

At the end of chapter 29, as he was concluding the discussion of the offerings for the feasts, Moses said,

“These you shall offer to the LORD at your appointed feasts,
in addition to your vow offerings and your freewill offerings...” (v39)

In Leviticus there was some discussion of the vow offerings,
but there was not much discussion of *vows*.

Also, as Israel approaches the Promised Land,

there will be vows made –
oaths will be taken.

What does your word mean?

Psalm 50 also helps us connect Numbers 28-29 and Numbers 30.

In Psalm 50 God calls his covenant people together –

“those who made a covenant with me by sacrifice” (v5)

and he declares that he does not eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats (v13),
in other words, God does not need the offerings of Israel to sustain him.

He accepts their offerings freely – graciously.

But then in verse 14 he says,

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

In a properly functioning Israelite community,

the offerings and sacrifices would be offered regularly,

and Israel would be regularly performing their vows –

doing what they have promised to do –

and so when the day of trouble would come,

they would call on the name of the LORD, and he would deliver them.

At least, that’s the way it was *supposed* to be!

That’s why Psalm 50 concludes,

“Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!

The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifices glorifies me;

to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (v22-23)

Numbers 30 helps us understand the purpose of vows and oaths.

1. “He Shall Not Break His Word” – Let Your Yes Be Yes, and Your No Be No (v1-2)

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, “This is what the LORD has commanded.² If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Verses 1-2 deal with the basic principles of oaths and vows.

A vow is made directly to God.

An oath is made directly to man – with God as witness.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:33-37,

“Again you have heard that it was to those of old,

‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’

But I say to you, ‘Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

or by the earth, for it is his footstool,

or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

To put it plainly: Moses and Jesus are on the same page.

The point of what Moses said was that you should do what you say you will do.

There were some in the Jewish tradition who gave different grades of an oath.

Jesus refers to this in Matthew 23:16-22.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’

You blind fools! For which is greater,

the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?

And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing,

but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’

You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God

and by him who sits upon it.”

In other words, if you swear an oath by a created thing,

then you are calling the Creator of that thing to testify against you in the judgment.

Therefore, there is only one grade of oath –

and as soon as you say, “Yes” or “No” you have already invoked God as witness!

Now, in the Anabaptist tradition,

they have taken Jesus’ warning against oaths as an absolute prohibition.

This makes about as much sense as literally plucking out your eye if your eye causes you to sin.

Jesus is using hyperbole to drive home his point:
when you say that you are going to do something,
you need to do it.

You cannot say, “Oh, well, my fingers were crossed, so I don’t really have to do it!”
Moses said in Deuteronomy 23:21-22,
“If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it,
for the LORD your God will surely require it of you,
and you will be guilty of sin.
But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.”
So there are strong reasons why you should refrain from vowing!

Why then would you vow?

Our Confession of Faith (chapter 22) provides a very helpful summary
of the biblical teaching on oaths and vows.

It starts by saying:

“1. A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calls God to witness what he asserts, or promises, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears.”

Again, this should *always* characterize the Christian when we speak,
but we should not hesitate to make explicit what we are doing, when it is appropriate.

Section two states:

“2. The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.”

Section three adds:

“3. Whosoever takes an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth: neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.”

Section four then provides a warning:

“4. An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to

performance, although to a man's own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels.”

This is at the heart of our passage in Numbers 30.

If you say that you are going to do it, then you must do it!

Sections 5-7 then turns to the vow:

“5. 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.”

“6. 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.”

We'll look at section 7 in a moment.

But before we do, let's think for a moment about the implications of Numbers 30:1-2.

Moses says that “if a man vows a vow to the LORD
or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word.
He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”

The most famous example of this is Jephthah – in the book of Judges.

In Judges 11 Jephthah takes a vow, and he is so committed to the principle of Num 30,
that he will kill his daughter rather than break his vow!

In Judges this is used as an example of how messed up Israel is becoming.

Israel is doing all the wrong things for all the right reasons!

(That's why we need a King from Bethlehem!)

But in Numbers 30, verse 3 it is clear, “man” here means *man* – not just a “person” in general.

And while the text does not make any further distinctions,

I think it's only fair to add that this does not include young children or slaves.

The assumption here is that the “man” making the vow

has the *right* to make a vow and bind himself to what he says he will do.

It's also important to note that in Leviticus 5,

God gave the provision for what to do when *you* realize that you have sworn a rash oath:

“if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good,

any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him,

when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these;

when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed,

he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed,

a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering.

And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.” (Lev 5:4-6)

So Jephthah had no excuse!

As we'll see, the reason why there is no reference to children or slaves in the passage is because the head of the household

always has the right to overturn the vows of his dependents.

There are two limitations that Moses gives in the rest of the chapter:

in verses 3-5, Moses limits the authority of fathers over adult daughters,
and in verses 6-15, Moses limits the authority of husbands over their wives.

Obviously, Numbers 30 presupposes the whole ritual system of Leviticus,
so I'm not going to argue that we should follow it strictly.

Rather, I'm going to suggest that the principles it embodies are wise and just –
and *really helpful* for thinking about parenting and marriage today.

2. “On the Day that He Hears of It” – the Limitation of Fatherly Authority (v3-5)

³ *“If a woman vows a vow to the LORD and binds herself by a pledge, while within her father's house in her youth, ⁴ and her father hears of her vow and of her pledge by which she has bound herself and says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. ⁵ But if her father opposes her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. And the LORD will forgive her, because her father opposed her.*

First, we need to see that the “woman” in verses 3-5 is an adult.

In verse 2, the man is an “ish.”

In verse 3, the woman is an “ishah.”

When it says “in her youth,” that’s essentially referring to her “unmarried” status.

When she was a child, she had no right to vow.

But now she is an adult,

and therefore she may bind herself by a pledge or vow.

Some people read this chapter and think that it is saying that women need to be controlled and prevented from making rash vows.

That’s not the point at all.

The restriction here is on the capricious tendency of *men* to not pay attention!

The Bible everywhere teaches that the husband is head of the wife –

and that this headship includes a general oversight of the whole household.

If a member of the household has made a pledge (any sort of binding obligation),
this is going to affect the whole household!

If she wants to take a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6),
this will be expensive.

Does she have final authority to commit the family's income to her vow?

Or, to put it another way, does anyone have the authority to say, "No, you can't do that."
Moses' answer is, Yes, her father has the authority to cancel the vow.

But!

There is a time limit on that authority.
Fathers of teenage daughters may *not* exasperate their children!
He can't come back a month later and say,
"Sorry, I know you took that vow a month ago –
but we really can't afford it. Too bad!"

Her father only has a few hours to make his decision.

Lazy, indecisive fathers, be warned!

If your daughter has big plans and wants to do something great for God –
you'd better be involved from the start.
Otherwise, your silence means consent!
Get out of the way, because here she comes!

And, what is more, her failure to keep her vow is not *her* fault – but his!
"The LORD will forgive her, because her father opposed her."

Why does it say that the LORD will forgive her?

The reason is simple:

she *said* that she was going to do it –
but she didn't do it.

And so she has broken her vow.

But the LORD will forgive her, because it wasn't her fault.

There are such things as "unintentional sins" (as we saw in Numbers 15).

For most unintentional sins, an offering is required.

But not here.

Here, the LORD simply forgives her because her father (whether rightly or wrongly)
opposed her.

Okay, so daughters, how should you think about this?

Make big plans!

Dare to dream big and do hard things for Christ!

(I say this with fear and trembling – with four daughters of my own!)

After all, if your father slips up and let's something slide – you have one more chance!

3. Silence Means Consent – the Limitations of Husbandly Authority (v6-15)

a. If the Vow Was Made before the Marriage (v6-8)

⁶ “If she marries a husband, while under her vows or any thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she has bound herself, ⁷ and her husband hears of it and says nothing to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her pledges by which she has bound herself shall stand. ⁸ But if, on the day that her husband comes to hear of it, he opposes her, then he makes void her vow that was on her, and the thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she bound herself. And the LORD will forgive her.

Verses 6-8 deal with the case of a woman who made a vow,
and now gets married.

Is she still bound – even by a “thoughtless utterance” (verse 6)?

Moses says, *Yes*, unless her husband voids her vow
“on the day that he comes to hear of it.”

Again, the time limit is important.

The husband may be head of his wife,
but he does not have absolute authority over her.
There are limitations on husbandly authority.

If before she was married, your wife promised to do something,
she brings that promise into your marriage.

The more egalitarian side would chime in here:
but what about the man!
He brings in his own set of promises and obligations!

That’s true.

But the wife does not have the authority to abrogate unilaterally her husband’s commitments.
Before God, he will have to answer for his decisions.
Moses’ point in Numbers 30
is that he only has a *day* to make that decision.
It would not be fair to the woman – or to others who are affected by her pledge –
to allow him arbitrary authority over time.

b. The Vow of a Widow or a Divorced Woman (v9)

⁹ (But any vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, anything by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her.)

Verse 9 then points out that a widow or a divorced woman has the same legal status as a man.
Her word may not be canceled by anyone.
Not her father – not her son.

She stands in the courts on her own word.

There are some patriarchalists who want to say that every woman must have a man as her head.
Moses disagrees.

A widow or a divorced woman is the head of her own household.

It's worth pointing out that there is nothing here about whether the divorce was "proper" or not.
The widow or the divorced woman – however she got there –
is the head of her own household.

c. If the Vow Was Made during the Marriage (v10-14)

¹⁰ And if she vowed in her husband's house or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, ¹¹ and her husband heard of it and said nothing to her and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. ¹² But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows or concerning her pledge of herself shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the LORD will forgive her. ¹³ Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself, ^[a] her husband may establish, ^[b] or her husband may make void. ¹⁴ But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them.

Verses 10-14 then deal with the case of a married woman.

Again, the focus is on the limitation of the husband's authority.

Yes, the husband has the authority to make her vows and pledges void.

But that authority is limited.

Husbands, your wife's word must mean something.

When she makes commitments, you'd better be ready to back it up –
and if there's a problem, you'd better say so right away!

The basic principle here is that you need to have good communication.

I've seen a husband who heard his wife make a commitment,
and he thought, "We'll see" –
and weeks later he nullified it.

I've *been* that husband.

Verse 15 speaks to that husband:

d. If He Nullifies the Vow Later (v15)

¹⁵ But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity."

If you nullify the vow or pledge on the day you hear of it,

then no one bears iniquity for it.
But if you wait – and nullify it later –
then God treats it as though *you* were the one who broke your vow/pledge.

Numbers 30 both asserts and limits a husband's authority over his wife.
And if he misuses his authority, then he bears the penalty.
He becomes an oath-breaker.

At least, that's the central point of verse 15.
The central point of verse 15 is that a husband should be very reluctant
to nullify his wife's vow after the "day" that he heard it.

But there's a background point that emerges slowly from verse 15.
"if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them,
then he shall bear her iniquity."

I told you that I'd come back to our Confession of Faith, 22.7.

"7. No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God. In which respects, popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself."

But where does the Bible teach this?
The example of Jephthah is not very encouraging.
Jephthah was bound by his vow –
even though it meant killing his daughter!
So on what scriptural ground does the Confession say
that no man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, etc.?

They point to Acts 23:12-14 –
where certain Jews vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.
Plainly that was a wicked vow –
but that passage doesn't teach that we can escape a bad vow.
Indeed, Numbers 30, verse 2, would suggest
that those men should have starved themselves to death –
and that if they didn't they would be oath-breakers.

The other passage they cite is Numbers 30 –
but not verse 2!
Rather, they cite verses 5, 8, and 12-13.

I first encountered this when I was looking through the way in which the Westminster Divines used the five books of Moses as proof-texts for the Confession and Catechisms. And at first I thought it was a little odd.

“No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God...”
and yet they cite a passage that says that a man must do whatever he pledges – and only a *woman* can be let out of her vow.

It would seem that Leviticus 5:4-6 would have been better –
because God allows the one who has sworn a rash oath to get out of the oath –
all he has to do is confess his sin and bring a rather inexpensive sin offering.

But the more I looked at how the Westminster Divines used the Pentateuch in their proof-texts, the more I began to realize that they may have had another idea in mind!

Paul says that he is pledging us as a pure virgin to Christ.

Christ is our husband.

It’s not enough to say that if we realize that we have made a foolish vow,
we can fix it!

If that’s what you want to say, then quote Leviticus 5.

What if we don’t realize that we have made a foolish vow?
How can we be released from oaths that have entangled us?

Only if Christ, our bridegroom, bears our iniquity.

In relationship to Christ, we are all feminine.

So how does a Christian get out of a rash vow – a foolish pledge?

Only by Christ, our faithful bridegroom bearing our iniquity!

Conclusion (v16)

¹⁶ *These are the statutes that the LORD commanded Moses about a man and his wife and about a father and his daughter while she is in her youth within her father's house.*

Close with 415 – Baptized into your name most holy