

Worship (18) Corporate - Vows, Oaths and Covenants

This is an age where one's word is not taken seriously. We all know that in our day, someone's promise to come and fix your window, or to look into that account discrepancy and get back to you; to phone you back; to meet you at the designated time, is worth very little.

And for that reason, our world has to ideally include certain things to force liars to tell the truth. Business deals are structured around complex, legally worded, contracts. Should someone lie and try to change the terms, they can be penalised by a court of law. For many things in life, you have to go to the police or the commissioner of oaths and make a sworn affidavit, stating this is *truly* true. A court of law has you swear under oath that everything you say will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The reason is because people lie, and people forget. They forget because they don't take the truth very seriously; but those are really the two issues. Their word is worth very little because they are either lying, or not planning on giving their verbal commitment very much thought. People don't take words very seriously.

And as such, it means very little when a sinner says to God – "I will do this". Because, in fact, the Bible says:

Psa. 58:3 *The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies*

Rom 3:13 *Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips";*

In a world of liars, slackers, truce-breakers, promise breakers, insincerity, forgetfulness, God knows He needs to do more than give a sinner a command and then take that sinner's word that he will perform it.

So to cause sinners to be serious about His Word, about their word; to cause sinners to remember their word, God's method has been to approach people and make a *covenant*.

What is a covenant?

A covenant is a sworn agreement, binding one or more parties to do certain things. It is more than a contract.

God made many covenants in Scripture – the first one we see is His covenant with Noah.

God made a number of unconditional covenants – where He bound Himself to do something – regardless of the other person's response, e.g. Abraham, David.

Sometimes there is a curse prescribed if one breaks the covenant – this was the case with the Mosaic Covenant, God's Covenant of the law with Israel. When He repeated it in Deuteronomy, He listed many curses that would be experienced if Israel broke the covenant – which they did.

A covenant would often be sealed by some formal means - giving the hand, taking off the shoe, giving of presents, writing and sealing, making a sacrifice, building a monument, using salt (purity and perpetuity). The most ancient way was dividing an animal in two and both parties walking between the two pieces.

Now what covenant are we under? We are under The New Covenant. How was the covenant ratified? It was ratified by the blood of Jesus Christ.

And this covenant is not a covenant we struck up with God. It is something He graciously brought us into. And once we are in this covenant, there are terms He expects us to obey. And for God's people, as in the times of the Old Covenant, it is part of our worship to respond with commitments, reminders and vows, even under the New Covenant.

God's glory is magnified by His people hearing His Word and then committing, in varying degrees of severity to obey what God has said. God is pleased when His people do not let His Word fall to the ground. God is worshipped when His people take His Word seriously.

And so, part of corporate worship is the concept of commitments and vows.

God's people voluntarily commit themselves so as to remember more, and be less disobedient. After all, we submit to such things when taking up a job, or in making a case report for the insurance firm – commitments to mere humans for mere material gain. How much more should God's requirements be met with the kind of self-binding seriousness that says – "I promise, I will do this."

Basically, it is worship because it is God's people binding themselves to obey God's authority. They hear what he says – they honour His Person, His position, His authority, His wisdom – by saying – we have heard, we will obey.

Would you consider how many verses in the **Psalms** link vows to worship? Notice that they are not discouraged but encouraged as a form of worship.

Psa. 22:25 *My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him.*

Psa. 50:14 *Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High.*

Psa. 56:12 *Vows made to You are binding upon me, O God; I will render praises to You,*

Psa. 65:1 *Praise is awaiting You, O God, in Zion; And to You the vow shall be performed.*

Psa. 66:13-15 *I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows, Which my lips have uttered And my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble. I will offer You burnt sacrifices of fat animals, With the sweet aroma of rams; I will offer bulls with goats. Selah*

Psa. 76:11 *Make vows to the LORD your God, and pay them; Let all who are around Him bring presents to Him who ought to be feared.*

Psa. 116:12-14 *What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me? I will take up the cup of salvation, And call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD Now in the presence of all His people.*

God wants His people to overcome their own tendency to lie, or to forget, by taking His Word seriously.

This follows these lines:

God approaches His people, or the people He wants to save.
He speaks to them.

He sets up a conditional or unconditional agreement or covenant with them.

God's people respond in worship by doing three possible things:

- 1) Committing to obey God's Word
- 2) Rededicating self to live under the covenant.

3) Making further binding vows to please God.

Each one of those things is pleasing to the Lord. However, they grow in severity and commitment. A commitment is indeed a promise. Rededicating oneself to obey the covenant is deeper than that. Deeper still is making a vow, as part of your obedience.

1. Commit to obeying the terms of the covenant

Exodus 24:1-7 *And he said unto Moses, Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off.² And Moses alone shall come near the LORD: but they shall not come nigh; neither shall the people go up with him.³ And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do.⁴ And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.⁵ And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the LORD.⁶ And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basons; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.⁷ And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient.*

Here God's Word is read to Israel. They hear what God requires of them. Their response is pleasing to God – 'All God says, we will do.' Here is the Old Covenant being read, or preached, to them; and their act of worship is to say – 'We take it all.'

There is no picking and choosing through the commands; there is a wholehearted embrace of the whole Law.

Now here we are in the New Covenant.

Where do we find our covenant? We find it in The New Testament. Every time we hear it preached, the same thing is essentially happening. God is restating how He expects His people – called by His name, bought by His blood, in His covenant - to live. The act of worship is to so listen and act that we corporately and individually say, 'We will go and do this.' The declaration of God's terms with His people always demands a response. You never get the sense from this account in Exodus that, when it was read, people said, 'That was a nice sermon.' They said – 'If those are God's terms, we want them.'

Here is an illustration. There was once a very cruel slave-owner. His slaves were hardly fed, poorly clothed, freezing in winter and always badly beaten when they did not please the master. A kind and wealthy landowner would frequently come and buy some slaves from this wicked man, bring them home with him, and cause them to be his slaves. The difference was that he was kind, gentle, generous and patient. Yet every morning, he would gather them around him, and remind them of the things he expected from them – what he wanted done, and how he wanted it done.

How did those slaves treat those times? The slaves were so grateful to be living with this man, that they looked forward to hearing his wishes, because they wanted to please him; they lived in great affection and love for their rescuer. They would always walk away from those meetings saying – 'All that you wish, is our desire. We will do it all.'

God is that kind Person, who rescued us from the cruel master of sin, self and Satan. We now live in His home – under His authority. And when we gather to hear His Word, we are to come as willing love-slaves - those that arrive to say, 'What is thy desire, master? All that you say – we will do.'

This is how you become not just a hearer, but a doer. You value The One speaking. You hear what He says, and your act of worship is to soberly consider and say, 'I will do it. We hear with a view to obeying.'

Isa 66:2 ... *But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.*

We have not yet made a vow or an oath, but we make commitments. What we hear in a sermon – we don't let it fall to the ground. We seek to implement it. What we read in the Word, we don't ignore – it's our Master's wishes. And as blood-bought slaves in the New Covenant – we say, 'I come to do thy will, O Lord'. It's more than, 'OK, I'll do it'. It is careful listening, with a view to obeying.

2. Rededicate ourselves to live under the covenant

Nehemiah 9:36-10:39

Here in Nehemiah, the nation came to a point of revival and rededication. And in this portion, you see them rededicating themselves to obey God's Law. In other words, they re-dedicated themselves to the original Mosaic Covenant. They had departed from it, and as a group came to a place of renewal, surrender.

So here we take it further. We not only hear God's Word in terms of specific details; we, as it were, step back and consider our whole lives before God, our whole covenant relationship with Him. We consider, 'Where am I in relationship to you, Lord? How is the whole sway of my life? How is the direction of my whole walk with you? Am I truly living under the terms of the New Covenant? Am I learning to obey all things whatsoever you commanded me?'

We are a forgetful people. And our spiritual momentum often runs down. We get less zealous. We become less careful in obeying. We become less mindful of our Lord. We take back some of what we surrendered.

Pretty soon, we are forgetting most of God's Word, hardly considering His commands beyond the actual sermon. We are not walking like New Covenant believers.

And God would have us stop – consider: Christ died for my sins. He shed His very blood, His life – that I might be rescued from that pit of hell, and a life of shame. Am I seeking Him with my whole heart? Am I loving Him? Am I pleasing Him? Am I magnifying Him with my life? Am I obeying His commands? If not, we come to a re-consecration. **Romans 12:1** tells us to present our bodies a living sacrifice – holy, acceptable to God which is your 'spiritual act of worship'. From time to time – we need a re-surrender.

Romans 12:1 *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

Do you know the ideal time to do this? The Lord's Supper is the ideal time. That cup, that bread, is symbolic of His death which introduced the New Covenant. '*This cup is the new covenant in My blood*'. This is why, at least once a month, we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Here we can, in quietness and in solemnity say – 'You gave it all for me – I belong entirely to you. I want to live wholly for you. I re-surrender myself to you.' You may not have to re-dedicate

yourself every time the Lord's Supper is observed, but it certainly is an ideal time – when the means by which the covenant was made and sealed are commemorated in symbolic form.

So, on the first level – we should always be committing ourselves to obeying God. But on a second level, we should now and then come to a renewal of our commitment to obey and serve God. This brings us to the third and strongest level of responding to God's Word – vows.

3. Make vows to further bind ourselves to please God

A vow or an oath is the strongest kind of commitment you can make. It is often used to make a covenant in the first place. God Himself would swear by Himself in making a vow or a covenant.

There are vows and oaths throughout the Bible. There are some foolish ones: Jephthah's foolish vow to sacrifice the first thing he saw upon returning home; vows not to eat until they had killed Paul; Herod's oath.

There are unbiblical ones seen in false religion today – like vows of abstinence from food, vows of celibacy for the priesthood, vows of silence.

There are also good ones – like Hannah, vowing that should God give her a child, she would consecrate Him entirely to the Lord. And she did.

Vows were used in becoming a Nazarite; in testing for unfaithfulness in marriage.

Now we see that God was pleased with vows like Hannah's. We saw all those verses in Psalms suggesting that vows are very pleasing to God.

So what about the fact that Jesus and James say – **Mat. 5:34-37** - *'But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.'*

Jam 5:12 *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," lest you fall into judgment.*

God does not forbid all vows or oaths – because Jesus responded to one (**Mat. 26:63-64**). Paul took one (**Acts 18:18**), and sometimes made them in his writing (**2 Cor. 1:23; Phil 1:8**).

God forbids frivolous oaths. The Pharisees would swear using heaven or earth to avoid using God's name in their oaths, and go on to violate the oath. Jesus was saying, 'Don't try to get around the oath.' It forbids using God's name for something you may break. It prevents using speech frivolously like, 'I swear...' 'God's my witness'

It insists that all your speech be as truthful as the rest. In a 'Sermon on the Mount world', oaths would be unnecessary. But it is not forbidding vows made for very special purposes. For God's people should require no oaths – our yes should be as good as a sworn oath.

So I do not believe Jesus or James were forbidding vows in totality. I believe they were forbidding vows in everyday speech. Since God's name is invoked, swearing is not to be done in ordinary conversation.

This does not preclude vows for very special reasons.

But what about the verses which tell us that it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay?

Ecc. 5:4-6 *When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed; Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?* Also **Deu. 23:21, Num 30:2, Pro 20:25**.

Now this much is clear – it is better to not vow than to vow and not pay. But what is better than not vowing? To vow and pay. Here is the idea: Vows are voluntary – their fulfilling is compulsory.

A vow is indeed a special act of worship. It is the strongest word you have; the strongest promise you have. You are binding yourself to do something for or because of God. You link the importance and the truthfulness of your vow with the importance and truthfulness of God Himself (**Heb 6:16**). You willingly bind yourself by the greatness of God's name, to do the thing you have sworn to do. You are so committed to do something that you make it a matter of being bound by the very name of God. To break your oath is to blaspheme the name of God. In fact, a sin offering was needed for foolish swearing (**Lev 5:4**).

Vows are precious, and are not something we should use frivolously or frequently. They are to accompany the most serious things of our lives.

Let me list some examples of vows today for the believer:

In the Old Testament we see vows most often to do with *consecration* or *devotion*.

A man could consecrate something to God – a field, a house, even people to God. It was considered a vow.

In our day, I would include under this type of vow:

Child dedication vow. This is a vow to raise your children to God. It is an act of surrendering them to God – saying, 'All of their lives, they will belong to You God, so we make an oath to raise them in a way that is pleasing to you.'

Consecration to the ministry vow. When someone surrenders themselves to serving God as a full-time minister, it is a tremendously serious thing. You do not take back from God what you vowed to give Him all your life, just because the going gets tough, or the hardships arise. It is not to be taken lightly.

Consecration of time vow. You vow to give God a certain portion of time of your life to Him. This should not be taken back, even if 'opportunities arise'.

Consecration of resources vow. A vow to give God a portion of your income should not be violated because of fluctuations in income. If you have made a vow regarding finances, you keep it.

Psa. 15:1,4 *“LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?...⁴ In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honors those who fear the LORD; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change;*

Pro. 20:25 *It is a snare for a man to devote rashly something as holy, And afterward to reconsider his VOWS.*

Vows of devotion – these were vows where people bound themselves to display their love for God with some act of loyalty or service:

Marriage vows - This is certainly a set of vows of devotion made before God and man. You make a covenant together, and make an oath to be faithful to one another till death. To break those vows is a very serious thing.

Vow of purity before marriage. Here a person devotes their bodies and minds solely to God before the actual wedding day. The vow to be pure is difficult, but certainly worth it. A person vows to remain utterly pure, even if God should not bring a marriage partner to them.

Membership vows. These are taken terribly lightly by all too many church attendees today – they pay no more attention to the church covenant than they do the founding statement of the local bowling club. But membership is a covenant – a covenant made in front of the church and unto God; binding ourselves to walk together and serve God.

And any other vow to do something for God or give something to God. A vow arises out of deep desire to please God and make sure it comes to pass.

Vows should be made carefully. Do not make a vow when you are weak, e.g. vowing not to repeat a besetting sin in your life. Don't vow something which will be impossible to pay. Vows should be made under authority. In Numbers 30, God makes the law that if a daughter or a married woman made a vow, and her father or husband revoked the vow, it would not stand before God. But if he allowed it, it would stand. The principle seems to be – make vows with the consent of your spiritual authorities. Don't make a vow on the run. Make it carefully, prayerfully, with a multitude of counsel to guide you.

Vows should be paid promptly, if there is a time limit on them. If your vow goes over the long term, go back to the wording of the vow and examine it.

We could see these as three ways of binding ourselves to obey God. As they grow in severity they also decrease in frequency. *Commitments to obey are real, and frequent. Rededication and surrender of the whole life are more serious and less frequent. Vows are the most serious and therefore rare.* But all are for us at different points. It is the way we worship God. We don't shrug off His Word. We say, 'Lord, what would thou have me to do?', and 'Lo, I come to do thy will, O Lord.' This is a sweet-smelling sacrifice before the Lord.