

01 – How Good is Your Word

Church Vows

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According to Merriam-Webster, a vow is a solemn promise or assertion: one by which a person is bound to an act, service, or condition. A vow is a solemn promise or assertion that binds a person to certain things. Well, as you can deduce from that simple definition, vows are pretty much a part of everyday life, aren't they? When you, children, you can ask your parents about this, you can have them show you a copy of it if they have it close by, when your parents bought their home, unless they're wealthy or have accumulated much wealth over life and they don't have to have a mortgage on their home, they have a mortgage. They went to a bank, a mortgage broker, and they borrowed money and they vowed a vow that they would repay that money and that vow is symbolized by their signature that they placed on a contract. If you go and buy an automobile and you take it to be registered or a boat or a motorcycle, whatever you have or all those things, when you took it to be registered, you know, there's a line that you sign on those registration forms that say that the information that you've given the county, the city, the state, whomever, is accurate. You vow a vow. You make a promise, you assert that what you're saying is true and that you will abide by the laws because if you have a car, you have to abide by the laws of the state to operate it properly within the bounds of what the laws of the state say. You vow a vow. When you take it to get it insured, same thing.

So you can see vows are something you do every day. It's a way of life for us. For those who are members of this church or any Presbyterian church and some other churches as well, I know growing up as a Baptist, we had a covenant. It was a very simple little document but there's a covenant and it hung out in the – we didn't call it a narthex, Baptist's call it a vestibule or perhaps a foyer depending on how far out or in toward town you were – and that covenant was up on the wall out there and members had to take vows that they believed that covenant; they would adhere to that covenant. And it was not just in doctrine but it was in practice as well. Well, our vows as Presbyterians, those five vows that you assent to, you assert that you believe those things and will do those things. There is both doctrine and practice to which you vow your vows.

Listen again, I'll re-read a part of what we read earlier from the Confession. The Confession says, "A vow, like an oath, is a part of religious worship, wherein upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calls God to witness what he asserts or promises; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears." So it's a promise, an assertion made to God. As we read in Hebrews 6, God finding no one higher than himself swore to himself, swore in his own name. And we are called, Jesus says in Matthew 5 we're not to swear to anything in heaven or on earth but let our yes be yes, and our no be no. Now, his point there is not and some have taken this and the history of the church has taken it, "But we're not supposed to take vows," and so you may know some people who if they go into the courtroom, they will not swear, "So help me God." They have misread the Scriptures. The Scriptures are replete in the Old Testament, the word "vow" occurs over and over and over. We take vows to God in the presence of God. Jesus was saying there is no one higher than God, that's where you go. Just as Hebrews 6 told us, God swore in his own name and we are to do the same thing as we see in this passage before us. We're to promise God that we will do what we say we will do and that we believe what we say we believe and that we're thankful for what Christ has done for us. That's the essence of vows we take.

Well, I don't have to tell you that in the Ecclesiastical milieu of our day vows are not very common. Well, I shouldn't say it that way. Vows are rather common, they're just not taken very seriously. People take their alumni clubs more seriously than they take their vows to the church. People take their vows to the Rotary Club, to the Lions Club, to the their Book Club, more seriously than they do and most of those aren't even written vows, they're just, "Yeah, I'd like to be part of this." And they are more regular in their attendance to their baseball clubs, their football clubs, than they are to the one eternal club, the church. If you break your vow to men, yes, that's bad; you lose your credibility and you have brought dishonor on Christ by doing that. But if you break your vow to God as we see in this passage in Ecclesiastes, God becomes angry. God becomes destructive. Those aren't my words, we just read them in the infallible, inerrant word of God.

Starting today and for the next few weeks, what I want to do because of observing over the years such a low view of vow taking in churches, is to begin a series on the doctrine of vows. As you already noticed from our Confession of Faith, we have an entire chapter within our doctrinal standards of the church concerning vows and oaths. We utilize vows not only in receiving people into membership and holding them accountable for discipline in the church, but we also use them when men are ordained to the offices of elder and deacon. So they take a vow before God and God witnessing that they will do for you what they have promised to do and we have to hold those men accountable, this man accountable, members likewise as I've said, take those vows and we need to take them seriously.

Well, this passage in Ecclesiastes is just one of many Old Testament passages and one of many in the Bible that we could have chosen but it's so clear, it's so easy, I decided to go the easy route this week in developing what a vow is and how important a vow is and this passage does that for us. Notice, first, the context for the vow that's being spoken of.

Verse 4 is clear, "When you vow a vow to God." Someone could say, "But that's just talking about everyday life." Even some churches say, "Oh, we don't require membership. Nothing in the Bible requires membership so we don't." Well, they fail to read the Bible in a holistic, biblical, theological way. Yes, there may not be a single solitary verse that says, "Thou shalt vow vows to be members of the church," I'll grant them that, but neither is there a verse that says, "The Lord God is one in three persons," the Holy Trinity, but in order to be a Christian, you must believe that truth which is gathered from the totality, the organic unity of the Scriptures, by an easy and careful reading of the Scriptures from a holistic standpoint.

So the context for vowing vows to God is stated for us in verse 1, it's the church. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." Now remember Solomon, most likely Solomon based on the evidence of the book and tradition, Solomon is writing and so much of Ecclesiastes is what? It's about vanity, meaninglessness. There is just no meaning in life. Then in verse 1 of chapter 5, he makes a bit of a shift and he goes to the place where there is to be meaning. We shouldn't expect and this is aside, you don't have to pay for this one, you shouldn't expect there to be meaning out there among people who reject the one true God and the Lord Jesus Christ. You should expect there to be meaninglessness and you should expect your friends to say, "I don't understand what's going on and I don't think anyone can understand what's going on." That shouldn't surprise you.

But Solomon then comes and says, "Now let's go to the house of the Lord," and when you go to the house of the Lord, you're to guard your steps. You are to draw near to listen because listening is better than talking. You've all used this on your children and grandchildren: God gave you one mouth, two ears, that should tell you something. Twice as many ears means you ought to listen at least twice as much as you talk. We live in an age of proliferation of talk: talk radio, blogosphere, Twitter, who knows. Everybody has something to say and thinks it's worthwhile. It doesn't matter that they're repeating the same stuff that was said yesterday by someone else, better in most cases. Or last century. Solomon's point here is, "Oh, just quit talking. That's all I hear, people talk, talk, talk." People, when you go to the house of the Lord, you're not coming to give your opinion. I don't stand up here to give my opinion. We come in here to offer God his praise from his word. That's why we sing the Psalms and we sing hymns that are based upon the Scripture. We come to offer him his word, not our opinions.

So Solomon says, "Come into the house of the Lord," and you need to come into the house of the Lord and you come into the house of the Lord, "not to offer rash words with your mouth," verse 2 says, "not to let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God for God is in heaven and you are on earth." In other words, keep in mind who you are. You're the creature, he's the Creator. You're the redeemed, he is the Redeemer. We get it flipped, don't we? We like to think, "Oh well, we're..." Psalm 100, "He made us, not we ourselves." We forget that so easily, don't we? We do. We act like we're the Creator, we act like we're the Redeemer and those are rash thoughts and rash words. Hasty.

Those are, he says, the words of fools who don't even know that they're doing evil. We come into the church and the last thing we should do is speak rashly; speak hastily; speak much at all. We come into the presence of the one true God. And I love, you know, you read in the book of Revelation, the imagery is consistent with the Old Testament imagery. Isaiah fell on his face before the Lord. He speaks when God speaks to him. You go to the book of Revelation and it was silent when John saw the heavens. He saw the worship going on and there was silence in the heavens because God's presence hushes our mouths.

The vows are to be taken in the church. Deuteronomy 23 says this, "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for it would be sin to you and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God that you have promised." The Old Testament saints came into the covenant community by vows. They lived their lives in the context of the covenant community by vows. We don't have time this morning to rehearse all those cases but you'll find it all through the Old Testament. God calls them to repentance and they come and they vow to God they'll do this and God holds them responsible for that.

The vows that are to be taken in the Old Testament are also consistent with New Testament decorum as well. Isaiah 44:1-5 tells us of the coming Messianic age. Isaiah is so wonderful. Isaiah talks about all the doom and gloom that's coming on the people of God in the exile context and then he'll always turn it around and give them hope of restoration and hope in the Messiah to come. And when he gives them the hope of the coming of the Messianic age, the coming of Christ, he says, "And the Holy Spirit is going to be poured out on you," and then he says this, "And when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the offspring and blessing on your descendants, they will spring up among grass like poplars by streams of water." Then listen, "This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,' and that one will call on the name of Jacob; and another will write on his hand, 'Belonging to the Lord,' and will name Israel's name with honor." In other words, in the new covenant context, people will be just as responsible for declaring themselves as they are in the old covenant context. They will assert what they believe. They will declare it. They will promise to God what they have always promised and that is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.

We see this not only from the Old Testament prophecy of the new covenant and vows being taken, we also see it just from a biblical theological position. Ephesians 5:1, for instance. Ephesians 5:1 says that we are to be imitators of God. Now, I want to ask you something: how seriously do you take that word? That's convicting, isn't it? It's convicting to me. We are to be imitators of God. Now, the passage we read this morning says that God, having no other name whereby he could swear, he swore by his own name. And out of that swearing by his own name, taking an oath, binding himself to do certain things which the book of Hebrews is about sending his Son to be the great Mediator, the perfect Priest, the one true sacrifice, the one of which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed; that in doing that, in keeping his word, in honoring his vow that he vowed in eternity past, we can have hope and assurance. I want to suggest to you that we are to imitate God, that means we're to take vows, we're to take vows in the name of God

and when we do, we can expect that the hope and assurance of our salvation will be stronger than it would be otherwise. God promised it in Hebrews 6. He vowed a vow and our hope and assurance benefits from it. We vow a vow and 1 John teaches us this: one of the ways we know we're children of God is by our obedience; our keeping our word. Of course, the other way is the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit and, of course, our faith in the one true Savior, Jesus Christ. So we see here that just from a biblical theological perspective we're to imitate God. God vows, God vows in his own name, that brings hope and assurance. We should vow in God's name as imitators of God and expect assurance and hope to follow.

We also see that vows are to be taken in the New Testament new covenant context following the same biblical theological line because vows are deduced from the fact that the Bible teaches church discipline. The Bible in 1 Timothy 5:20 says if anyone sins publicly, they are to be rebuked publicly. Sometimes people ask the elders, "Why did you have to send a letter explaining that someone's been disciplined? Why did you have to announce it from the pulpit?" Because the Bible says to. It's a warning to us all. I don't know about you but when I'm driving down the road and they are working on it, I would like to be warned about that. When there's a curve coming, particularly those real sharp ones and if I'm out on a pretty day with my little sunroof back on my faded painted Honda Accord from 1996 and maybe driving right on the speed limit and if there's a real sharp curve, I'd like to know that. The same principle. God's very gracious to his church. When a person sins, comes into sin and they have to be dealt with even to the point of a public rebuke or, as in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and following, they have to be put out of the church, excommunicated.

God is very good to us that we announce it to the people so that it stands as a reminder, as a warning, that sin has to be dealt with. Sin is serious. Sin can't be tolerated because sin, you see, sin brings dishonor on Christ's name. Sin also brings impurity into the midst of the people. That's the whole covenanted union aspect of the Bible. God has put us, and we looked at this last week in the context of the Lord's Supper, but we're a family and if one family member is grumpy, what happens? The dinner table is not much fun. If one family member is sick, what happens? It usually goes through the whole house, doesn't it? The same analogy holds up with that body analogy Paul gives us in the New Testament. When one person is sinning, it will have a leavening effect, a negative leavening effect on the whole congregation and that has to be dealt with; it has to be carefully surgically carved out and God has given us biblical discipline to do that.

You say, "Now, what has this got to do with vowing vows?" Because, look, we deduce vows from this very simply: in order for the elders, in order for you according to Matthew 18 as an individual to go to a brother and say, "Brother, you're sinning," you have to have the right to do that. You have to have the right to go to your child, right? You have to be the parent to go to your child and talk to them about certain things. You have to have the right as a member of this church to go to someone else and that right has to be a contractual right in order for it to be a binding right. In the Scriptures we don't speak contractually as much as we speak of covenantally. Vows are covenant promises that we take. Vows are the way in which we become bound to one another in the

covenant community and thereby we can speak to one another. We can individually say, "Brother, you said this. That's inappropriate. Brother, you did this. That's inappropriate." And Matthew 18 says if he will listen to you, your brother has been saved. If he won't, take it to the elders. If the elders speak to him and he won't, then they are to bring it to the whole church. We ought to be thankful for church discipline but out of church discipline we back ourselves up and we deduce that vows are very important. You see, we wouldn't have any basis to go to someone and say, "You can't do that," that public sin, if there were not vows taken.

So the Old Testament and New Testament are replete with this concept, either clearly, explicitly set forth as in Ecclesiastes 5, or biblically, theologically set forth as in these two examples that I have given you in the New Testament from Hebrews 6, Ephesians 5, from those various passages concerning church discipline. Vows originate for the Christians within the context of the church so we take them very seriously.

The second thing I want you to see and very briefly: the house of God can witness insincere vows and that's the sad part, isn't it? It's where your vows originate in the household and that's where they can be broken is in the household. You notice what he says here, verse 4, "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it for he has no pleasure in fools." First of all, take that language seriously. God doesn't use the word "fool" lightly. He says when you break vows, you're a fool. You're a foolish person.

But second, not there, he has no pleasure in people who breaks vows. Boy, in an age where people just come, they take a vow, "Yes. Yes, I believe I'm a sinner. Yes, I believe I need Jesus Christ. Yes, I'll try to live like a Christian in humble reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Yes, I promise to support the worship and work of the church to the best of my ability. Yes, I'll submit to the governance of the church." And then they come and they go. They come when they want, if they want. They give if they want, what they want. They leave on a whim as if they don't owe God or you anything and the Bible says that's a fool and that's a man with whom I have no pleasure, God says.

Look what else he says, "It's better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin." Breaking a vow is sin, God says. What is sin? Lawlessness. When you keep your vows, you're simply keeping the law of God and that's good for us. The law is good. God gave it to us for good purposes. He didn't give the law to us to hurt us. He gave the law to us to give us a path; to give us direction; to give us instruction on living. It's good for us.

"Let not your mouth lead you into sin and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry?" Notice that, God is angry at your voice when you don't keep your vows. Do you notice the language? Keeping vows, he uses the language of paying them. We make a vow to God and our payment is the keeping of those vows. He says here that if man doesn't keep his vows, God is angry at your voice. I don't know about you, but that runs shudders all over me to think God's angry. You say, "But wait a minute, if I'm a Christian, God's wrath has been turned away by the blood of his Son. There is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ. How can he be angry with

me?" Well, that's a good question. That's one that should cause us to search our souls. He is talking in the context of the covenant community here, going into the house of God. And yet he says, "If you don't keep your vows, God is angry with you." I believe I can reconcile that in a biblical theological manner. I believe it's consistent with 1 John 2, there are those who go out from us because they were really never part of us even though they took vows and they broke those vows. Breaking the vows show us a real heart.

It's one of those things where we have to stop and examine our hearts. Goodness, why would I break a vow? Why would I do that? Why would I take vows to God and his people so lightly and just so flippantly be able to say them and then not be concerned about keeping them? What's wrong with my heart? And we call upon God. What's the answer to sin? What's the proper response to sin? The proper response to sin is repentance. So we find ourselves in a position where we've broken vows and we know God's response is one of displeasure; we know God's response is one of anger; we know God's response is destroy the work of your hands. I'm going to tell you, folks, if that didn't drive you to your knees in repentance, I don't know what would. And if you're not at that point, desirous of repentance, then there's only one thing that can be brought from that. If you don't care and you don't desire to repent, you don't desire to turn away from your sin of breaking vows to God and his people, you have to ask yourself, "Am I really his? Can I be that insincere toward God that I claim to be my Savior?" I'll tell you on the basis of the word of God: no, you can't be a Christian and live a perpetual life of breaking vows and being insincere about your vows to God.

Right now, some of you are thinking, "Boy, this is heavy stuff. I hope the next five weeks aren't quite this heavy." Well, they will be if you're not keeping your vows. If you're not trusting the Lord and the Lord alone to save you from your sins, if you're not striving every day of your life to live a life of repentance in humble reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ and his Spirit, if you're not every day seeking ways how I can to the best of my ability support the worship and work of my church, if you're not every day saying, "You know, my heart is one that's been molded by the Holy Spirit and I am desirous to be submissive to the leadership God has put over me, those wonderful elders and those deacons," if that's not your daily desire, then there are serious heart problems. But on the other hand, what a wonderful way to live your days working through, and we do this with our children, our family occasions, we just work down through those vows. If you don't have a copy of the vows that you took, you ought to have a copy of those vows you took. You see, God is angry if you don't keep them. God destroys...do you ever wonder, "Why am I not being successful?" And I am not health and prosperity. "Why am I struggling so in life? Why am I not content with my work? Why am I...?" Maybe it's because his hand is turned against your work because your vows have been taken lightly and insincerely.

So I would encourage you all today, go to your elder and say, "I need a copy of those vows. I don't have them. I need a copy of those vows. I want to go over them with my children. We want to rehearse them." We want to be studying these from the Scripture and that's what we're going to do for the next five weeks is look at each of those vows from the Scripture, see the basis of them and the significance of them so that when we come out of this on the other end, and we will, when we come out this on the other end,

five weeks, six weeks from now, we'll be a people who resemble what the Lord says, "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no." People can trust you. God will be honored by you when your yes is yes, and your no is no.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you. We ask now that you would bless your word to our very hearts. As we prayed at the beginning, we pray that you would faithfully keep your word to us and work your word into our heart. We were told in Isaiah that your word never, never returns to you void; it accomplishes one of two things: it either changes us and makes us imitators of God, it changes us and makes us lovers of our Savior better, it changes us and gives us ears more finely attuned to the voice of the Spirit, or else it hardens our hearts, it resolves our indifference and we leave cold, heartless. Father, I pray that this morning there would be none leaving indifferent, none leaving cold, but all leaving with a great desire to honor their word; to make their word true in your presence and the presence of your people; that they would find great joy in being faithful to you. That's my prayer. Show us your grace, Lord. Turn our hearts to say what we mean and mean what we say and to honor you in all things. We pray it in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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