

Of Lawful Oaths and Vows (Part 3)

Numbers 30:1-16; WCF 22.5-22.7

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 27 September 2020, 16:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This is the third sermon in a series on oaths and vows.

The previous two sermons dealt mostly with *oaths*, whereas this one deals with *vows*!

You might ask, “But what’s the difference between an oath and a vow?”

Well, we will hear the answer to that question under point 1 of this sermon.

Here, it is...

Vows Are to The Lord

My brother & sister, the Hebrew text of the Old Testament clearly uses a different word for a *vow*² (or *making a vow*)³ and an *oath*⁴ (or *swearing an oath*).⁵

And here is the difference in meaning...

- An oath is what you make *with another human being* in the presence of God;
- But a vow is what you make *to God Himself*.

So, strictly speaking, we should in English have talked of “marriage *oaths*” and not of “marriage *vows*,” for, at the Christian wedding, the bride and groom (although in the presence of God) make solemn & binding promises *to one another*! However, the phrase “marriage vows” is so ingrained in our vocabulary that it would be impossible to get everyone to from now on talk of “marriage oaths!”

Anyhow, when the Bible talks of *vows* it means that God is (or should be) the One to whom we vow!

Now, here is a major characteristic of vows – i.e. that they must be made voluntarily! In other words, if a person refrains from vowing, he/she will not be guilty of sin. But the minute you make a vow to God – although it is a voluntary action that you take – you put an obligation upon yourself to fulfil that vow.

Look, is this not what Deut 23:21-23 says? Here it is: “***If you make a vow⁶ to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you***”

¹ 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.

² In Hebrew, *nēder* (נִדְּרָה) or *neder* (נִדְּרָה)

³ In Hebrew, *nādar nēder* (נִדְּרָה נִדְּרָה) literally “to vow a vow” (cf. e.g. Isaiah 19:21); or *shillem nēder* (שִׁלְּמֵם נִדְּרָה) literally “to fulfil/pay a vow” (cf. e.g. Ps 61:8; 66:13)

⁴ In Hebrew, *shavu`āh* or *shavū`āh* (שָׁבוּעָה or שְׁבֻעָה)

⁵ In Hebrew, *hishshāva` shavū`āh* (הִשָּׁבַע שְׁבֻעָה) literally “to swear/make an oath” (cf. e.g. Num 30:2)

⁶ In Hebrew, *tiddor neder* (תִּדְּרָה נִדְּרָה).

*and you will be guilty of sin. ²² But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. ²³ Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.*⁷

Why, then, did people in Bible times (and in later times) make vows to God if they put themselves under huge obligation?

Well, people have made vows to God to encourage themselves in their actions, or perhaps to more powerfully plead for something they desired.

Look, is this not what Jacob did when he was fleeing from his brother Esau – yes, when Jacob fled on his long journey to his uncle Laban, when he (Jacob) woke up from that prophetic dream he had at Bethel? Remember how Jacob took the stone which he had used for a pillow, that night, and set it up as a pillar? Remember how he then he poured oil on it and made a vow to the LORD? Here is what Gen 28:20-22 tell us about that vow...

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹ so that I return safely to my father’s house, then the Lord will be my God ²² and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”⁸

My brother & sister, remember how also Hannah made a vow to God – a vow made at a time when her husband’s second wife, Peninnah, mocked her because she had not yet had a child? Again, as with Jacob’s vow, Hannah’s vow was made in an urgent plea that God would bring about a drastic change to her worrisome state. This was what we read in 1 Sm 1:11, *And she made a vow, saying, “O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.”⁹*

Of course, we know how God heard Hannah’s cries. And 1 Sm 1:24-28 tells us how Hannah then fulfilled her vow: *“After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. ²⁵ When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶ and she said to him, “As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” And he worshiped the Lord there.”¹⁰*

That’s how Hannah vowed to the LORD, and then fulfilled her vow!

Also the psalmist of Psalm 66 describes how God has heard His people’s cries to rescue them – to save their lives at a time when they were sorely oppressed by their enemies.¹¹

⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Dt 23:21–23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ Well, later on, after all the many years that Jacob had worked for Laban, his father-in-law, the LORD reminded Jacob of the vow Jacob took at Bethel. This is what the LORD said (Gen 31:13), *“I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.”*

⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Sa 1:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Sa 1:24–28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ Cf. Ps 66:8-12 *Praise our God, O peoples,*

Well, now that God has brought them through that ordeal, here is what the Psalmist says he will now do (Ps 66:13-15) ...

*I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you—¹⁴vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble. ¹⁵I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats.*¹²

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that the basic idea behind a vow is that we (as the WCF 22:6) says, “more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties” or perhaps even to something that is not necessary, but still fitting and proper. In saying this, we also see the limitations of our human natures.

How?

Well, in the sense that the sad reality is we human beings need helps and devices such as vows to spur us on in our duties/services to God – or to help us carry through our good intentions.

Look, is this not what King David did?

You see, to spur himself on to do something about the fact that, in his days, there was not yet a temple for the LORD, David made a vow to God that he (David) would not rest until...

Well, Ps 132:2-5 gives us David’s own words...

He swore an oath to the LORD and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: ³“I will not enter my house or go to my bed— ⁴I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, ⁵ till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.”

Well, how about you & me? Have you ever made a vow to God that if He would do this or that, you would then become a missionary or give X amount of money for the spreading of the Gospel; or would do this or that as a way of thanking/praising/glorifying Him?

In the past week, I was scanning my memory to see whether I have ever made a vow to God! Here’s the sad thing: I can honestly not even remember whether I ever vowed to God! Yes, on numerous occasions (just like any other child of God), I did earnestly pray for God’s guidance and for His help and deliverance during tough times in my life and in the lives of my family members, friends and church family members. But that I ever made a vow, I cannot remember! What a clear sign of my sinful limitations!

Now, that brings us to the next short point...

Fulfil What You Vow

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 warns, “*When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.*”¹³

Well, even the LORD (Yahweh) Himself says to His covenant people, Israel, who so easily used to fall in the habit of worshiping Him with their mouths and even with their sacrifices

let the sound of his praise be heard; ⁹he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. ¹⁰For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. ¹¹You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. ¹²You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance (NIV84).

¹² [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 66:13–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ec 5:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

of bulls while their hearts were far from loving Him – this is what He says to them in Ps 50:14

“Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, ¹⁵and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”

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“...fulfil your vows...”

How sad & scary that the LORD had to remind His people to fulfil the vows they had made to Him!

However, how wonderful the times when the believers *themselves* remembered and sang (as in Ps 66:13-14), ***“I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you— ¹⁴vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.”***¹⁵

My brother & sister (dear children), we are going to sing these same words from Ps 66 as our closing song this afternoon! Here are the words from stanza 4, ***“With gratitude and offerings I come into your house, for when I was in trouble, Lord, I spoke to you my vows. I bring you now burnt offerings of fatlings from my herd; I offer you my gift of thanks, because I gave my word.”***

Now, please note: when you & I come to praise God here in this place of worship, we no longer do what the Ancient Israelites did – we don’t bring to God fatlings from our herd (as one godly sister in the Foxton church once reminded me); no, but we still bring offerings in the shape of our financial tithes and offerings – and even the special offering on a Lord’s Supper day, like today!

But look, it’s not just by *financial* offerings that we can fulfil vows that we might have made! Granted, some of us might have vowed to God that if He answered our prayers to the positive, we would throw X amount into the offering bag for overseas’ missions. However, the content of our vows might have been that we would serve the Lord in some or other way – perhaps with our meal-preparing talent for someone who is under stress.

Well, whatever vow we make to the LORD, it will be wise, on account of our weak human nature, not to promise to God a thing that we cannot or may not be able to do. Therefore, we might include in our heartfelt vows phrases such as, “so far as...” or “so long as...” You see, you & I need to remember that we are restricted in our abilities to keep our vows! Well, so far re point 2 “Fulfil what you vow!”

Here’s the last point...

Foolish Vows

My brother & sister, foolishness can be applied to *vows* as well as to *oaths* – that is, vows & oaths which we make without thorough consideration; so, vows & oaths which we are bound to be unable to keep, or to keep at greater pain than we foresaw!

This is e.g. what Jephthah did when he vowed to sacrifice to God the first thing that approaches him from his house when he returned. He clearly overlooked the great possibility that his one and only darling daughter would be the one to approach him first!¹⁶

Then there was King Herod who made a rash oath in a moment of light-heartedness & frivolity – an oath to the pretty daughter of Herodias who enchanted him with her dances!

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 50:14–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

¹⁵ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 66:13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁶ Judges 11:29-40

The Bible tells us (in Mk 6:23), “***And he promised her with an oath,¹⁷ ‘Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.’***”¹⁸

Well, in his frivolousness, Herod did not think of the possibility that she might, through the help of her embittered mother, ask for the head of John the Baptist. So, instead of *admitting* that he made a foolish oath, Herod, in his weakness (and not wanting to lose face before his guests), decided to *uphold* his oath.¹⁹ Thus he commanded that John the Baptist’s head be severed and brought on a platter!

Well, forty Jewish leaders in Jerusalem made a similar foolish oath when they wanted to kill Paul. Acts 23:12 tell us, “***The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.***”

Well, how foolish! Because Paul was not killed until at least four-to-eight years later – and in Rome! So, one wonders what those Jewish leaders did about their oath *not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul!*

My brother & sister, you & I cannot promise to do what God has not promised to help us do!

Quite strikingly, our Old-Testament passage (Num 30) sketches a scenario in which God’s laws allowed for a husband and/or father to revoke the thoughtless vows their wives and/or daughters have made. No such exception clause exists in the New Testament.

Well, before we conclude, here are some of the most common foolish vows people have made. Many of these are associated with the Roman Catholic Church.

For example, ...

- Roman religious leaders make vows never to marry. They do this thinking that it could lead them to an undivided relationship with God; and to try and avoid the sins of lust. Even in Jesus’ times there were people who sterilised themselves to avoid lust (Mt 19:11, 12).²⁰ However, they did not take to heart that which Paul explained to the Corinthians, i.e. that God’s way to avoid lust often includes the blessing of marriage (1 Cor 7:2, 9).²¹

¹⁷ From the Greek verb *omnyō* (ὀμνύω [a by-form of ὀμνυμι]) “... to affirm the veracity of one’s statement by invoking a transcendent entity, freq. w. implied invitation of punishment if one is untruthful, swear, take an oath...” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 705). Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Note that Mark used the same Greek verb here (the verb *omnyō*) as the one used by the Septuagint in Num 30:2 (30:3 in the Septuagint). The Hebrew phrase is *hishshāva` shəvū`āh* (שָׁבַע עִשָׂרָה) literally “to swear/make an oath” (cf. e.g. Num 30:2)

¹⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mk 6:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁹ Cf. Mk 6:26 ***The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.***

²⁰ Mt 19:11-12, “***Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.***

¹² ***For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’***

²¹ 1 Cor 7:2, 9 “***But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. ...***

⁹ ***But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.’***

- Then there are certain religious orders who vow to remain poor.²² Some of them live by begging only – as Francis of Assisi did! Yet, choosing poverty is ignoring Paul’s exhortation for Christians to work hard so that they can be able to help those who are really/truly in need (Eph 4:28).²³

Well, usually the whole package of Roman Catholic promises includes three: *chastity*, *poverty* and *obedience*. These are such strict rules that they cannot be fully kept by mere men and women. So, these vows only have the *appearance* of wisdom, but, in reality, they are unqualified vows – yes, open-ended promises which bring the Lord’s displeasure when they are made – and again when they are broken!

My brother & sister (dear children) let us never entangle ourselves with unwise vows, for this is what they will do to us: they will take us – yes, we whom Christ has set free from the curse of the law – and return us into a bondage so that we become slaves of man and man-made rules.²⁴

But we have been set free by our Lord Jesus Christ whose yoke is easy and burden light!

AMEN (2,501 words excluding footnotes)

²² On this, cf. e.g. The Vow of Poverty and the Vow of Devotion [<https://borgenproject.org/vow-poverty-vow-devotion/>].

²³ Eph 4:28 ***“He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.”***

²⁴ 1 Cor 7:23 ***You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.***