

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Chapter 23 Lawful Oaths and Vows

1. What does it mean to swear?

When we swear, we make a promise or pledge – a vow or oath.

When we swear, we call upon God to punish us for failing to keep our promise

- We become citizens of a country
- We assume public office
- We testify in a court of law
- We get married

2. Why do Jesus (Matt. 5:33–38) and James (James 5:12) forbid swearing?

It's permissible to swear by God's name (Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Job 22:27; Ps. 61:8; 63:11). Abraham swears (Gen. 14:22–24; 21:23–24; 24:2–9; 26:31), as does Jacob (Gen. 50:5), Joseph (Gen. 50:25), David (1 Sam. 20:17), and Paul (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:23).

- They condemn foolishness and rashness (Judg. 11:30–31; 1 Sam. 14:24).
- They condemn subtle idolatry (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 6:13).
- They condemn practical dishonesty (Matt. 23:16–22).

“In the Jewish code of law called the *Mishnah*, there is one whole tractate given over to the question of oaths, including detailed consideration of when they're binding and when they're not. For example, one rabbi says that if you swear by Jerusalem you are not bound by your vow; but if you swear toward Jerusalem, then you are bound by your vow. The swearing of oaths then degenerates into terrible rules which let you know when you can get away with lying and deception, and when you can't. These oaths no longer foster truthfulness, but weaken the cause of truth and promote deceit. Swearing evasively becomes justification for lying” (D. A. Carson).

Chapter 24 Civil Government

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Mk. 12:17).

1. Jesus dismisses the theocratic state

The payment of the denarius supports (among other things) the Roman legions. By commanding the Jews to pay this tax, Jesus encourages them to acknowledge Rome. As far as He's concerned, the Israelite theocracy is over. The kingdom of God is never again identified with an earthly nation. The kingdom of God isn't political, but relational. It isn't national, but international. It isn't tribal, but global.

2. Jesus affirms the authority of the state

“There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). The state exists for the preservation of law and order – the protection of life (Gen. 9:6). It restrains man’s sin by acting as a deterrent.

Despite the many imperfections, we should be extremely thankful for this country’s laws, courts, judges, prisons, sheriffs, etc. Are these things perfect? No. Can these things be abused? Yes. But can you imagine life without them?

We should praise God if He grants us government officials, who fear Him. The reality is, however, that very few do fear God. But this doesn’t negate the function of government. “The many failures of human government, which are the failures of human beings themselves, must not blind us to the truth that government is nevertheless directly and divinely appointed” (J. M. Boice).

3. Jesus commands us to submit to the state

Rome is pagan, yet Jesus commands the Jews to pay the tax. A state doesn’t need to be Christian, in order to be obeyed and respected.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...” (Rom. 13:1–7).

Why?

“For there is no authority except from God...”

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad...”

“For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath...”

How?

First, we pay taxes and customs (13:6).

Second, we render respect and honor (13:7).

Paul commands us to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Tim. 2:2).

That “we may lead a peaceful and quiet life...”

That “we may live godly and dignified in every way...”

4. Jesus requires civil disobedience

The denarius identifies Tiberius as divine and high priest. Jesus refutes this claim. What does that mean for Christians when Rome commands its citizens to worship the emperor? They disobey. As a result, they die by the thousands. What’s our response when divine and human authorities clash? If the government commands us to do something morally wrong, God commands us to disobey.