

# CHAPTER 22

## Of Lawful Oaths and Vows

Welcome

Prayer

Introduction: in preparation for this I have consulted the commentaries by Chad Van DixHorn, RC Sproul and AA Hodge, as well as some current PCA TE's.

The fault of most people today is to use Gods name lightly perhaps more lightly than any other name.

James 5:12 "But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." Swearing meaning the solemn taking of Oaths and Vows.

This is reinforced by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Mathew 5: 33-37 saying, 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

God is the benchmark for Truth. He is an honest, promise keeping God and it is right to formally commit to the Living God. Our hope for redemption rests in our confidence that He will keep His promises. We must believe His Word and live on the basis of our trust that what He declares is Truth.

We'll review the Confession and answer some questions and look at some brief applications.

Some of the questions that we will answer:

What is a lawful oath?

What is implied in it, and how is this implication generally expressed?

An oath is an act of supreme religious worship, since it recognizes the omnipresence, omniscience, absolute justice and sovereignty of the person whose august witness is invoked, and who's judgment is appealed to as final.

In whose name must every lawful oath be taken? and why is it sinful to swear in any other name?

Who may and who may not consistently swear by the true God?  
In what manner and with what forms is it right to swear?

From what does the obligation to keep the oath arise?  
What is a vow, and how does it differ from an oath?  
Upon what principle does the obligation of a vow rest?  
How do they play out in every day life?

Marriage Vows

Vows in the Sacraments.

Prayer renews our covenant promises to God

As we will we need to make sure that we are justified and fully persuaded of any assertion when we call on God as witness.

1. 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.
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.
3. Whosoever taketh 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 any thing but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.
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.

## Exposition

These sections embrace the following points: *first*, The nature of a lawful oath; *secondly*, By whose name men ought to swear; *thirdly*, The warrantableness of taking an oath; *fourthly*, The manner in which an oath ought to be taken; and, *fifthly*, The binding obligation of an oath.

**1. An oath is a solemn act of religious worship, in which the person swearing calls God to witness his sincerity in what he asserts or promises, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears.** When a person swears to facts past or present, this is called an *assertory* oath; when one swears that he will perform a certain deed or deeds in time to come, this is called a *promissory* oath. An oath may relate to matters civil or ecclesiastical, and, according to its matter, may be denominated a civil or ecclesiastical oath; but to whatsoever matter it may be applied, the oath itself retains its high place among the solemnities of religion.

**2. An oath is only to be taken in the name of God.** We are expressly commanded to "swear by his name" (Deut. 6:13); and to "swear by them that are no gods" is represented as highly criminal.—Jer. 5:7. Swearing by the name of God implies a belief and acknowledgement of his omniscience, omnipotence, and justice; it follows, therefore, that to swear by any other besides him, must be utterly unlawful, and no less than idolatry.

**3. An oath may be justifiably taken on weighty occasions, when imposed by lawful authority.** An oath for confirmation is justified by the third precept of the moral law; for while that precept prohibits the taking of God's name in vain, it sanctions swearing by the name of God on lawful occasions. The practice is confirmed by numerous approved examples under the Old Testament. Abraham swore to Abimelech that he would not deal falsely with him.—Gen. 21:23, 24. A king of the same name desired that an oath might be between Isaac and him; and they swore one to another. - [Gen. 26:31](#). In like manner Jacob swore to Laban (Gen.31:53); and Joseph swore to his father.—Gen. xlvii. 31. We have various examples of holy men swearing by the name of God. Thus Jonathan required David to swear unto him (1 Sam. 20:17); and David also swore unto Saul.—1 Sam. 24:21,22. The taking of an oath being no part of the judicial, or of the ceremonial law, there is much in the New Testament to confirm the practice. The Apostle Paul frequently appeals to God in these and similar expressions: "God is my witness:"—"I say the truth in Christ, I lie not", (Rom.1: 9, 9:1): "I call God for a record upon my soul."—2 Cor.1:23. Christ himself answered the question of the high priest, when he adjured him by the living God; which was the common form of administering an oath among the Jews. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the oath which God swore to Abraham, "who, because he could swear by no greater, aware by himself;" and he adds, "An oath for confirmation is an end of all strife" (Heb. 7:13, 16); plainly showing that he sanctioned the practice. It must be evident, therefore, that our Saviour's words (Matt. v. 34), "Swear not at all," and the similar words of the Apostle James (v. 12), do not absolutely prohibit all

swearing on necessary and solemn occasions; but **only forbid the practice of swearing in common conversation, and particularly of swearing by creatures. It must be remarked, however, that an appeal to God in trivial matters, and the frequent and unnecessary repetition of the same oath, is a taking the name of God in vain.** And it may also be observed, that as the lifting up of the hand is the usual mode of swearing mentioned in Scripture (Gen. xiv. 22; Rev. x. 5, 6), so it ought to be preferred; and all superstitious forms ought to be rejected.

A person may not bind himself by an oath to anything except what is good and just, and what he is able and resolved to perform. As an example if someone promises to do something and then realize that if he does what he promised, he will be sinning, then not only may he break that vow, but he must break it. We find this in Judges 11:30-40 the story of Jephthah...

4. An oath ought to be taken "in truth, in righteousness, and in judgment."—Jer.4: 2. In *truth*; that is, with an entire correspondence between the thoughts of the mind and the words of the oath, in their common obvious meaning, and as understood by those who administer it and without any equivocation and mental reservation. To allow of mental reservation in swearing is to defeat the very end of an oath, to destroy all confidence among men, and to involve the swearer in the sin of perjury. In *righteousness*; that is, in things lawful and possible for us at the time of swearing, and with a fixed intention to perform what we pledge ourselves to do. In *judgement*; that is, deliberately and

reverently, well considering whether the matter of the oath be good and just, and whether the ends proposed be sufficient to justify us in interposing the glorious and dreadful name of God for a pledge of the truth of our declarations.

B. A lawful oath binds to performance. Oaths engaging persons to what is sinful are in themselves null and void; and those who have rashly taken such oaths ought to repent of and renounce them, instead of adding the sin of keeping to the sin of making them, as Herod most wickedly did in beheading John the Baptist for the sake of his oath.—Mark 6:23, 26, “and he vowed to her. ‘whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom; And the king was exceedingly sorry but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.” But a lawful oath is binding, though the performance may be prejudicial to a man's temporal interest; and it is the character of a good man, that though “he swears to his own hurt, he changes not.”—Pa. 25:4. It is a detestable principle of the Romish Church, that “faith is not to be kept with heretics”

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 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.
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 of which he hath no promise or ability from God. In which respects, 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.

#### Exposition

These sections relate to the nature, the matter, and the obligation of a vow.

A vow is a solemn promise made to God, and may be either personal or social. Although a vow is "of the like nature with a promissory oath," yet they admit of being distinguished. **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.** A vow is to be made to God alone; and, therefore, to make vows to saints departed, as Papists do, is superstitious and idolatrous. Vows ought to be entered into voluntarily, and in the exercise of faith, or in dependence upon the grace of Christ for enabling us to perform them.—Phil. iv. 13; 2 Cor. xii. 9.

People may bind themselves by a vow, either to necessary duties or to other things not expressly required, so far and so long as they may lie conducive to the better performance of these duties. But no man may vow to do anything which is either unlawful or which is not in his own power, and for the performance of which he has no promise of ability from God.

A vow has an intrinsic obligation, distinct from the obligation of the law of God. In the law, God *binds us* by his authoritative command; in a vow, we *bind ourselves* by our own voluntary engagement. To represent a vow as laying no new or superadded obligation on the conscience, or to maintain, as some Popish writers do, that a vow does not bind us in moral duties commanded by the law of God, because our vow cannot add any obligation to his law, is manifestly absurd. It is equally contrary to Scripture and to the common sense of mankind. The law of God is the primary obligation. But a vow also obliges; this is the secondary obligation. And subordinate things oppose not each other.

The performance of vows is frequently and strictly enjoined in the Word of God. "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God," says Moses, "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."—Deut. 23:21; see also Eccl. 5:4; Ps. 50:14, 76:11.

### **'Popish' Roman fallacies:**

Vow of celibacy: Gods answer for lust is marriage

Vows of poverty: Some religious orders vow to poverty and begging to get by. Paul exhorts all to hard work so that Christians will be able to help those who are truly in need. (Ephesians 4:28,

Vows of denial: False denials that address sins instead of just repenting and turning from that sin.

These have the appearance of wisdom but are empty and shallow promises.

### **Important thoughts and observations on Vows:**

We must not entangle ourselves with unwise vows.

Remember we are restricted in our abilities to keep our vows. Don't vow something you cannot deliver on.

We are called to trustworthiness.

“Vows had better be restricted to the voluntary assumption and promise to observe, with the help of divine grace, duties imposed by God and plainly revealed in the Scriptures.” - AA Hodge

Covenanting is a means of sanctification, when you formally commit to something it pushes you to a place where you finish and have accountability

### **Some consequences of failing to take these things seriously:**

Lets not kid ourselves here, Spirituality is tied to the law of God. Ecclesiasties 5:5 ‘It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

The breaking of the 2nd Commandment. In swearing by any other god and a sin of idolatry if we swear by any thing or place...atheist/infidel swearing on the Bible...

The breaking of the 3rd Commandment. We violate the third commandment when we take up the name of God in service of 1. what is false, 2. what is frivolous, or 3. what is phony.

Misrepresented witness: our propensity lie as described in Romans 3:4.

**Other Considerations to Ponder:**

Power and Potency of membership vows, there are blessings and curses there. Keep your vows to wife, church job, not keeping vows brings chastisement and Gods wrath.

Don't bind yourself to something that is against God

If you say your gonna do something good do it, fulfill the duty you've put forth.

Pastoral Point: in marriages make stupid vows to get our of the doghouse said to calm/placate the person not biblical placate others

Weird vows to help turn from sins, normally are empty and hollow

Oath of officers: Every officer not upholding their confession and stand for it. Don't take an oath unless you really want to keep it; God has intervened catastrophically when people toyed with their oaths

-elected officials and establishment principles in life to God

Isaiah 19: National Covenanting, magistrate, Men, Fathers should covenant to God

## **Final Thoughts:**

As we've seen Oaths are promises we make in Gods Presence. Vows are promises made to God Himself.

We must not entangle ourselves with unwise vows. They return us to bondage and make us forget the warning of the Apostle Paul: 'You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men'(1 Cor 7:23). Since we have been bought by a Lord whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light, let us not needlessly multiply our promises to him, but revel in the promises he has made to us. - Chad Van DixHorn

Righteous people are called to live by faith. To live in this manner means more than trusting God. It involves being trustworthy and faithful with respect to promises, oaths and vows. As people of the Word, our word should be our bond. - RC Sproul