

What Did Jesus Mean When He Said, “He Who Swears by the Temple, Swears by It”? (Matthew 23:20, NKJV)

To understand this statement, we must explore the broader context in Matthew 23:16–22, where Jesus addresses the religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes—the Jewish religious leaders of His time.

Context:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?”

(Matthew 23:16–17, NKJV)

The Pharisees had developed a twisted hierarchy of oaths, where swearing by certain religious objects was binding, but others were not. They claimed that if someone swore by the gold of the temple or by the offering on the altar, the oath was binding. But swearing by the temple or the altar itself wasn’t binding.

Jesus rebukes this distorted logic:

“Which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?”

(Matthew 23:19, NKJV)

He then corrects their thinking:

“Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.”

(Matthew 23:20-22, NKJV)

Jesus was not teaching that people should swear oaths. In fact, in Matthew 5:33-37, He explicitly forbids the practice of oath-taking:

“But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it

is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool... But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”
(Matthew 5:34–37, NKJV)

This teaching is echoed by the Apostle James:

“But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ lest you fall into judgment.”
(James 5:12, NKJV)

So, in Matthew 23, Jesus is not validating oaths, but rather exposing the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. They valued material offerings (like gold and sacrifices) more than the sacred spaces (like the temple and altar) that represented God’s presence.

Misplaced Priorities:

By teaching that an oath by gold was binding but not one by the

temple, the Pharisees revealed their materialism and greed. They elevated gifts above the Giver, and offerings above the sanctified place of worship.

This was a form of religious manipulation, turning sacred practices into means of profit. Jesus saw through it and called them “blind guides” (v. 16), “fools”, and “hypocrites” throughout the chapter (cf. Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, etc.).

This same issue appears again in Mark 7:10–13, where Jesus criticizes their use of the term “Corban” (a gift dedicated to God) as a loophole to avoid caring for their parents:

“...you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition...”

(Mark 7:12–13, NKJV)

Their tradition allowed people to withhold help from their parents by claiming the resources were pledged to God. But Jesus emphasized that true obedience to God honors both God and His

commandments, including the command to honor parents.

Modern Application:

This same attitude is sometimes seen today. In some churches or ministries, there’s more concern when someone fails to give an offering than when someone fails to honor God through worship, service, or discipleship. People are often pressured to fulfill financial pledges, while spiritual neglect is overlooked.

However, Jesus teaches that God’s dwelling place (the church, God’s people, His Word) is more important than the material gifts given in it. Offerings are meaningful only because they are presented in God’s holy presence, not because of their monetary value.

Conclusion:

When Jesus said, “*He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it*” (Matthew 23:21), He was pointing back to God Himself as the ultimate authority behind all sacred things. The temple is holy not because of its gold, but because God

dwells there.

Thus, He calls us to honor what is truly sacred—not for personal gain or ritual tradition, but in reverence to God. And above all, He reminds us to speak truthfully, avoiding oaths altogether, and simply letting our word be trustworthy.

May the Lord help us to seek purity of heart over performance of religion.

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