reasoning is invalid, because the head is a creature of God’s and to God alone belongs full dominion over it.

The sense of the passage may, therefore, be paraphrased as follows. You have heard that it was said to them of old ‘Thou shalt not perjure thyself, but shalt pay thy oaths to God’. You acknowledge that an oath taken by the name of God is binding, and that if you do not intend to keep it, you must not take such an oath. But I say to you that this is true not only of oaths taken by the name of God, but also of oaths by any creature precisely because all are God’s creatures, and all such oaths are therefore equivalent to oaths by God. Hence you can perjure yourselves by any oath, and therefore, if you do not intend to abide by your oath, you must not swear either by God or by any creature at all. To this is added a precept to be satisfied with a simple affirmation or denial except in cases where the corroboration of an oath is required by the circumstances—a qualification implicit in the whole context.

The correctness of this interpretation may be confirmed by the consideration that our Lord said in so many words ‘Do not think that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfil’, Matt. v, 17. Now the liceity of oaths had express divine sanction in the Law, and our Lord does not ‘destroy’ by contradicting the divine commandment to swear by the name of God, but ‘fulfils’ or perfects it by teaching that all oaths are binding as being in substance equivalent to oaths taken in the name of God.

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