

## Of Lawful Oaths and Vows (Part 1)

Deuteronomy 10:12-22; WCF 22.1-22.2

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 23 August 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)<sup>1</sup>

### Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

You will remember that James, the brother of Christ, wrote the following words (in Js 5:12) ...

***But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.***<sup>2</sup>

Of course, with the word “swear” James does not mean “using bad/foul words.” Granted, no one should use bad/foul words. But what James means is “taking oaths.” James says the Christian’s life should be so truthful that he/she will have no need to take oaths! Indeed, a Christian should be a person whose word can be trusted!

Why did James find it necessary to write these words?

Well, because of man’s natural bent to sin! Yes, even Christians need to hear such an admonition/exhortation!

To illustrate this, here is what the late Professor Gerstner once experienced. (John Gerstner was a Professor in Church History in in the USA).<sup>3</sup>

It is said that Professor Gerstner needed repairs to be made to the room that housed his library, so he had arranged for the services of a carpenter – a *Christian* carpenter! This carpenter agreed to come at an appointed day and time. Prof Gerstner rearranged his schedule to meet the carpenter. But, sadly, the carpenter did not show up! And Prof Gerstner waited and waited! And so, the whole day went by without this Christian carpenter showing up or calling!

Then, a few days later, Prof Gerstner saw the carpenter and said, “I thought you were going to come last Tuesday to do a job for me.”

Said the carpenter, “Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t get there!” “You see, on Monday night I got a phone call to come give a quote on building a house.” “So, in order to secure that contract, I had to be there the next day.” “I’m sorry, but I’ll get to your job as soon as I can.”

Said Prof Gerstner, “This Christian’s ‘Yes’ meant ‘Yes, unless something better comes along.’”

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jas 5:12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>3</sup> *John Henry Gerstner* (November 22, 1914 – March 24, 1996) was a Professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Knox Theological Seminary and very knowledgeable on the life and theology of Jonathan Edwards (<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=John+Gerstner%3F> ).

For this incident, cf. Sproul (ibid:349-350).

My brother & sister, perhaps you have had a similar experience!  
Even worse – I hope not, but perhaps you have broken your promise to someone else – and knowingly so!  
See? See the reason why we have oaths and vows in this world?  
It's because, by their sinful nature, all people are prone to lying! And Rm 3:4 even says it: "Every man is a liar!"<sup>4</sup>  
Indeed, by nature, man has an aversion to receiving the truth from God – and also an aversion to speaking the truth!

Where did it all start?

Well, remember where we encountered the first liar? In the Garden of Eden – the *serpent*! Yes, the first assault against God, which has been recorded in Scripture, was an attack on God's truthfulness: "**Did God actually say...**?"<sup>5</sup> the serpent asked!

Then, when Eve at first defended the truth of what God had said, the serpent suggested the very opposite!

See the origin of all lies!?

See why (in Jn 8:44), our Lord called satan, "...*the father of lies*"?<sup>6</sup>

Wow! In this sad & broken state into which satan plunged creation, where does man's hope lie?

In *God* who is the opposite of lies – yes, in God who *keeps* His promises!

Remember how God, although He did not have to, confirmed His promises to Abraham with an oath!?<sup>7</sup>

And those promises? Well, God has fulfilled them already in what He, in Christ, did to all His loved ones!

So, God keeps His promises!

Indeed, as Paul says in Rm 3:4, "**Let God be true, and every man a liar.**"<sup>8</sup>

My brother & sister, it's because human beings – even Christians – are inclined to lying and not sticking to their word, that there exists e.g. an extraordinary Christian movement called "Promise Keepers."

I read that, in its heyday, more than 600,000 men assembled in an open-air gathering in the USA to be exhorted towards keeping their marriage vows.<sup>9</sup> When the men who

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<sup>4</sup> In this verse Paul is quoting Ps 116:11 **And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars."**

<sup>5</sup> So, the ESV

<sup>6</sup> Jn 8:44 **You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies** (Emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Heb 6:13-14 **For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,** <sup>14</sup> **saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you."**

Also cf. Gn 22:16-17 **"...I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,** <sup>17</sup> **I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore..."**

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ro 3:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>9</sup> "Promise Keepers' most notable event was its Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men open-air gathering at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on October 4, 1997. C-SPAN carried the event live in its entirety. Attendance figures vary but have been estimated to be between 600,000 and 800,000"

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promise\\_Keepers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promise_Keepers)).

Also cf. Sproul (ibid:351)

attended such meetings were asked why they went there, they replied that they felt guilty that they had not kept, *as they should have*, their promises to their wives and children!

Well, what else, but the *sanctity of truth*, is Promise Keepers based upon!?

Yes, Promise Keepers exists because of man's sinful inclination towards lying!

Here's another example: We have wedding services where bride and groom make promises to one another – promises on oath in the presence of every authority possible!

Yes, bride & groom take their oaths before friends, family, church family, secular government, and God!!

You see, it's one thing to promise faithfulness to one another *when no one else is listening!* But it is something else to make that same promise *in front of many people and authorities!* After all, such witnesses can in future call us up on our promises and say, "You aren't keeping what you have promised!"

And here's another reality: If, years later, even the government, the church family, our friends and family don't care that we have broken our promises, *God* does still care!! And God says (in Eccl 5:5), "***It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.***"<sup>10</sup>

My brother & sister, why do witnesses in a courtroom have to put their one hand on the Bible and raise their other hand and swear "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!"?

Why does the judge not just say to the witness, "Please make sure that you tell us the truth today!"?

There's only one answer: Because we all are weak and fallen, and because our words are not inherently trustworthy!

And so, it is for this reason that God, in His grace, has granted us the help and blessing of the holy vow and oath!

Well, after this lengthy introduction, here are the two main points of our sermon...

- Taking an Oath is Like Worship
- In One Name Only

### **Taking an Oath is Like Worship**

My brother & sister, is it not true that, to a certain degree, taking an oath in God's Name is *worship!*?

I mean, what else is happening when someone takes an oath in God's Name? Is that person, by that very action, not saying as much as, "God, by taking an oath in Your Name, I acknowledge that You are *the highest authority* in the universe!"?

See? Is it not so that such a person is giving God the *weight*, the *importance*, the *glory*, yes, the *worth* due Him? And where does our word *worship* come from? Well, does it not come from *worth-ship*?

It's clear! In taking an oath in God's Holy Name, I'm acknowledging God's highest status – His weightiness; His worth!

Thus, taking an oath is, among other, also a way of worshiping (*worth-shiping*) God!

It's like Ps 29:1-2 which says,

***Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,***

***Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.***

***Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in holy array.***<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ec 5:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>11</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ps 29:1–2). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

You see, the Hebrew word translated in these verses as “glory,” comes from a word-origin which means “to be heavy” or “weighty.”<sup>12</sup>

So, in the Hebrew mindset, these verses from Ps 29 may just as well be translated as...

*Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,*

*Ascribe to the LORD weightiness and strength.*

*Ascribe to the LORD the weightiness due to His name; Worship (bow down low before)<sup>13</sup> the LORD in holy array!*

See? Taking an oath in God’s Name is doing just that – is ascribing to Him the weightiness/worthiness/glory due Him!

Look, is that not what the Apostle Paul did when he found the need to convince the Corinthian Church of his sincere & honest motives?

This is what Paul said (in 2Cor 1:23), “**I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.**”<sup>14</sup>

See? It’s because Paul knew that God is the highest authority (that God is *weighty* in honour & glory; that God is most *worthy*), that he used God’s Name to assure the Corinthians that he (Paul) meant it well by not visiting them earlier, for if Paul did visit them earlier, his stern rebuke would have been too painful for them!<sup>15</sup>

My brother & sister, these two concepts simply go together:

- 1) Having a most high regard for God (worshiping/fearing Him), and
- 2) taking an oath in His Name.

Look, do we not encounter both of these concepts together in one Bible verse – in Deut 10:20? Here it is: “**You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.**”<sup>16</sup>

Did you hear that? *Fearing God and swearing by His Name* – these two belong together!

Now, here’s the scary part...

What if – yes, what if someone has taken an oath (has made a promise) in God’s Name, but then does not stick to his/her oath!?

Well, such a person will go against God’s command in Lv 19:12, “**Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.**”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the person who has made his/her marriage vows in the name of God, but then breaks those vows – such a person has profaned (*defiled, polluted – dragged through the*

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<sup>12</sup> Yes Ps 29:1 & 2 uses the word *kāvōd* (כְּבוֹד), which is related to the verb *kāved* (כָּבַד) *be heavy, weighty, burdensome, honoured* (For these two words, cf. e.g. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 457). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

<sup>13</sup> In Hebrew, *hishtahāvū* (הִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ), *prostrate yourselves*; a Hishtaf'al Imperative Masculine Plural of הוהו.

<sup>14</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Co 1:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 2:1-4 ***So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup> For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? <sup>3</sup> I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup> For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.***

<sup>16</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Dt 10:20). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>17</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Le 19:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

*mud*) God's Name. The same with the one who, in the courtroom, lies under oath to the judge!

Yes, such a person will be guilty of transgressing the Third Commandment: "***You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...***"<sup>18</sup> (not raise His Name in emptiness – or for nothingness; or for no good purpose).<sup>19</sup>

And how does the Third Commandment continue?

In this way: "...***for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.***"<sup>20</sup>

Wow! May we all take these words to heart!

Perhaps someone will say, "But, preacher, I cannot remember that I took my marriage vows in the Name of God?"

Well, allow me to remind every Christian of the first three lines of the vows in the form for Christian weddings:

*I, So & So, take you, So & So,  
as my wife/husband in Christian marriage.  
In the presence of God and before these witnesses...*

Also remember what this same form says in its very introduction: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here *in the presence of God* and of these witnesses to unite this man and this woman in the holy bonds of marriage..."

My brother & sister, hear the weighty words which King Solomon prayed at the time of the dedication of the temple and its altar: "***When a man wrongs his neighbor and is required to take an oath and he comes and swears the oath before Your altar in this temple,*** <sup>23</sup> ***then hear from heaven and act. Judge between Your servants, repaying the guilty by bringing down on his own head what he has done. Declare the innocent not guilty and so establish his innocence.***" <sup>21</sup>

Well, what do we see?

We see that making an oath in God's Name is a serious undertaking!

It has an element of worship in it!

And it has serious consequences for anyone (also you & me) if we have used God's holy Name lightly, or have dragged it through the mud before believers or unbelievers by breaking our vows!

Well, so far regarding point 1: "Taking an Oath is Like Worship."

Here is point 2...

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<sup>18</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ex 20:7). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>19</sup> In Hebrew *lō nāsā laššāv' (לֹא נָשָׂא לַשֵּׁשֶׁבַע)* *take up the name of God in vain* (to no good purpose; to nothingness/emptiness) (Cf. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 996). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

<sup>20</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ex 20:7). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>21</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Ch 6:22–23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## In One Name Only

What a privilege God has given us that we are allowed to swear our oaths in His Name! And how privileged we are that, even our secular government in New Zealand allows for us (often requests of us) to swear in God's Name!

You see, ten years ago, when three people in our family became New Zealand citizens, we had to take an oath of allegiance. And, among three options of making that oath, the New Zealand government gave us also the option of taking our oaths in the Name of the God of the Bible. And we gladly did this, because we saw that also as an opportunity to witness for our God to all who were present – even some from other faith backgrounds.

Well, here's an important point – i.e. that God's Word tells us we are to take our oaths in His Name only and in no other would-be god's name! Deut 6:13 makes this plain by the order in which it has arranged its words – the words, "The Lord your God" are standing upfront in the sentence, "***It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.***"<sup>22</sup> Because of this emphasis laid upon the words "The Lord your God," most English versions of the Bible have inserted the word "only" in Dt 6:13. So, e.g. does the NASB read, "***You shall fear only<sup>23</sup> the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.***"<sup>24</sup>

And if this was still unclear to the Israelites, then the next verse removed all doubt (Dt 6:14), "***You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you...***"<sup>25</sup>

So, in matters of weight and great importance, we are allowed to swear by God's Name, *but in no other name!*

Yet, sadly, you & I often hear how people (at times even *church people*) swear by names of those who are no gods at all – just as God once said through the prophet Jeremiah (in Jer 5:7)...

***Why should I forgive you?  
Your children have forsaken me  
and sworn by gods that are not gods.  
....***<sup>26</sup>

In fact, in His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus also preached against this practice, when He said...

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'<sup>34</sup> But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;<sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.<sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you

<sup>22</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Dt 6:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. Here's

the Hebrew: אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא וּבְשֵׁמוֹ תִשָּׁבַע:

<sup>23</sup> This word was inserted by the NASB and NIV84. Also cf. Mt 4:10 in which Christ referred to Deut 6:13: "***Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'***" (...καὶ αὐτῷ μόνῳ λατρεύσεις).

<sup>24</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Dt 6:13). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>25</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Dt 6:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>26</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Je 5:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

*cannot make even one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.'*<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Christ was not taking away the God-given privilege by which we are allowed to take oaths in important matters. He was only speaking against cheap & frivolous oaths! And today we still hear such frivolous oaths when a colleague at work or someone on the street might say, "As true as Bob!" or "As true as this/that!" And the irony is that, often when you hear someone swear like this, all signs are there that there may be some untruth or evil brewing!

However, the more common abuse of God's Name is when people say or text the letters O.M.G. – or even say *in full* the words for which these letters stand! Sometimes you will hear how someone will say all the names of our Lord Jesus – simply to add force to their frivolous words/emotion!

My brother & sister – and dear young people & Children, remember: a Christian is different to the world!

And taking an oath in God's Name is a privilege to be used sparingly – only allowed in weighty matters and when government lawfully requires it.

Also: The Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His Name in vain (the Third Commandment's warning)!

How will you & I be able use this privilege correctly?

Only when we really love the Lord who saved us (made us right with Him) at a tremendous cost!

AMEN (2,639 words excluding footnotes)

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<sup>27</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mt 5:33–37). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.