

“You Shall Fulfill Your Vows”
(Matthew 5:33-37)

Introduction: So that we don't miss the forest for the trees, I would remind you that Jesus, in this section in the Sermon on the Mount, is making comparisons and contrasts between what the teachers of the Law were teaching and what the Law of God really meant. Remember Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. He did this by way of fulfilling the righteousness of the Law through His perfect life and atoning death, but He also did this by way of teaching the people what God really intended by them, for by this time the commandments had become distorted in their minds because of what they had been and were being taught. And this isn't unusual. The same thing happens in our culture. The writers of the Constitution of this land meant certain things by what they wrote, but by this time what they said has been debated and reinterpreted so many times that it has lost much of its original meaning. The same thing happens within churches with regard to their Confessions. A denomination little by little gets into the habit of allowing certain beliefs which are contrary to their Confession. And then, after a while, they simply accept that this is what their Confession always meant. Well God doesn't want us to forget what He meant by what He said, so He sent His Son into the world to teach us and to set the record straight. And any time we may question what God meant, we can always look into His Word for the answer. “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2a). May the Lord grant that our eyes would not be so clouded by those who have taught us that we cannot see what God's Word really says.

Jesus, having corrected the people's false views on the sixth commandment regarding murder, and on the seventh commandment regarding adultery, now turns to the third commandment, which has to do with the making and fulfilling of vows. And what I want you to understand from this passage is that,

Jesus does not forbid the making of vows, but tells us that we must be faithful to fulfill what we vow.

Since this is such an important and highly neglected area in the worship of God, I would like for us to spend at least two weeks considering it. This week we will see what oaths and vows are and that Jesus is not forbidding here the taking of oaths. And next week I want us to look at why and how we should make vows.

I. First, I want you to see that the taking of oaths was something which was required by the Lord in the Old Covenant and that He intends that this practice continue into the New.

A. Jesus begins by quoting here the essence of several passages in the Old Covenant.

1. He says, “Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfil your vows to the Lord’” (v. 33).
2. Literally, He says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, or break your oath, but you shall pay your oaths to the Lord.’” When Jesus speaks here about oaths and vows, I believe that He uses them as being roughly

the same.

- a. Jesus is really quoting here the third commandment, and its explanation in other places in the Old Testament. The Lord says in Exodus 20:7, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”
- b. To take the Lord’s name in vain means to misuse it in some way. This can be done either by blaspheming it, or by using it to take an oath or vow which you have no intention of keeping.
- c. Now the Israelites were not given to using the Lord’s name as a curse word.
 - (i) They knew that to do so was to forfeit their own lives.
 - (ii) When they left Egypt, there was a man who was the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian. This man got into a fight with a man of Israel, and in the middle of the struggle, he blasphemed God’s name and cursed. He was then taken into custody until they knew what the Lord would have them do with him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him. And you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If anyone curses his God, then he shall bear his sin. Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him. The alien as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death’” (Lev. 24:10-16).
- d. Today, most people in our society don’t think twice about cursing, using the name of the Lord, or about blaspheming His name.
 - (i) Perhaps some of us here have done this sometime in our lives. If you haven’t, don’t ever start.
 - (ii) Do you realize that the Lord considers this a crime punishable by death?
 - (iii) How many of here have deserved death at the hands of the Lord for this reason? How many of us have earned the death sentence by other things which we have done. Any sin is enough to damn us.
 - (iv) But yet how gracious has the Lord been in forgiving us for all of our sins in Christ. Apart from Jesus, all of us would have perished eternally. But those of us who have embraced Him by faith and love Him in all sincerity have been forever delivered from that punishment. How thankful then should we be to God for the gift of His Son?
- e. But another way in which the people of Israel would use God’s name in vain was by taking oaths or making vows, and not paying them. This was to call God to bear witness to a lie. And to do this was to take up God’s name, which is a revelation of God Himself, in an empty and vain way.
- f. The Lord said in Leviticus 19:12, “You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.”
- g. He said through Moses, in Numbers 30:2, “If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth,” and again in Deuteronomy 23:23, “You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips,

just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised.”

- B. To take an oath or to make a vow without paying, was considered a serious sin. But to do so with the intention of keeping it, was considered an act of worship in the Old Covenant. And this, as I’ve said, is what the Lord commanded His people to do.
1. We see this in Deuteronomy 6:13-15, where the Lord said, “You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the Lord your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; otherwise the anger of the Lord your God will be kindled against you, and He will wipe you off the face of the earth.”
 - a. In this passage, the people of God were finally about to inherit the land which was promised to their fathers: to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. They were about to inherit cities which they had not built, houses filled with good things which they did not fill, cisterns full of water which they did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees full of fruit which they did not plant or cultivate.
 - b. But when they entered the land, God did not want them to forget that He was the One who had brought them out of Egypt and who had given them all these things.
 - c. And so He commands them to fear only Him, to worship only Him and to swear only by His name.
 - (i) To fear the Lord means that you take His Word seriously enough to act upon it. You believe that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do. This fear reveals itself by making you turn from all your sin, and by making you strive to do all that is right with your whole heart. You realize that if you don’t, His chastening hand will come upon you. It is a real fear of a real God who really takes His Word seriously, even when you do not.
 - (ii) To worship the Lord means to serve Him. It means to render to Him an acceptable service with love and with fear. All of life is to be worship to the Lord. Paul writes, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). He urges us, on the basis of the mercies of God, to present our bodies as living and holy sacrifices to God, for this is our spiritual service of worship (Rom. 12:1).
 - (iii) But what does it mean to swear by His name?
 2. To swear means to bind yourself with an oath (TWOT 899). It means to promise that you are going to do what you say you will do.
 - a. It was not a mysterious thing to the Israelites. It was a part of their lives.
 - b. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* defines it in this way, “To swear in the Old Testament was to give one’s sacred unbreakable word in testimony that the one swearing would faithfully perform some promised deed, or that he would faithfully refrain from some evil act. . . . Occasionally one swore that he freely acknowledged a truth and would continue to acknowledge it in the future. This was the case when Abraham in Gen. 21:30, 31 caused Abimelech to swear to the truth that he, Abraham, had dug, and hence owned, the well called Beer-sheba” (900).
 - c. Often, it meant calling upon someone who was greater or more worthy than the swearer to bear witness to the truth of the oath. For the Israelite, this could only be

God. And so we read in 1 Kings 2:8 where David, speaking to Solomon about Shemei, the Benjamite who cursed him on the day he was forced to leave Jerusalem because of his son Absalom, said, “But when he came down to me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord, saying, ‘I will not put you to death with the sword.’”

- d. The Lord told the Israelites that they must always swear by His name, and His name only. The reason He did this was that swearing, as I’ve said, was an act of worship, and the Lord did not want His people worshipping false gods.
 - (i) Certainly, in the land of Canaan, there were many false gods, and they would be tempted to go after them.
 - (ii) Any many times they failed and did what God forbade them: they called upon the names of false gods, and fell under His wrath for it. The Lord rebukes Judah through Jeremiah the prophet, by saying, “‘Why should I pardon you? Your sons have forsaken Me and sworn by those who are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the harlot’s house. They were well-fed lusty horses, each one neighing after his neighbor’s wife. Shall I not punish these people,’ declares the Lord, ‘and on a nation such as this shall I not avenge Myself’” (5:7-9).
 - (iii) To swear by a false god was to give that dignity and worship which is due to God alone to that which is not God. And to do this was idolatry. They must “swear by His name.”
- e. But once having made an oath, they must be prepared to pay them, whether what they vowed was wise or not.
 - (i) The only reason they could legitimately break an oath is if what they vowed was sinful in itself. If this happened, they were bound to break it, for keeping it would be worse. There is never any excuse to sin.
 - (ii) For instance, if Jephthah really did vow to sacrifice his daughter, that vow would have been far more sinful to keep than to break.
 - (iii) But foolish vows could be made, and if they were, they needed to keep them.
 - (iv) For example, when the Gibeonites, during the Conquest of Canaan, heard what Joshua and the Israelites had done to the cities of Jericho and Ai, some of them came to the leaders of Israel and lied to them, telling them that they had come from far away, from outside of the land, and they wanted Israel to make a covenant with them that they would not destroy them. And so Joshua and the leaders of Israel made a covenant with them, and they did so without first inquiring of the Lord. And when they found out who they truly were, they were forced to keep that covenant which they had made because they had sworn to them by the Lord, and because they were afraid of God’s wrath, if they should break that covenant (Joshua 9).
 - (v) Jesus rightly says here what the Law means, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord” (Matt. 5:33).

C. But now having seen that a vow is a promise to God that we will do what we have said, or that what we are saying is true, and having seen that a vow is an act of worship and should only be taken in the name of the Lord. this brings us to the question raised by our text this morning, Does the making and keeping of oaths continue into the New Covenant?

1. I believe the answer is obviously, Yes, not in spite of what Jesus says here, but because of it.
 - a. On the surface, it appears as though Jesus is forbidding the use of vows, when He says, “But I say to you, make no oath at all.”
 - b. James seems to understand it in the same way in his letter, where he writes, “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; so that you may not fall under judgment” (5:12).
 - c. But can we assume that Jesus would quote the express and clear will of His Father in one breath, only to contradict it in the next? Jesus has already told us that “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished (5:18). He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (v. 17).
 - d. Jesus is not contradicting what His Father declared. Rather He is condemning here the practice of swearing by things other than the name of God.
 - (i) They were swearing by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, and by the hairs of their head. But they were not swearing by the name of God.
 - (ii) They thought that if they made their oaths in this way, they would appear to others as though they were making oaths, but believed that God would not hold them accountable for them because they were not using His name.
 - (iii) But Jesus reminds them here that whatever they thought they were swearing by, they were actually swearing by God. Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His holy city, the hairs of your head, both as to their number and color, are all sovereignly under His control.
 - (iv) To swear an oath, any oath, without intending to keep it is to swear falsely, and to swear falsely is a great sin. And to commit this sin, is to fall under the curse. In Zechariah 5:3-4, we read of a curse which the Lord was bringing upon His people, partly because they were swearing falsely. He writes, “‘This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side. I will make it go forth,’ declares the LORD of hosts, ‘and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones.’” The Lord also said to His people through Malachi the prophet, “‘Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,’ says the LORD of hosts” (3:5).
 - (v) Notice that the Lord considers the taking of an oath without the intention to fulfill it to be in the same category as sorcery, adultery, and the oppressing of the widow and the orphan, both of whom were very precious in the eyes of the Lord.
 - (vi) It is no wonder then that Jesus warns us against taking our vows lightly, lest we fail to pay what we have vowed. He does not condemn the taking of oaths, but only the abuse of making them without intending to pay them. This is why He tells us that when we make a vow, we should simply say what the truth is, or what

we intend to do: either yes this is true, or not it isn't; or yes I will do this, or no I won't. When we do this, Jesus wants us to realize that we are automatically calling God to bear witness to what we say. He is the One who sees and hears everything we do and say. When we speak, we must always speak righteously, for God is going to hold us accountable for our words.

2. This interpretation is further strengthened by the many examples in the New Testament of those who took oaths.
 - a. The author to the Hebrews tells us that in his day the taking of oaths was still a common practice. He says, "For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute" (6:16). He said this because God Himself swore to Abraham that He would surely bless him, as He had already promised him (vv. 13-14).
 - b. Paul himself took an oath before the Corinthians to show them how seriously he considered his words to be. He writes, "But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth" (2 Cor. 1:23).
 - c. One more example is seen in the angel of Revelation 10, who "standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it, that there shall be delay no longer" (vv. 5-6).
 - d. Far from forbidding oaths, the Lord actually commends them to us by way of Christ's teaching and by way of example. The Old Covenant practice was therefore not a ceremonial law which has passed away with the coming of Christ, but a moral law which obligates God's people throughout all the ages.
 - e. Having seen what oaths and vows are and that they are a proper part of the worship of God, next week we will look at the times when we should take them, and when not, and how they should to be taken. But for now I would encourage you to begin examining your hearts to see whether or not you have been faithful to those oaths and vows which you have made in the sight of God. Have you lived up to what you said you were going to do? If not, then confess your sin to the Lord and ask for His pardon. All the Lord requires from us is that we be truly sorry for our sins, turn from them all to His Son, and He will forgive us of all our sin. But if we stubbornly refuse to turn from them, the Lord will not turn to us in His mercy and forgiveness, indeed, He has not. May the Lord grant to each of us here this morning that we might forsake our sins and live in all the ways of God. And may He grant that we would not only make righteous vows, but also fulfill them to His glory. Amen.