

All About Vows

One afternoon I was listening to a radio program during which the host was asking a number of people to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag. For those of you outside the United States, the Pledge of Allegiance is a simple statement of commitment by citizens to the United States. The pledge reads as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

The pledge is a vow or oath of commitment to the United States. Similar statements of commitment are common throughout the world. When a man and a woman marry, they usually make some type of vow or pledge to commit themselves to one another. When we sign a contract to purchase property, an automobile, a house, or to accept a credit card, we make a commitment or a vow that we will fulfill certain obligations. Those obligations vary with the contract from country to country. When we tell our children or our spouse that we will do something, we have made a pledge. We make verbal and written agreements, oaths, vows, or commitments throughout life. What one have you made?

GOD AND OATHS. When we look in the Old Testament, we discover that God made commitments, vows, or oaths too! In Genesis 3:15 God gave an important warning and promised Satan that Jesus Christ would defeat him (Satan) some day in the future. God used the expression “her seed” to refer to Jesus and “your seed” when talking to Satan in the passage.

In Genesis 9:8-17, God promised Noah that He would never use a flood of water to destroy life on this planet again. The Hebrew word translated as “rainbow” actually refers to a “bow.” The Hebrew word has the sense of a circle. Aircraft pilots report that rainbows appear as circles when they are viewed from a high altitude. The rainbow was a reminder to God to not use water again to destroy the world. Next time He will use fire and plagues. These are described in the book of Revelation.

When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. (NASB) Gen. 9:16

This was a vow from God.

Then in Genesis 22:16-19 God made an oath to Abraham that he would be the father of many descendants. His descendants would be as many as the “stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore.” The immediate descendants of his two children, Isaac and Ishmael, are the

Jewish people and the Arab nations.

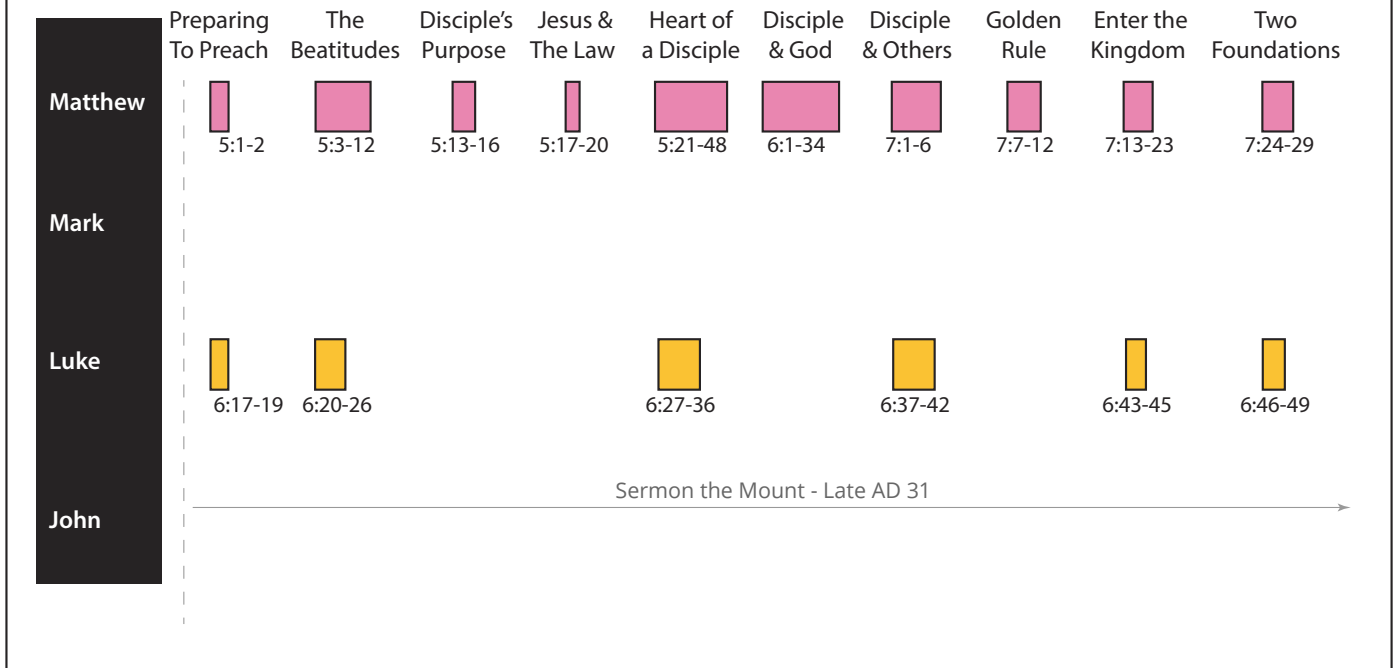
God also made a vow to King David that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever. That promise was made in 2 Sam. 7:12-17. The prophecy was about Jesus Christ (Isa. 9:7).

O.T. Vows and Oaths. Not only has God made vows, oaths, or promises, but He has told us how to make



Life and Heart of Jesus

Sermon on the Mount



vows and oaths too! Listen to Deut. 6:13,

You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name. (NASB) Deut. 6:13

The first time that I saw this verse I was surprised. God actually told the Israelites to make an oath in His name. The command is repeated in Deut. 10:20. Hebrews 6:13 tells us that even God has made promises in His own name.

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself. . . (NASB) Heb. 6:13

The prophet Isaiah does not criticize or rebuke anyone for swearing or making an oath in the name of God when he says,

Because he who is blessed in the earth will be blessed by the God of truth; and he who swears in the earth will swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they

are hidden from My sight! (NASB) Is. 65:16

VOWS TODAY. Vows and oaths have often been broken and ignored, and it is no different today. One well known religion currently advocates the breaking of an oath if there is an advantage in doing it. Some people do not believe in polygamy and others do. But when a group starts suggesting that the old vow or promise between a husband and wife can be re-negotiated in order to allow for polygamy, it is clear that the initial vow was empty. It reflects on the person who wants to ignore his/her vow.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees had distorted oaths and vows and made them meaningless too! According to those religious leaders, commitments came in different sizes, shapes, and with various degrees of importance. Some vows, oaths, or promises could be broken, but others could not.

FALSE VOWS. So we should not be surprised that Jesus' next statement in the Sermon on the Mount was about vows, oaths, or promises.

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "YOU SHALL

NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.” (NASB) Matt. 5:33

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) indicates that Jesus quoted the Old Testament by the use of capitalized words. But this is not correct. Neither the New International Version (NIV) or New King James Version Bible (NKJV) indicate that Jesus quoted the older scriptures, and they are correct. Jesus’ quote cannot be found in the Old Testament. Apparently Jesus quoted a well-known, popular teaching of the Pharisees.

The NASB, NIV, and NKJV have three different English translations of the same Greek word that the NASB translates as “false vows.” Instead of “false vow,” the NIV has “break an oath”, and the NKJV reads as “swear falsely.” Why are they different? The answer is found in the Greek word, EPIORKEO, that Jesus used. The word has a range of meanings, but the basic meaning of the word is “to swear falsely” or “to promise and not fulfill.” Have you ever promised someone that you would not reveal a secret and then done so anyway? Have you told someone that you would do something for him or her and yet known deep down inside that you would not fulfill your promise? That is the meaning of the Greek word. A person makes a promise and does not keep it. The three major translations have captured the basic idea of making a false vow. That is, some made a vow and did not plan to keep it or made a vow and later broke it.

PHARISEES AND VOWS. The Pharisees had many rules about vows, oaths, or promises. The Mishnah contains pages of rules about vows or oaths. They had four types of vows which they considered not to be binding:

Vows of Incitement - The first type of vows were those which were motivated by the actions of another person. The Mishnah illustrates this type of vow with a person making a vow not to drop his selling price any further. Then in response, the buyer vowed not to increase his offer. According to Rabbi Eliezer the vows were null and void (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 3.1*).

Vows of Exaggeration - The second type of vows were those which were unrealistic and excessive. For example, if someone swore that he really did see a snake as big as the beam

of an olive press, the vow would be null and void (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 3.2*).

Vows Made In Error - The third type of non-binding vows are those which were made by “mistake.” If a person affirmed that he did not eat all of the ice cream and then later remembered that he had, the vow was considered to be null and void. If a person forgot to fulfill a promise, the rabbis would forgive the person. The Mishnah does not discuss the obvious issue of lying (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 3.2*).

Vows Made Under Constraint - The last type of non-binding vow were those made to robbers, murderers, and tax collectors (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 3.3*).

The religious leaders said,

He who makes a vow not to have wine is permitted to have apple wine. He who takes a vow not to have oil is permitted to have sesame oil (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 6.9*).

On those particular days (festival and Sabbath days) the vows are not binding, but for all other days that are binding (*Nedarim, Mishnah. 9.6*).

And the examples from the Mishnah go on.

From Jesus’ own lips we discover later in the gospel of Matthew, some other things that the religious leaders taught,

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated. You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated. You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.” (NASB) Matt. 23:16-22

According to the Pharisees, someone could make an oath by swearing by the temple and yet not be required to keep it. A

husband could tell his wife that “by the altar in the temple, I promise to cook dinner tonight;” but because he did not swear by the offering on the altar, his oath was meaningless. These religious leaders did not care about truth. They did not care about personal integrity. It is not surprising that Jesus rebuked them. It is not surprising that Jesus’ next words in the Sermon on the Mount were as follows:

But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. (NASB) Matt. 5:34-35

CURIOUS VERSES. Jesus’ next statement in the Sermon on the Mount is a mystery at first.

And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. (NASB) Matt. 5:36

How does this verse fit with vows and oaths? The answer is found in the fact that all of their oaths or vows appealed to God or some religious item. Now Jesus adds that they cannot swear by themselves either. Jesus told them to not swear by the temple, altar, heaven, or themselves.

Men will always look for a way to escape God’s wishes and to do what they want. Men and women do not like being told, “No.” Jesus’ listeners must have been very surprised. If you had been there, what would you have thought? Would you have wondered if Jesus was wrong and your pastor was correct? Would you have wondered what the Old Testament really said? It is clear that God had told the Israelites they could swear by Himself. So what was Jesus’ message?

The answer to this question came quickly with Jesus’ next words,

Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (NASB) Matt. 5:37

Jesus’ message was direct - be direct and honest. Do not be deceptive. Do not lie. Tell the truth. This is the message of James 5:12,

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. (NASB) James 5:12

MAKING VOWS. Some have used Jesus’ statements to teach that God does not want us to make an oath, vow, or make a promise. That is an easy conclusion to reach from Matthew 5:33-37 if we ignore other parts of the Bible. For example, in the Mosaic Law God told them that they could make a vow to God, but first we need to read the fine print,

If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (NASB)

Num. 30:2

When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall

not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. (NASB) Deut. 23:21

Ecclesiastes also tells us that we can make vows; but if we make one to God, we need to keep it.

When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. (NASB) Eccl. 5:4-5

In Acts 18:18 we discover that one of the apostles made a Nazirite Vow. His name was Paul. Now if an apostle made a vow, that means we are free to make vows and oaths too! If we should not make vows why did an apostle make one? What was Jesus’ message? His message was to be honest and

fulfill your commitment. He repeated the statement that He had made thousands of years earlier in Leviticus.

And you shall not swear falsely by My name . . . (NASB) Lev. 19:12

Men and women frequently promise (by vow, oath, or commitment) God that if He will rescue them from some trouble, tragedy, or desperate situation, they will commit their lives to Him. Then after God rescues them, they ignore their promise. Should they be surprised if God comes collecting on their promise later in their lives?

It is reported that when Emperor Sigismund asked the Archbishop of Cologne how to attain true happiness, he replied, "When you are well, perform what you promised when you were sick." That is good advice for all of us.

Too often we are like the young man who wrote a letter to the girl of his dreams in order to tell her how much he loved her. Here is the frequently quoted letter, "Darling, I would climb the highest mountain, swim the widest stream, cross the burning desert, die at the stake for you. P.S. I will see you Sunday, if it doesn't rain." Often we have great intentions, but God wants more. He wants us to keep our promises!

CONCLUSION. God honors those who keep their commitments. The following verse has always challenged me. It is the response of a man or woman of integrity.

. . . those who fear the LORD; He swears to his own hurt, and does not change. (NASB) Ps. 15:4

God wants us to keep our commitments even if it hurts us, even if we do not like doing so. If we are married, we need to keep our vows. If we promise to spend time with our children, then we need to do it. Did you promise to meet someone? Then be there! Did you promise to help at the church or on a community project? Then follow through. If you told God that you would serve Him, then serve Him with all your heart.

What should we do if we fail to keep a promise? Leviticus 5:4-6 gives us the answer. And the answer is found in the phrase "confess your sin." We are to admit to God that we

have sinned. Then we need to promise God that our "yes" will be "yes" and our "no" will be "no." Anything else is sin according to Jesus. We need to be a woman or a man of godly integrity whether it is a promise to our spouses, children, friends, neighbors, co-workers or someone at church.

The example of Dr. J. Vernon McGee's father is a great motivation for us. Dr. McGee reports this eye-witness account about his dad,

As a boy, I can remember that my dad could go into a bank and borrow money, then come back a couple of days later to sign the note. Or he could call the bank by phone and have a certain amount of money credited to his account. (McGee, J. Vernon. Thru the Bible. Nelson Pub. 193. p. 33)

The times have changed because people have changed. But his dad was a man who could be trusted. He kept his promise. His "yes" was "yes" and his "no" was "no."

We will close with the prayer from Jonah to God.

**But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the LORD. (NASB) Jonah 2:9**