

Fundamentals, Study 23. Lawful Oaths And Vows (Heb 6:13-18)

by BS Poh

o What are oaths and vows? Should Christians ever swear at all?

1. An *oath* is a solemn promise or declaration made to people, or between people, in which God is called upon as witness. A *vow* is a solemn promise made to God. Both are acts of worship that are permitted by God in the Bible.¹ Oaths and vows may be made, and ought to be made, on solemn and important occasions, e.g. in marriage, when becoming a member of the church, and in the ordination of a pastor. Some Christians mistakenly think that Christ forbade oaths, when He only forbade vain and rash swearing. He had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it.² (1. Matt 26:63-64; Heb 6:13-18; 2. Matt 5:17-18, 33-37)

2. Oaths may be sworn only in the name of God, and vows may be made only to God. To swear by any other name or thing is sinful and detestable to God.³ Oaths and vows must not to be made rashly because God's holy name must be treated with fear and reverence. Furthermore, we are required to speak the truth at all times, so that it is not necessary to make an oath under ordinary circumstances. However, on important occasions, an oath is allowed in order to confirm the truth of what we say, and for the ending of disputes.⁴ A lawful oath imposed by a lawful authority, e.g. the elders of a church and the civil courts, can rightly be taken in such circumstances.⁵ A vow may be made to God in thankfulness for mercies received, or in anticipation of answered prayer. It is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and with a desire to please God.⁶ (3. Deut 10:20; Matt 5:34-37; James 5:12; 4. Heb 6:16; 2 Cor 1:23; 5. Neh 13:25; 6. Gen 28:20-22; Psalm 76:11.)

3. An oath, and a vow, is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without ambiguity and mental reservation. Those who make rash or insincere oaths and vows, using words of double sense, and with no intention of keeping to all or part of the promise, will be judged by God.⁷ Whatever is promised in an oath or a vow must be kept, even if it hurts, provided it is not sinful in nature and is capable of being fulfilled.⁸ It is better not to make an oath or vow, than to break it.⁹ It is better to make a lawful oath or vow when necessary, than not to make it, e.g. to make oaths during marriage, and to vow to follow Christ forever when converted.¹⁰ (7. Eccl 5:2, 4; Psalm 24:3-4; 8. Lev 19:12; 9. James 5:12; 10. Rom 7:1-3; 4)

4. Some oaths and vows that need not, or must not, be kept include: (i) A person who became a monk, vowing to remain single, to live in poverty, and to obey the rules of the monastery, without realising that these are contrary to God's word;¹¹ (ii) A person who was given by his parents to be the "adopted child" of a medium or a spirit, without his ability to consent and before he knew the Lord Jesus Christ;¹² (iii) In a covenant relationship, such as marriage and church membership, when the terms and conditions of the covenant are broken by the other party and persisted in without repentance;¹³ (iv) A person who was "dedicated to God" for full-time ministry by his parents when he was underage.¹⁴ (11. 1 Cor 7:2, 9; 12. 2 Cor 6:14-18; Exod 34:4; 13. Matt 19:11-12; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; 14. Ezek 18:19-20)

5. Let us aim to be truthful in speech, so that no swearing is needed except during solemn occasions. We give due allowance for friendly banter and jesting but duplicity (deceitfulness in speech) must be avoided.¹⁵ (15. Matt 5:37; Eph 4:29, 31; Col 4:6.)

= Why not solemnly vow to trust in Christ and walk in newness of life with Him?

Review Questions

1. What is an *oath*?
2. What is a *vow*?
3. When may oaths and vows be made?
4. Why can't oaths and vows be made rashly?
5. On important occasions, why is an oath made?
6. Why is a vow made?
7. How should the vow be made?
8. How should we take the words of an oath or a vow?
9. Complete the sentence: Whatever is promised in an oath or a vow must be kept, even if it hurts, provided...
10. Give one example of an oath or a vow that need not, or must not, be kept.

Assignment/Discussion

Should parents dedicate their children to full-time gospel service? What if such children grow up realising that they are not called by God to ministry, or do not have the biblical qualifications? Cf. Ezek 18:19-20.

Memory Passage (Matt 5:37)

37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

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