

Lawful Oaths and Vows

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[0 : 0 0] Now we'll come back again today, resuming the next section, which we left some time ago, or the next section of the biblical basis behind our church's confession of faith, that is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

And we looked at today in chapter 6 of Hebrews, of how when God desired to make something solemnly known to Abram, for example, he confirmed it, we read verse 17, by an oath.

But when you take an oath, you take an oath in the name of something higher than yourself. And for God, there is nothing higher than himself. So we read that when God made promise to Abram, verse 13, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.

And this is a reference to Genesis 22, after Abraham had offered up Isaac on the altar, but had been prevented from actually taking his life. Verse 16, God said, So God swears by himself.

So God swears by himself.

[1 : 2 6] We have then, from God, the example of what the confession of faith calls lawful oaths and vows. Lawful oaths and vows.

And God sets the example here, as we say, of a lawful oath taking his own name. Now, a lawful oath is described in the confession of faith as a part of religious worship.

You might think, well, come on, we don't have, you know, oaths and vows in our religious worship. Do we? I mean, we have singing, we have prayer, we have reading the Bible, we have preaching, and we pray again.

No, but we don't really take oaths as part of it. Well, obviously it's not something that is done every single week and is part of the normal diet of worship. But it is rather a rare thing and, in the literal sense, an occasional thing.

Because there will be occasions in religious worship, and I'm thinking obviously in terms of Christian religious worship, when oaths or vows are appropriate and when they are laid on by a lawful authority.

[2 : 3 8] I mean, for example, we don't have the Lord's Supper every single week. We only have it like twice a year, three times a year on some occasions. But it's a rarity, but nevertheless, we would never say that the Lord's Supper is not a part of religious worship, just because we don't do it every week.

And likewise, there are occasions such as, for example, baptisms or weddings that might happen in a context of Christian worship, where there are solemn promises made.

A solemn promise made before God and in the presence of witnesses and calling God for a witness upon them.

And that is the substance, really, of what an oath is. It is calling God for a witness upon the truth of what we declare.

We are making promises technically, you know, when you get to weddings and so on, that people talk about wedding vows. They're not technically vows. Because, you know, as we'll go on to make a vow of something which is taken directly to God.

[3 : 47] And a couple at a wedding, they're making promises to each other before God, but they're not actually technically making vows to God in that sense.

They're making solemn, yes, binding promises to each other, but they're not technically vows in that sense. A vow is to God. An oath is to somebody else, but in the name of God and calling God for a witness upon it.

And because, as we've said, when God makes his oath, there is no higher that he can name. There's no greater authority that he can call to witness what he says. So he swears by himself, we read.

And for those who would seek to follow the Lord, they likewise should swear by no other name than by the name of the true God.

We are taught that in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 13. Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.

[4 : 55] Not by any other name. If you swear by any other name, you call anything else for a witness upon the truth of what you say, then you're effectively putting that thing or that person in the place of God.

You know, sometimes people would put their hand on a sacred object and swear by that sacred object. It can't see you. It can't hold you to account. It might swear by a star consolation.

Or sometimes you hear people say, oh, I swear on the life of my children, or whatever. Now, obviously they're calling the Lord to see that if they're telling a lie, he would smite their children dead.

But these are all things which are inappropriate. They're not lawful oaths. They're not called for by a lawful authority.

Nor are they sworn appropriately upon or by the holy name of God. Nothing but the name of the living God, the true God, is to be used in the taking of a lawful oath.

[5 : 58] It is only his name, just as we read there in Chief of Mormon. And it is only under certain circumstances. Because to swear rashly or falsely by that holy name is to bring real judgment on oneself.

We'll come to that in just a few months. But, of course, all of us will be conscious of passages in Scripture which imply that a Christian perhaps ought not to swear any oaths at all.

James chapter 5, verse 12, for example. Similarly, of course, James is not saying anything different from what his half-brother Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew chapter 5, verse 33. Again, you 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.

[7 : 20] Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou shalt 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. Now, how do we reconcile these two statements? You've got Jesus and you've got James both saying that we shouldn't swear at all by anything at all.

But just let your yes mean yes, and let your no mean no. Then you don't have to take any additional oaths or whatever. How do we reconcile these? We reconcile them by the simple fact that both James and Jesus are talking about your ordinary ongoing life.

In which people had, by that stage, as they do nowadays, used all manner of profanity in order to emphasise the point that they are making or the thing that they are saying.

They would seek to enhance their statement by using some supposed profanity, either false oath or to swear on, as we've used examples, of some particular object or thing or their child's life or whatever it may be, in order to lend weight to what they are saying.

[8 : 35] But the only reason that such weight is needed in their eyes is because they fear that if they do not add such solemnity to it, then nobody will believe what they say.

Now, why would nobody believe what they say? Unless they have built up a reputation for untruth. And for a Christian, for one who seeks to follow the true and living God, there should not be any such embellishments upon what they say and do in their ordinary life and work and business and relationships.

When you say yes, that should be enough. When you say no, that should be enough. But when you say yes, you'd better make very certain that you keep it. It is not enough so you'll say, yeah, yeah, I'll do that, yeah, I'll be there, and then you're not there.

Say no, no, I'm not going to do that and then you do it. That's not enough. That's not good enough for those who seek to follow the Lord. Let your yes mean yes. And let your no mean no.

And make sure you follow up on it. That is what both James and Jesus are teaching in your ordinary everyday life. There should not be any need or requirement for any additional embellishments on what you promise.

[9 : 55] It doesn't add to it. It doesn't enhance it. All it does is it diminishes your ordinary everyday word when you give it.

It's kind of like, I suppose, a wee bit like the honours list, you might say. I mean, when I was comparatively young, it was a rare thing for somebody to get, say, an OBE or a knighthood or a CBE or whatever it might be.

And if you've got a wall, that was a big deal. Nowadays, my goodness, they seem to make every other person a knight or a dame or whatever or a lord this or a lady that.

They just shower out on us all over the place as if it was worth a lot less than it should be. And I'd say, oh, yeah, but it's good that everybody should have a share.

Okay, that's fine. But all that you do by doing that, let's think of it this way. Supposing your grandfather had fought in the war and been awarded the Victoria Cross.

[10 : 58] Oh, this is for valour. This is really special. And there it is in the case, and he was so brave. And then the Ministry of Defence decided, well, you know, everybody who signs up for the forces, they're really a hero just like everybody else.

They're just as brave. We should give them all Victoria Crosses. And how would you feel then? You'd think, yeah, absolutely. We'd just like my grandfather. Yeah, everybody have a Victoria Cross.

Oh, you'd think, well, come on. He did something really courageous or worthy of valour to get his. I mean, he was posthumously awarded. Maybe he died doing the thing that he got awarded it for.

And I'm just giving it to everybody. There's that thing. I think, yeah, everybody's really worthy. Everybody's a hero. Or does it rather diminish the thing that is splattered around so lightly and so commonly?

When it becomes common, it no longer becomes special. And so likewise, this is what was happening with oaths and vows in Jesus' day and in the time of Jesus. People were sprinkling their conversation with oaths here and there and everywhere, which meant that unless they added a oath to it, nobody would give it any kind of weight.

[12 : 09] I remember when I was at school, the playground, so-and-so, somebody might say to somebody else, a wee friend might say to one another thing, oh, you said you knew such a thing. Oh, yeah, but I didn't promise. You know, unless I added a promise or a pinky promise or a cross my heart hope to die sort of thing, then it didn't really count.

But it should count. When you say your yes, it should mean yes. When you say no, it should mean no. That is what Jesus is talking about. That is what James is talking about.

That is what the New Testament is talking about for a believer. That it should be truth which you live and which you speak regardless.

But there are occasions when for additional solemnity and the binding nature of something being undertaken, it may be necessary to make a solemn promise in the presence of God, calling the Lord for a witness and all the other witnesses there.

Some of you will have been present when I was inducted to this congregation. What happened there? The presbytery laid upon me certain solemn promises that I had to take, certain questions that I had to answer.

[13 : 31] And I did so in the presence of God, calling the Lord, as it were, for a witness upon the truth of what I would answer. If I undertake a wedding with a young couple or a baptism with the parents of a baby, I ask them certain questions.

I put questions to them. And if they are unable to give those solemn answers in the presence of God, holding God for a witness upon what they answer, then there will be no wedding.

There will be no baptism. There would have been no induction if I don't give the answers that are required of me by the lawful authority.

When a lawful authority requires of you certain answers or certain solemn promises in the name of the Lord and in his sight and in the presence of witnesses, then to refuse such an oath then becomes a sinful thing.

There's no way that I would be inducted to this charge if I hadn't given those promises and assurances, if I hadn't meant to keep them. Likewise, if a bride and groom were to turn up to me and I were doing a wedding, whatever, I said, now, do you solemnly promise to take so-and-so for you?

[14 : 55] And often what it was, when I said, well, I don't think I do. No, I mean, obviously I'll do my best, you know, but I don't want to say the things that you're saying. No, no, I'm not going to do that. You know, we're all having a nice party here and we're all dressed up so that's nice.

Is that what you're doing? Go ahead. No, it's not. Only if a couple come, a wee baby, and it's all lovely, and a Baptist in LSA, and I do solemnly promise to bring up this child in the Christian faith.

They say, well, you know, we'll do our best and we like to sort of try and do the best that we can with the child. No, we're not taking those promises that you're saying. We're not calling God for a witness here.

This is just a social event. And so that's not going to go ahead. It's not going to happen because it is necessary under certain circumstances for a lawful oath to be imposed by a lawful authority.

In the case of such church services, as we mentioned, it would be a minister. If you were giving evidence in a court, the judge would say to you, perhaps take the Bible in your right hand. You might have to say it.

[15 : 58] You swear by Almighty God, the evidence that you give would be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And that is a lawful oath imposed by a lawful authority.

But it's only under certain circumstances and particular occasions. If you were to stand up in court and say, well, actually, you know, I'll answer the bits I like, but I'm not going to promise to tell the whole truth, and I'm not going to take the name of God to do it.

I'm not going to put my hand on the Bible or whatever the equipment is they use for other religions nowadays. But is that evidence going to be accepted? No, it's not. Because if a lawful oath is required by a lawful authority, then it binds you more solemnly to the truth under these particular circumstances.

You might think, well, you know, you've said that God swear by himself. He took that solemn oath to Abraham, swearing by his own mate. But, you know, supposing it were possible for a lawful authority to require something of somebody else, I mean, do we have evidence of Jesus accepting that?

Well, yes, we do. In Matthew's account of the Gospel, you may remember, in chapter 26, when Jesus is brought before the high priests and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and he answers them, not a word.

[17 : 19] They tried to get witnesses to put him to death, but they found none. Yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At last came two false witnesses and said, this fellow said I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.

And the high priest arose and said, and then answer's thou nothing. So all this time, Jesus is not saying a word while he is being accused.

But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

And then Jesus speaks, thou hast said, nevertheless I say unto you, hereafter shall you see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Now what has happened there? Has Jesus suddenly developed respect for Caiaphas or Annas or the Kangarii court was trying them? Has he suddenly decided, oh well I better answer, or they might do something bad.

[18 : 24] Do you know what has happened is the high priest, who is a lawful authority, he may have been a charlatan, and he may have been abusing his position, but he is nevertheless a lawful authority.

And John's account of the gospel, remember, gives the instance of Caiaphas making that prophecy, that one man should die in the place of the whole nation, rather than the whole nation's supper.

And he says, and this he spake not of himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied. Because God owned, if you like, acknowledged the position of the high priest as being a lawful and legitimate position, a lawful and legitimate authority, albeit being abused in this instance.

And here now, this lawful authority is invoking the holy name of God, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tellest whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

If Jesus doesn't answer now, he is not so much contemning the high priest, he would now be holding in contempt the name of his Holy Father, of the Lord.

[19 : 32] And he's not going to do that. That a lawful oath has been required of him by a lawful authority. And so he answers truthfully, thou hast said, you said it.

Nevertheless, I say unto you, hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven. He answers when he is required to do so by a lawful authority in the name of God.

That is what an oath is. It is something imposed by a lawful authority. And then it is lawful for a Christian to undertake it. So it is in a sense a part of religious worship.

When we take and acknowledge the name of the true God, we are acknowledging the truth of God. And Jesus acknowledges this even with the high priest whom surely he could not have had much respect for.

But he has respect for the name of his Father. An oath, we read here in Hebrews chapter 6, for men verily swear by the greater, verse 16, and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.

[20 : 42] Now, of course, this is well documented in the law. Exodus 22, verse 10 and 11, for example, if a man deliver unto his neighbour an ass or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep and it die or be hurt or driven away, no man seeing it, then shall an oath of the Lord be between them both that he hath not put his hand unto his neighbour's goods and the owner of it shall accept it all and he shall not make it good.

Wow. You know, you just take the name of the Lord and you make yourself a walker and think that's you. You're sorted. Everybody believes you. They might not have believed you before but they believe you now. This is just great.

Now, of course, the temptation given that knowledge for those without faith or unscrupulously to take the holy name of God lightly or vainly and just use it for their own ends to swear it off when they didn't mean it or when it wasn't true, that would have been just too much of a temptation for most people.

This is one reason why Psalm 24 says, you know, he that hath clean hands and a pure heart and hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity nor sworn deceitfully.

to swear falsely by the holy name of God, that was just about as serious as you could get. That is, you know, in the Ten Commandments, you know, there it is in chapter 20 of Exodus and verse 7.

[22 : 14] 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 take his name in vain. That means swearing it off on the name of God and just, you know, it's just a convenience.

It's just an experience. An expediency. It's getting you off the hook. It's helping people to believe, you know. So you're taking the name of the Lord lightly and you don't mean it. And what would be the circumstances when that would be counted against you?

Well, any time that you invoke the name of God, the name of his son, Jesus Christ, the name of himself, under circumstances that are not worship, not prayer, not a solemn oath imposed by a lawful authority.

Outside of these parameters, any use of God's name is vain use. It is essentially blasphemous.

It is that for which God will require an answer. God will require an account.

[23 : 28] Now you stop for a minute and think how many times you hear the name of God blasphemed in the street in idle conversation.

You turn on the television. They would not dream of taking the name of Allah or Muhammad vainly on the television for fear of causing offense to people, but the name of Christ, the name of his father, the name of God, will trip off the lips of vain and godless actors and actresses and scriptwriters and screenwriters right, left, and center, and it's not even counted as bad language.

the use of the name of God vainly will be required for every single instance.

Jesus said that men will give an account for every idle word that they speak. That's before you even get into the ways of blasphemy.

So false and deceitful swearing, it's not just, oh God, he hasn't done anything, look, no lightning bolt, no ground opening to swallow me up, so obviously God doesn't care.

[24 : 41] It is all stacking up. Every single instance that every single person has ever used the name of God in vain or blasphemously, it's not repented of, it's just stacking up and stacking up.

And these will be the very same people who at the end of their lives will say, oh come on, I've been quite a good person, I haven't done anything terribly bad, I've been nice to most people, I've tried to pay my bills, I've tried to help people when I can, I've not broken any major laws, I'm not a criminal, I'm not a rapist, I'm not a God dealer, I'm a good person.

And you don't see all the evil stacking up and stacking up and stacking up out of their own mouths and out of their own lives. Good and evil is defined not by our own fallen vanity, it is defined by God, the God of truth.

Jesus accepted the necessity of a law for oath or vow under certain circumstances because it would enhance the truth, because it would convey the truth, and God is above all a God of truth.

Now the apostles, likewise, would be the same. Paul writes to Timothy, 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 1, I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge the quick and the dead and his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word, be instant, in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.

[26 : 21] Why does he just say, you know, preach the word, Timothy, do your best? This is a solemn charge Paul lays on Timothy, before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge the quick and the dead and his appearing and his kingdom.

Likewise, he writes to those in Corinth, 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 23, moreover, I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spade you I came not as yet unto Corinth.

He is calling God for a witness, upon the truth of what he is writing. He is effectively using an oath, the better to convey the truth of what he is saying.

Now, of course, as we say, this is Old Testament, it's New Testament as well, it's used by the church, used by the apostles, acknowledged by Jesus. What happens though, if, let's say you make an oath to somebody in the name of God, solemnly, faithfully, but then you find that they have been the ones deceiving you.

You know, when you made your promise to them in good faith, they weren't being straight with you. Where does that leave you? Are you free to break your oath? Are you free to break your promise?

[27 : 36] Are you bound by what you promised? Well, we've got an example of that, of course, in Joshua chapter 9, with the Gibeonites who lied to Joshua and the Israelites pretending that they were from a far distant country instead of being their neighbours.

And being their neighbours, they would be due for warfare and extermination from the Israelites, so they tried to make peace with them. But they knew that the Israelites couldn't make peace with their immediate Canaanite neighbours because they were under orders to cleanse the land of all that idolatry and all the tribes that shed blood and that worked wickedness.

So they lied to them. And we read in Joshua 9, verse 15, Joshua made peace with them and made a league with them to let them live and the princes of the congregation swear unto them.

And then until later on they find out that they lived nearby, that they had deceived them. The children of Israel smothered them not because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel.

And all the congregation murmured against the princes. And all the princes said unto all the congregation, we have sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel. Now therefore we may not touch them.

- [28 : 49] Even if you are deceived, God will require that at the hand of the deceiver. What he requires of you and me is faithfulness to his oath, faithfulness to his name, faithfulness to his truth.

God, the highest witness of all, is the ultimate truth. He is the one who sees and knows all things.

And ultimately it is he that we call upon as our witness in such an oath. If you remember a few weeks ago we were looking at Jacob and Laban and we read of how they made this pact together in Genesis 31, verse 49, the Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another.

And Laban said to me, if thou shalt afflict my daughters, if thou shalt take our wives beside my daughters. And here's the key thing, no man is with us, just you and me, Jacob.

Nobody else sees us here. See, God is witness betwixt me and thee. Then he said, the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us.

- [30 : 12] And Jacob swear by the fear of his father Isaac. A lawful oath. Now we mentioned earlier about a vow. A vow is technically very much like an oath except the vow is taken to God directly.

A vow is taken to God. If you think of Jacob when he has his dream and he vows to the Lord, 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 wait to put on, so I shall come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God.

And this stone which I set up here shall be God's house and of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee. Jacob is making that oath, that promise to God.

That is technically the definition of a vow. It is made to God as opposed to simply an oath made to another person calling God for a witness upon that.

One final thing we need to recognize and that is that no oath can bind anyone to sin. You cannot say, oh well I have to do this because I promised to do it, I have done it on oath and therefore I must do it.

- [31 : 28] God is not going to hold or require anyone to sin against him. Think for example of Herod making his promise about John the Baptist.

Well it wasn't, he didn't know it was about John the Baptist but he promised to Herodias' daughter, he said, you know anything you want, I'll give you up to half my kingdom and he swore with an oath.

And then she asked for the head of John the Baptist and he was sorry but for his oath's sake and for the guests that were there he didn't want to lose face.

So he was bound in by that false oath to a sin. Nobody is bound in to a sin. No oath will ever require you, can ever require you to sin.

An oath can only be taken in the name of God legitimately before God in the presence of God to bind you to something which is in line with God's will.

- [32 : 31] To honour God, to be true to God. It cannot bind to sin or to that which we have no assurance of keeping.

We've got no strength. For example, I can't vow before God or take an oath and say, this time next year Lord I'm going to make myself a millionaire. Well, I've got no promise of the Lord that I'll be able to do that.

So it would be a very foolish thing to do. I cannot bind myself into sin nor should I take an oath for something of which I have no promise of ability or strength to fulfil.

But if I can do it and if it is in my power to do it and I trust the Lord will give me strength to do something, then it is legitimate if an oath is required of me by a lawful authority that I should give that truth and that assurance.

So this is how one reconciles the truth of what is in God's word. It doesn't contradict itself. But rather Jesus and James and no doubt elsewhere in Scripture are talking in their teaching, the Sermon on the Mount and the James chapter 5 as well, they're talking about ordinary everyday life.

[33 : 50] You do not sprinkle or litter your life with oaths and solemnities that there's no necessity for. If you're a follower of the true God, the God of truth, then your yes will mean yes, your no will mean no, and you live your life to that consistent and truthful standard.

Now, you don't need embarrassments. But if a lawful authority on a lawful occasion requires a solemn oath or vow of you, then it is legitimate and right for a Christian to respond accordingly.

And the Scripture teaches that clearly. As we said at the outset, God himself, the ultimate personification of truth, sets the example of the legitimacy of an oath.

When God made promise to Abraham, a mere man, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself.

This is the only name that is legitimate for an oath. The name of the living God saying, surely blessing I will bless thee, multiply I will multiply thee.

[35 : 06] And so after he had patiently endured, he obtained a promise. Wherefore God, willing more abundantly to show to the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath.

There are lawful oaths and vows, which rather than diminishing the truth or the binding nature of what God says, are designed to exalt the truthfulness, the holiness, and the fear of the living God, whose name we take and whose witness we call for whenever we swear humbly and reverently in his name and in his name alone.

Let us pray. Thank you.