

Ecclesiastes 5: 4-7; “When you Make a Vow”, Sermon # 32 in the series – “Remember Your Creator”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall, on November 19th, 2017, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

We are living in a day where words are used very quickly and very carelessly, as if they are cheap. But we who are Christians should understand from these verses, that the Lord our God takes notice of the things which we say, whether we understand that we are in His presence, or not. Words are of great value and significance with Him when they are used by us in a right and holy way. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 12: 36, “But I say to you that for every idle word (every careless word) men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” Here in this passage, Solomon is giving us instructions on the greatest and most profitable thing that we can engage in, in this life; that is, our public worship of the only true and living God. In verses 1-3 we saw last time that it really matters very much to God how He is worshiped. Solomon told us that we are to walk prudently (we are to guard our steps); we are to listen carefully; and our words are to be few.

Now, in this section, he is speaking to us about making a vow to God in the presence of His messenger. Although I don’t intend to go into any depth about God’s “messenger”, I believe that it refers to the priest in the Old Testament, who an Israelite would go to, in order to be formally released from a vow which they had made which may have been rash or presumptuous. At some other time, they might also go to the priest to have their vow which they had made, be confirmed by him as a lawful vow. You can see the example of a priest being called, “the messenger of God”, in Malachi 2: 7. “For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” You can see the example of a priest acting in this way, in helping a person to find forgiveness when he had made a sinful vow, in Leviticus 5: 4-6. You can see a priest confirming a vow in 1 Samuel 1, verses 8-17.

We see in these verses, from their context, that a vow to God is also an act of worship; it could actually be a part of a public act of worship in Old Testament times. There are also private vows that believers in God made then, that were made to God alone. And I would like to show you that vows can also be made now in New Testament times; through our Lord Jesus Christ in prayer to God. At this time we will look at some Old Testament examples, and we will draw suitable conclusions in relation to our possibly making a vow in New Testament times. When, and if, we make any vow to God, we will want to know what we are doing, lest we dishonor God, and hurt ourselves, or others, when we take it. We want to look 1st of all at what a lawful vow is. Then 2nd – We want to look at what rash and unlawful vows are. And then 3rd – We want to look at what the right motivation in relation to making a vow is.

1st of all – Let’s examine what a lawful vow is. (Verse 4a)

“When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools.” A vow, Alexander Cruden says in his Concordance of the Bible – “A vow is a promise made to God of doing some good thing hereafter.” I believe that this is a good and sensible definition, as will be proved as we go along. I think that it will be very helpful if we could first distinguish between lawful oaths and lawful vows before we go any further. We do not have time to speak of both in detail at this time. We will focus on vows only. But we need to understand the difference between the two. Both oaths and vows involve the giving of a solemn promise. But in the case of the oath, the solemn promise is made in the presence of God, calling upon God to witness; but it is made in relation to other men and not to God. Oaths, as Sam Waldron says in his Exposition of the 1689 Confession, are “solemn promises made before the Lord, but to men.” The purpose of an oath is the confirmation of truth, or an agreement between men that certain things will be done. An oath is a confirmation between men, in the sight and presence of God. They swear to each other that they will do certain things for one another. And they swear to each other; God as their witness, that if they do not live up to their sworn

promise that certain consequences from God Himself might come upon them if they do not live up to what they have promised.

A Biblically lawful vow is also a solemn promise; but it is made directly to God. And it may or may not have men as witnesses. The purpose of its being made is some act of commitment or a promise of some particular outworking of obedience to God. I like the way that the Westminster Confession of Faith words it; Chapter 22, paragraphs 5 and 6: “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.” “It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone; and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want; whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties, or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.”

For a Biblical example of a private vow to God in worship, please turn with me over to Genesis Chapter 28 and verse 20. Here Jacob has just come to saving faith in God. He is on his way over to Haran, to live with his mother’s relatives. He is fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, whose blessing of the firstborn he had stolen from him, by tricking his father into thinking that he was Esau. He was certainly not worthy of being shown God’s mercy and His great salvation, but God had chosen Him from before the foundation of the world. He was one of God’s Elect, and God had that very night before, revealed Himself to Jacob; a vision of the Lord came to Jacob in a dream, giving him many precious promises of what God would do for him. He called his experience – “the Gate of heaven”. And he responds to this revelation given to him by God in this way in verse 20: “Then Jacob made a vow, saying ‘If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.’” “And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

You will notice that he is speaking to God when he says this. He is promising God what he will do in relation to Him if God will be with him and guide him and protect him, and preserve him, and provide for him. That place where he was, would become a place to worship God at; an Old Testament church if you will; and he would give a tithe to God of all that God gave to him. Vows that we make to God upon our conversion, like this one, are very pleasing to God. We will worship Him; we will praise Him; we will give Him of the firstfruits of our substance, and we will follow His lead. We will have faith that He will provide for us and watch over us in both a temporal and an eternal sense. This is taking God for our God in a promissory vow.

You can see this again, in terms of public vows being made in worship, if you will turn over to Psalm 116, verse 1. “I love the Lord because He has heard My voice and my supplications.” “Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live.” This is the Psalmist’s statement to others around him who would be able to appreciate it and agree with it. He then relates to them his conversion experience, or some great deliverance from his sins. “The pains of death surrounded me, and pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I found trouble and sorrow.” “Then I called upon the name of the Lord; ‘O Lord, I implore You, deliver my soul!’” “Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yes our God is merciful.” “The Lord preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me.” “Return to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.” “For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.” “I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”

Then in verse 12, he relates his response to the Lord for what He had done for him. He says, “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.” And verses 17-19 – “I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call upon the name of the Lord.” “I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord’s house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.” You see these are vows which are related to worship; worship of God from a thankful heart for all that He has done in salvation in delivering him

from all of his sins and his soul from death. And his vow is to call upon the Lord as long as he lives. He will pray to Him, and praise Him and be thankful to Him all his days. Let me ask you if you have made a vow like this; a vow which is purely voluntary, but a perfect response to all that God has done for us through Christ. This kind of a vow is a lawful vow, and it is pleasing to God if it is paid both in private devotion and public declaration.

2nd – We want to look at what rash and unlawful vows are. (Verses 4b, 5, and 6)

“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 with your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?” Now you can see an example of a rash vow if you will turn with me to Judges Chapter 11, verse 30. We haven’t time to go over all the history of the conflict which is here recounted, concerning Israel and the people of Ammon. Suffice it to say that Ammon thought that Israel had stolen some land from them, which they had not, and so they came out to wage war with Israel. Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and Israel appointed him over them to deliver them, and he did so. It says here in verse 29, “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon.”

“And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, ‘If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.’” “So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands.” “And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter.” Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.” “When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child.” “Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.”

“And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, ‘Alas, my daughter!’” “You have brought me very low!” “You are among those who trouble me!” “For I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot go back on it.” “So she said to him, ‘My father, if you have given your word to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon’” “Then she said to her father, ‘Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I.’” “So he said, ‘Go’.” “And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.” “And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which had vowed.” “She knew no man.” “And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.”

Now, what shall we say to these things? I believe that the last part of this vow was a rash vow on the part of Jephthah. When he said, “Whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s”; there was no sin in this. But when he added, “and I will offer it up as a burnt offering”; he went too far. What did he think would come out of his door; a sheep, or a goat, or a ram, or a lamb? I don’t think that he thought that his daughter would be the thing that came out. But he had not thought carefully enough about it. If he would have offered her up as a burnt offering, he would have sinned against God. He had no commandment from God to offer his daughter up as a burnt offering as Abraham once had from God in relation to Isaac. So therefore the fulfilling of the vow was understood by both he and his daughter to relate to the offering up to God, of her never being allowed to marry, and never having a posterity to give to Jephthah. She would remain a virgin to her dying day. This was a real death of sorts to both her and to her father to have no posterity. Here was a man who was caught up in the excitement of doing a great thing for his people and His God, and he was a man whom the Spirit of God, it says in verse 29, “came upon” him.

But this sad thing happened because he didn't sufficiently guard his tongue. His vow teaches us several things. It shows us first that a vow is purely voluntary. Jephthah did not have to make this vow, and he should not have allowed himself to be carried as far as he did with it. Our vows, whatever they are, should always be governed by the commandments of God and the precepts and principles of His Word, which he always expects us to keep. God expects us to be very thoughtful in any vow that we make. Secondly, it shows us that it is possible even for a godly man like Jephthah, who is commended for his faith in Hebrews 11, verse 32, in relation to his valor and bravery in this battle; to let his mouth cause his flesh to sin. He was rash with his lips in his final part of the statement, and yet it was a true vow, and he knew it. And therefore he had to perform it. "Pay what you have vowed—better not to vow than to vow and not to pay," our text says in verse 5. What is even more amazing is the faith of his dear daughter, who voluntarily remained a virgin all of her life. She voluntarily went along with her father's vow. In order for the vow to be performed, she would be willing to comply with his vow in the most holy way that she possibly could have done. This was the grace of God at work in her. "My father, if you have given your word to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth." What amazing grace! And she was honored for it in succeeding generations.

The lesson for us, however, is this. You should never vow anything; you should never so word it, that later on you might find that you are unwilling to pay the vow. Do not word a vow in such a way that you cannot see what the implications are; that you have to guess about it. You may indeed hurt others around you. Be careful of making a vow; be very careful of what you say in the presence of God in a vow. God will hold you to it. You can see the importance of this principle stated clearly also in Psalm 15, if you will turn over there with me. "Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle?" "Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" "He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; 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." You see, this was what Jephthah did. And this is what you and I should do as well. If we have made promises to the Lord, we need to fulfill them; even if we are personally hurt by it in some ways. We do not, however, in any vow that we make, put others into a position in which they will be hurt by that vow. If we have made a lawful vow, then we need to fulfill it, lest the Lord be displeased with us, and bring us into judgment or in to discipline over it.

3rd – We want to look at what the right motivation is, for making a vow.

(Verse 7)

"For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity." "But fear God." There is the remedy for making false and unlawful vows; it is to fear the Lord. Fear what God will think and what God will do, when you vow and you do not pay, or when you vow and then go on to actually sin against Him by trying to save face in light of your having made a vow. Realize that ultimately you cannot keep any of your vows that you make, without the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on your behalf. Christ died so that you, when you believe in Him, can have a sincere faith. And the vows that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are looking for, are the vows related to your praising Him, serving Him, and loving Him with a thankful heart for all of what Christ by His grace has done for you; in saving you, and keeping you by His grace, all of the days of your life. It is He, and He only, who will bring you safely to His heavenly kingdom forever. Psalm 61, verse 5 says, "For You, O God, have heard my vows; You have given me the heritage of those who fear Your name." "You will prolong the king's life, His years as many generations." "He shall abide before God forever." "Oh prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him!" "So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows." These are the kind of vows that our God and Savior are looking for from us as Christians. They are vows that we will praise Him always for His grace in Jesus Christ which leads us on to a sincere obedience to His Word.