"You Shall Worship the Lord and Swear by His Name"
(Deuteronomy 6:13)

Introduction: Over the past several weeks we have been exhorted to adhere to the biblical forms of worship which the Lord gives to us in His Word. It is very much in vogue these days, in order to fill the house of God, in the name of "reaching out", to make the worship service "user friendly." It is thought that if we can somehow make the worship service more relevant, more culturally acceptable, or just more downright fun, then more people will attend, more people will get saved, and God will be more pleased. But the Lord has shown us that this just isn't true. It is not that God doesn't want His worship service to be enjoyable. He does not purposely make it a drudgery for us. Really, His worship is only dull and boring to those whose heart is not right in His sight. If you love the Lord anything that He commands will be your delight and pleasure to do. Because you know that whatever He commands, He takes pleasure in seeing His children perform it. If you want to please God, you must do what He wants, and not what pleases you.

So far we have been looking at the ordinary elements of worship, which, as our ***Confession*** tells us are, "The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ" (WCF 21.5). It also tells us that "Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and if vocal, in a known tongue" (WCF 21.3). These are the different things that we normally do as acts of worship. But there are also those occasional elements which our ***Confession*** tells us are part of the extraordinary worship of God, that is, those things that are acts of worship, but are less often used, such as, "Religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner" (WCF 21.5).

Over the next few Lord's Day evenings, we will want to look at these extraordinary acts of worship. And this evening, what I want you to see in our text is that,

Religious oaths and vows are another way of giving worship to the Lord when the circumstances require it.

I would summarize this sermon by saying that there are times when it is right to call upon God to witness to something that you promise to do, or claim to be true.

I. First, Realize that the Taking of Solemn Oaths Was Something Commanded by the Lord in the UT, And Its Legitimacy Continues into the New.

A. As Israel Was About to Enter into the Land of Promise, the Lord Was Reminding Them Not to Forget Him.

1. He reminds them that they are about to inherit the land which He had Swore to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs who had the promises, but who never possessed the land.

2. 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, vineyards and olive trees which they did not plant.

3. When they entered the land, they were not to forget the Lord who had brought them out of the land of Egypt to give them all these wonderful blessings. Therefore, He says, "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" (Deu. 6:13-15).
4. The way that they were to remember Him was by fearing Him, worshiping Him, and swearing by His name.
   a. You know by now what it means to fear the Lord. To fear Him means that you believe that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do, so that you take His Word seriously and turn from all sin, and endeavor after whole hearted obedience, in order that His chastening hand does not come upon you. It is a real fear of a real God who is true to His Word. The Israelites were to fear the Lord and turn from evil.
   b. You also know what it means to worship the Lord. The word means to serve Him. But when it has reference to God, it means the act of worship, for everything that you do in life is worship to God. Remember what the apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, "I URGE YOU THEREFORE BRETHREN, BY THE MERCIES OF GOD, TO PRESENT YOUR BODIES A LIVING AND HOLY SACRIFICE, ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, WHICH IS YOUR SPIRITUAL SERVICE OF WORSHIP. AND DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND, THAT YOU MAY PROVE WHAT THE WILL OF GOD IS, THAT WHICH IS GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE AND PERFECT." The Israelites were to serve the Lord daily, lifting all that they do as an act of worship to Him, especially in their corporate worship.
   c. But this concept of swearing by His name might be new to many of you here this evening. And this is what we will now want to focus on.

B. One of the Things that the Israelites Would Be Tempted to Do Would Be to Make Oaths or Vows in the Name of False Deities, Thus Forgetting the Lord. And So He Commands Them to Swear by His Name.
   1. To swear means "to bind oneself by an oath" (TWOT 899).
      a. It means that you are promising with absolute certainty that you are going to fulfill what you say you will.
      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 (Gen 21:23, 'swear . . . that you will not deal falsely with me'). 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).

2. Often, the one swearing would swear by something or someone else. When you did this, it was assumed that the one you swore by was greater and more worthy than you were. So we read in 1 Kings 2:8, where David, speaking to Solomon about Shemei, the Benjamite who cursed him, swore that he would not hurt him by the name of the Lord, "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.'"
3. In the land which the Israelites were then entering, there were many false deities of every kind. The temptation would be for them to make their oaths and vows in the name of these false gods; something which was tantamount to forsaking the Lord.
   a. In Jeremiah 5:7-9, He rebukes Judah for that very thing. He says, "'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?'"
   b. Again, in the Theological Wordbook, we read, "In such cases . . . a false deity, would be invoked to witness the truth and sincerity of that which was sworn, and by implication, to judge the one swearing if he should either be lying or fail to live up to his pledge in the days and years to come" (TWOT 900).
   c. To swear by a false god was to give that dignity and worship which is the Lord's alone, to that which was not God. Such oaths were forbidden.
   d. To call upon God to bear you witness is an act of worship, just as calling upon His name for other matters, and therefore God alone is to be invoked in such an act.

4. And there is one last thing you should realize about these oaths. Even when they were not good ones, if the Lord's name was invoked, they were still binding, as long as what you bound yourself to was lawful.
   a. After David had sworn to Shemei in the name of the Lord that he would not kill him with the sword, he was bound not to do so. He bound himself to show mercy in that oath, something which he didn't have to do.
   b. So holy and sacred were these oaths made in the name of Yahweh, that Joshua, after he had been deceived by the Gibeonites, would not rescind it.
      (i) You will recall that when the Gibeonites heard what Joshua and all Israel had done to the cities of Jericho and Ai, that they clothed themselves in rags, and took worn out containers of bread and wine and came to Israel deceitfully, saying that they were from a distant land.
      (ii) Joshua and the leaders of the people did not inquire of the Lord, but assumed that their story was true and made a covenant with them.
      (iii) And we read in Joshua 9, "AND IT CAME ABOUT AT THE END OF THREE DAYS AFTER THEY HAD MADE A COVENANT WITH THEM, THAT THEY HEARD THAT THEY WERE NEIGHBORS AND THAT THEY

WERE LIVING WITHIN THEIR LAND. THEN THE SONS OF ISRAEL SET OUT AND CAME TO THEIR CITIES ON THE THIRD DAY. NOW THEIR CITIES WERE GIBEON AND CHEPHIRAH AND BEEROTH AND KIRIATH-JEARIM. AND THE SONS OF ISRAEL DID NOT STRIKE THEM BECAUSE THE LEADERS OF THE CONGREGATION HAD SWORN TO THEM BY THE LORD THE GOD OF ISRAEL. AND THE WHOLE CONGREGATION GRUMBLED AGAINST THE LEADERS. BUT ALL THE LEADERS SAID TO THE WHOLE CONGREGATION, 'WE HAVE SWORN TO THEM BY THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL, AND NOW WE CANNOT TOUCH THEM. THIS WE WILL DO TO THEM, EVEN LET THEM LIVE, LEST WRATH BE UPON US FOR THE OATH WHICH WE SWORE TO THEM'" (16-20).

(iv) Even though they were deceived into making that oath, they still had to honor it, for they had sworn in the name of the Lord.

5. What the Lord was commanding them to do in this passage, was to make their oaths with the greatest solemnity, in His name, and then to be faithful in fulfilling them.

C. Now the Question May Have Arisen in Your Mind As to the Continuance of This Practice in the New Covenant.

1. You may have thought about the passages in the NT which seem to say that you are not to take an oath under any circumstances.

a. In Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "AGAIN, YOU HAVE HEARD THAT THE ANCIENTS WERE TOLD, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAUE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' BUT I SAY TO YOU, MAUE NO OATH AT ALL, EITHER BY HEAVEN, FOR IT IS THE THRONE OF GOD, OR BY THE EARTH, FOR IT IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF HIS FEET, OR BY JERUSALEM, FOR IT IS THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. NOR SHALL YOU MAKE AN OATH BY YOUR HEAD, FOR YOU CANNOT MAUE ONE HAIR WHITE OR BLACK. BUT LET YOUR STATEMENT BE, 'YES, YES' OR 'NO, NO'; AND ANYTHING BEYOND THESE IS OF EVIL" (33-37).

b. And James, quoting this in his epistle, 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. On the surface, it appears as though these passages contradict the OT command of the Lord. But one very serious objection to this view would be that Jesus and James seem to indicate that to swear would be evil, and surely the Lord would never at any time command something which was considered to be evil.

d. It is all the more confusing when you see in the NT, the practice of taking oaths is still present.

(i) The author to the Hebrews says that at his time, it was a common practice, "FOR MEN SWEAR BY ONE GREATER THAN THEMSELVES, AND WITH THEM AN OATH GIVEN AS CONFIRMATION IS AN END OF EVERY DISPUTE" (6:16).

(ii) As a matter of fact, he says, this is exactly what God did when He gave Abraham the promise, "FOR WHEN GOD MADE THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM, SINCE HE COULD SWEAR BY NO ONE GREATER, HE SWORE BY HIMSELF, SAYING 'I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU, AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU . . . DESIRING EVEN MORE TO SHOW THE HEIRS OF THE PROMISE THE

UNCHANGEABLENESS OF HIS PURPOSE" He "INTERPOSED WITH AN OATH, IN ORDER THAT BY TWO UNCHANGEABLE THINGS, IN WHICH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD TO LIE, WE MAY HAVE STRONG ENCOURAGEMENT, WE WHO HAVE FLED FOR REFUGE IN LAYING HOLD OF THE HOPE SET BEFORE US" (6:13-14, 17-18). God made His infallible promise to Abraham, and to His seed -- which seed you are if you trust in Christ -- and then made it more sure, if that was possible, by taking an oath, calling upon the greatest Being in existence to bear witness to it, Himself.

(iii) We also see two examples of the apostle Paul swearing an oath in the name of God in the NT.

(a) In 2 Corinthians 1:23, he writes, "BUT I CALL GOD AS WITNESS TO MY SOUL, THAT TO SPARE YOU I CAME NO MORE TO CORINTH." Here he calls upon God to bear witness to the truth of what he says.

(b) And in 1 Thessalonians 5:27, we read, "I ADJURE YOU BY THE LORD TO HAVE THIS LETTER READ TO ALL THE BRETHREN." Here Paul is calling them to faithfully perform what he has commanded, calling God as a witness if they do not.

(c) These things were taken very seriously. This was not a simple stylistic touch to add flare to his letter. He emphatically wanted them to do what he asked.

(iv) And lastly, you have an example in Revelation 10:5-6 of an angel who takes an oath. John writes, "AND THE ANGEL WHOM I SAW 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."

(v) And so you see, far from forbidding the taking of oaths, the NT actually commends them to us by example, showing that this OT practice was not something which passed away with the ceremonial system, but a moral obligation binding God's people through all the ages.

2. Jesus must therefore be addressing Himself to an abuse of swearing, and not swearing in the name of God as an act of worship.

a. Notice that Jesus indicated that that by which they swore was not the name of the Covenant God, but by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or by the hairs of your head.

b. They thought that by doing this, they appeared to others as making an oath, but avoided its consequences because they did not use the name of God. But Jesus here says that it is otherwise. They were swearing by God for heaven is His throne; the earth is His footstool; and Jerusalem is His holy city.

c. To swear and oath without intending to keep it, was to swear falsely, and to swear falsely is a great sin. In Zechariah 5:3-4, we read of the curse on the flying scroll which the Lord pronounces against such as will swear

falsely. "'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." And in Malachi 3:5, we read, "'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."

d. To make a vow and then not to keep it, is placed in the same category with thievery, sorcery, adultery, and the oppressing of the orphan and the widow, both of whom are very precious in the sight of the Lord.

e. It is no wonder then that the Lord Jesus warns you against making vows, lest you take them lightly and not pay what you have vowed. "BUT LET YOUR STATEMENT BE 'YES, YES' OR 'NO, NO'; AND ANYTHING BEYOND THESE IS OF EVIL" (Matt. 6:37).

f. People of God, realize this evening that there are legitimate oaths in the Scriptures. That such oaths, far from being sinful, are actually acts of worship. And begin examining your hearts as to your faithfulness to the oaths which you have made to God. Next week we will continue to examine this issue and see when oaths are to be taken, by whom, and for what purposes. We will also want to ask ourselves the question whether or not we have been faithful to the vows which we have already taken. May the Lord give us insight into this precious truth. Amen.