

Please turn with me in your copies of God's Word to Deuteronomy chapter 10. As we continue in our series on worship we come now to what our Confession of Faith refers to as the occasional parts of worship. These are those things that have a part in the corporate worship of God but are not regular parts of worship. These are those parts of worship that are to be done as occasion warrants. The Confession lists lists four: religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings. This morning we will take up the first two of these together. So hear now the Word of our Lord from Deuteronomy chapter 10 and we will be reading verse 20.

Read Deuteronomy 10:20

Pray

When you think of worship I would venture to guess that the taking of religious oaths and vows is not what comes to mind. But we confess that these acts are what's known as occasional parts of worship. You may be sitting there thinking you don't know what oaths and vows are. We also use the term covenanting often. How are these things related and why are they parts of worship? What is the difference between an oath, a vow, and a covenant? The Westminster Confession of Faith is helpful for us to understand what these are and how they are different. We confess, "A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth." This isn't seen as much today as it was in the past, but it is still done on occasion, primarily in matters of discipline in the church courts. It is calling upon God as a witness that your testimony is the truth. A vow is a bit different. The Confession goes on to say, "A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness." Essentially, a vow is an oath that is made not to another man but to God. Robert Shaw is helpful in showing the distinction between the two, "In an oath, man

is generally the party, and God is invoked as the witness; in a vow, God is both the party and the witness.” And a covenant contains oaths and vows, but the distinction in it is that there is engagement in two parties, namely the person covenanting and Jehovah. These are solemn acts which must be understood and taken very seriously, because they are part of the worship of the Lord. So we will take up this theme of religious oaths and vows by considering three heads: first, the warrant for oaths and vows; next, the weight of oaths and vows; and finally, the binding nature of oaths and vows.

Let’s begin first by seeing the warrant for oaths and vows. If oaths and vows are to be part of the worship of God then they must have a divine warrant. Remember our principle which we operate from. Whatever is not commanded by God to be done in worship is forbidden. So do we see this divine warrant for oaths and vows in Scripture. Yes, we do. Deuteronomy 6:13 gives us the command, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.” Not only does it give us the command, but it also gives us the form in which the oath or vow is to be taken: by the name of God. Shaw in his commentary of the Westminster Confession writes, “Swearing by the name of God implies a belief and acknowledgement of his omniscience, omnipotence, and justice.” It is a recognition that Jehovah is God and we are His subjects. Then in the Psalms we see that oaths and vows are connected to the worship of the Lord. Psalm 22:25, “My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.” Here we see the vow connected with praise in the midst of the congregation. The same language is seen in Psalm 116:18, which would have been one of those Psalms that the Lord Jesus Christ sang following the last supper. In Psalm 56:12 we once again see vows connected with praise, “Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee.” The same is seen in Psalm 65:1. There are many other examples that can be used to show this, but perhaps the one that most explicitly ties oaths and vows to an act of worship is Psalm 66:13, “I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows.” Here we see it connected to the burnt offering,

something which can only be understood as part of corporate worship.

But does this mean that oaths and vows were part of the ceremonial system? There are other parts of worship which were included under the Old Covenant but are now no longer binding upon believers. Would oaths and vows fall under that category? Perhaps an argument could be made for that to be the case if it were not for the fact that oaths and vows predate the giving of the ceremonial law. We see this in Abraham requiring of his servant an oath concerning finding a wife for Isaac. We read of this in Genesis 24:1-4, “And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: And I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac.” Then in Genesis chapter 28 we see Jacob vowing a vow unto God following his vision of the ladder from heaven. In verses 20-22 we read, “And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.” So we see from these passages that both oaths and vows predate the giving of the ceremonial law, and ought to be understood as moral. This is why Shaw states, “The taking of an oath being no part of the judicial, or of the ceremonial law, it must be equally warrantable under the present dispensation, unless expressly prohibited in the New Testament.”

But doesn't Christ in the sermon on the mount expressly prohibit swearing? There are many who have thought this throughout church history, including most of the early church

fathers and then the Anabaptists during the Reformation. But is this what Jesus is doing? “Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” What Christ is doing here is not forbidding any swearing, but is forbidding the added rules and regulations of the Pharisees. For example, the Midrash, which is a collection of Jewish teachings, said that if you swear by Jerusalem then you are not bound to keep your oath, but if you swear toward Jerusalem then you were. This is the nonsense that Christ is teaching against. And so we are to understand this passage as forbidding profane swearing, or the use of an oath to deceive or to escape one's duty. In fact, we see Christ answering Caiaphas by an oath imposed on him by a lawful authority in Matthew 26:62-64. If Christ had forbade all swearing then He would have been in violation of this Himself, something which is unthinkable. We also have apostolic evidence of oaths and vows in the New Testament, which provide us with warrant today. In 2 Corinthians 1:23 Paul takes upon himself the formula of an oath, “Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth.” Also in Acts 18:18 he refers to a vow that he made. So because Scripture clearly shows that oaths and vows are part of worship under the Old Covenant, and we see in Genesis that oaths and vows are done, proving they are not simply part of the ceremonial system. So we must look to the New Testament to see whether or not they continue today, and the New Testament uphold the use of oaths and vows. We do have divine warrant for their use in worship and continuance in the New Testament Church.

So with the warrant established, let us move on to consider the weight of oaths and vows. The Confession of Faith says that in an

oath “the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth,” and that a vow is” of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.” Why is it that great care must be taken when making oaths and vows? The reason is twofold. First, because you are taking the name of the Lord your God upon your lips and making the oath or vow with Him as the witness of your truthfulness in it. What a weighty thing it is to take the name of the Lord upon your lips. Our culture that we live in today does not have this same understanding of the weight of uttering the Lord’s name. They use it in jest. They use it so frivolously. Kids, to do something frivolously is to do it without any care or concern about how important it is. It is to make light of something which we ought not make light of. And even more disgusting, our culture will use the Lord’s name as a profanity. What a wicked thing this is. It is blasphemy. It is a clear violation of the third commandment found in Exodus 20:7, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.” Yet these blatant abuses of the Lord’s name are not the only violations of this commandment. To make a frivolous oath or vow, or to make a minced oath, is a violation of the third commandment as well. And so if you are to swear an oath or vow a vow then you must do so with grave solemnity and deep care, lest you violate the law of God and take His name in vain. Included in this also is swearing by any other than God. We see that this is what the wicked do in Jeremiah 5:7 when the people had “sworn by them that are no gods.” This too is taking the Lord’s name in vain because it is attributing something to vain things which ought to be attributed the Lord. As our main text says, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name.” To swear by any other besides Jehovah, must be utterly unlawful, and no less than idolatry.

The other reason why making oaths and vows is a weighty thing is because there are repercussions that may come from doing so frivolously or in not keeping that which you have sworn. We see

this in Nehemiah 10:29, where it states, “They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes.” This passage illustrates that they willingly entered into a curse, signifying their acknowledgment that they would face God's covenant curses if they failed to honor their oath. This is also evident in the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.” The weight of this commandment lies in the fact that the Lord will not absolve anyone who invokes His name frivolously or insincerely. Therefore, when you declare phrases like ‘God is my witness’ or ‘I swear to God,’ or when you take vows in the presence of God, you willingly submit yourself to the Almighty's authority. His hand will either elevate you as you fulfill your oaths and vows or it will bring crushing consequences should you break them. This is why it is such a terrible thing to see members forsaking their membership vows, because they are being placed under the righteous judgement of God and are in danger of His curses coming upon them. This shows the profound significance of honoring your word when invoking God's name. It is a matter of utmost gravity and solemnity. The words you speak in His name should reflect the sincerity of your commitment and our unwavering dedication to upholding the promises you make.

Friends, you must be sure that you understand the weight of oaths and vows. There is no reason to appeal to God in trivial matters. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. There is also no need for frequent and unnecessary repetitions of the same oath or vow over and over. To do these things is to take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You must seek to only enter into an oath or vow when it is necessary and when you can do so with full assurance you will keep your word. The Lord does not take lightly those who take His name lightly. But the Lord also does not take lightly when people refuse to take an oath or vow out of convenience sake. If a

lawful authority requires an oath or vow from you, you ought to take it, so long as it is not a sinful oath or vow. This would include taking membership vows in the Church. If you are not a member of a church, and yet you continue to try to enjoy the benefits of being a member without the responsibility of a vow, then you are sinning. Do not continue in that, but instead submit to the Lord and join yourself to His Bride by way of a public covenant. And do so not out of compulsion, and not in a half-hearted frivolous manner, but do so understanding the true weight of oaths and vows.

So we have seen the warrant for oaths and vows from Scripture; we have seen the weight of oaths and vows as something not to be taken lightly; now let us consider the binding nature of oaths and vows. If you swear and oath or vow a vow you are obligated to keep it. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 says that it is the fool who does not keep his vow, “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.” Deuteronomy goes further saying, “When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the Lord thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth.” You must not forgo paying that which you have vowed. You must not even be slack or delayed in doing so. Remember the weight of what you have done in taking the oath or vow and why it is a weighty matter. You have taken the name of the Lord your God upon your lips and have placed yourself under His judgement if you do not perform what you have vowed. If you have no intention of keeping a vow, then don’t make one. It is better for you to simply not have made an oath or vow than for you to not keep it. You have a duty per the ninth commandment to keep your word. To not do so is to take the Lord’s name in vain as well as to bear false witness.

And your oath or vow is in effect until the terms of it have been met fully. There are such things as temporary oaths and vows. That is when you make the oath or vow with a specific timeframe laid out. After that timeframe has been fulfilled then you are no longer bound to continue. Imagine that you want to exercise a spiritual discipline more over the coming year and so you make a vow that you will fast every Saturday over the next year in order to grow in your spiritual walk. The bind nature of that is only for the next year, and after that you are no longer bound to it. But you better be aware that you are bound to uphold your vow for the next year. You can't just say that you will skip this week or that because some activity is going on. You are bound to keep what you have vowed. But then there are those oaths and vows which are perpetually binding. These must be upheld from the point they are made onward. Think of your membership vows. So long as you are a member here you are covenantally obligated to keep your membership vows. You can't just decide you don't want to submit to the discipline of the church just because you don't like it. You are bound to submit. Unfortunately, lately there have been a few pastors who apparently didn't understand this and decided that they could just break their ordination and membership vows because they didn't like what was happening. The Word of the Lord says in Numbers 30:2, "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth." To make an oath or vow is to bind your soul to that which you have sworn or vowed, no matter what. Even if it is to your hurt, as Psalm 15:4 says, you must still uphold your oaths and vows.

The only time in which it is not only acceptable but necessary to break an oath or vow is if the oath or vow is sinful. You cannot be placed under an obligation to uphold an oath or a vow that causes you to sin. Think of an atheist who says, 'I swear I will never become a Christian.' Is he obligated to keep that vow? Of course not. He is obligated to repent of his sins and trust in Christ Jesus as Lord. Or here is one that may cut a little closer to home. What if you

made an oath in your teenage years or you made a vow as an adult that you would abstain from all forms of alcohol? This type of vow was required of all members in the RPCNA for decades and continued for all officers for even longer. It wasn't until the 1990s that Synod removed that vow. Are all those people obligated to keep that vow? Of course not. Why? Because it was an unlawful vow, forbidding the drinking of something the Lord made for our enjoyment, and which He instituted to be partaken of in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. That vow was sinful. And thank God that the RPCNA repented of it. But what of Jephthah's vow in Judges 11 and 12 where he vowed to offer to the Lord the first thing that came through his door, and the first thing that did so was his daughter? While there is disagreement of whether he actually sacrificed his daughter or not, that is not the point. The point is that he made a rash sinful vow, and if he did keep it then he multiplied his sins. Wilhelmus a'Brakel comments, "It then serves as a beacon for us not to make evil, reckless, and unrestricted vows; furthermore, even if we have made them, we are not to perform them. It is not a sin to renege on an evil and reckless vow; rather, it is a virtue if we do not perform it due to the fear of, and in obedience to, God. The sin is in the vow itself."

Brothers and sisters, I know the act of taking oaths and vows is not something that is common for us, but when you think about it, it is more common than you may realize. Just less than two months ago we did this very thing in our worship service as we welcomed eight new members into church membership. When this happens, don't just space out and think it's a time for you to relax and have a break. It is worship. It is an act of worship. Even if you are not the one taking the vows, you are to be engaged in that act of worship as well. Remember the covenant that you have made with Jehovah and the obligations of that covenant. Take the opportunity to renew your own vows personally, reminding yourself of that commitment that you also have made. Make your oaths and vows, swear by the Lord's name, and commit yourself to staying true to those things promised.