

**Vanity in Our Vows to God**  
Ecclesiastes 5:4-7; 1 Samuel 1:11  
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Those who seek for peace and satisfaction have often tried to perform acts of worship in order to obtain these blessings. Believing that such blessings (as peace and joy) must come from God, some have engaged in extended fasts from food and bound themselves to vows of poverty, celibacy, and isolation in hope of finding an enduring peace of mind. At times, these acts of worship become a means of punishment for sins committed or a means of satisfying a guilty conscience that brings one no closer to the joy of the Lord, but to the contrary, makes that joy of the Lord seem even more impossible to reach.

Dear ones, it is not the mere act of worship that brings the joy of the Lord. It is not how much you punish your souls or afflict your bodies that bring the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord is the fruit of faith in Christ, love for Him, and obedience to Him. The joy of the Lord comes, not so much from catching it, as much as being caught by it, as you go about your Christian duties of daily growing in your trust, love, and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. The joy of the Lord is not merely jumping up and down with glee, as much as it is being satisfied in your souls with a peace of mind that regardless of what happens in this world, all will work out for your good as a child of the living God. The joy of the Lord is a quiet calm in the midst of a violent storm, a deep satisfaction in the midst of heavy loss, and a thankful contentment in the midst of immense blessings (as well as jumping up and down for joy at times over God's goodness to you).

The joy of the Lord is certainly promoted in your lives by your loving obedience to God's commands. Those who may expect to know the joy of the Lord in their lives are not irreverent and rebellious children, but respectful and obedient children. As it is true in the life of a Christian in general, so it is true in the worship of the Christian in particular. You cannot expect to enjoy your great God and Savior if you have no regard for your duties in worship. If you ignore, neglect, or even despise all due preparation on your parts before coming into the presence of the Most High God, you will only find vanity and emptiness in worship, rather than joy and satisfaction in worship.

Last Lord's Day, we considered the vanity and emptiness of worship in general (in Ecclesiastes 5:1-3) apart from faith in Christ, love for Christ, and obedience to Christ. To simply show up for worship with no serious consideration or preparation as to whom it is you have come to worship is (according to Solomon) to "do evil" (Ecclesiastes 5:2). This Lord's Day, we continue the theme of worship, but move into a particular realm of worship that is less ordinary, and one in which many people have thought they would find the joy of the Lord: solemn vows. But as with worship in general, vows in particular will only lead you to utter frustration in enjoying the Lord, if they are not expressions of your faith in Christ, love for Christ, and obedience to Christ. Simply to show up for a vow without all due consideration and preparation to whom we make these holy promises is the height of foolishness and vanity. The main points from our text are summarized by Solomon in two rules for you to follow in making vows: (1) Keep Your Vows to God in a Timely Manner (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5); and (2) Watch Your Words in the Vows You Make to God (Ecclesiastes 5:6-7).

**I. Rule #1: Keep Your Vows to God in a Timely Manner (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).**

A. Why does Solomon specifically bring forward the case of a vow to demonstrate that a lasting joy and happiness cannot even be found in it apart from faith and obedience to Christ? What is so unique about a vow that would make it expedient for Solomon to bring it forward as Exhibit A?

1. Dear ones, this is why a vow is so unique. It is a solemn promise made unto Almighty

God Himself. Of all acts of worship, a solemn promise to God (that is, a vow) to perform a lawful duty is of the most serious nature. It is difficult to grade different acts of worship in this way, for all worship is offered directly to God. No act of worship can, therefore, be performed frivolously. But to break a vow is to lie directly to the Holy Spirit. Even when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the price of their property that they sold and how much of it they were giving to the Lord and how much of it they were retaining for themselves, Peter says they lied not to man, but to the Holy Spirit of God. How much more then when an actual vow or promise is directly made to Almighty God? Because of this lie to God, Ananias and Sapphira were both slain by the Lord right on the spot (Acts 5:1-10). As a result of this mighty act of God, the Scripture states (in Acts 5:11) that “great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.” The church learned the gravity of the sin of lying to God. It was good for the church that such great fear and reverence for God came upon all who heard what had happened. People took the Lord in His infinite holiness seriously. They realized that He is not a God to be mocked. That is what makes a vow so unique: it is a sacred promise made directly to the Most High God.

2. Thus, Solomon brings forward at this time the case of a vow in worship, because it reveals the height of our folly. You will even seek for joy in the vows you make to God, but without considering the absolutely sober and momentous words that you are uttering to the almighty. And when you do so, rather than finding peace of mind, joy, and contentment in the vows you make, you find the anger of the Lord (as we shall see). If ever you should watch your steps when you are in the presence of Almighty God, it would be when you make sacred promises to God to perform lawful duties for your good or for the good of others. How careful you must be in your approach to the living God, before whom the angels in heaven even cover their eyes due to His greatness, power, and glory. There will be no joy of the Lord, if you do not begin by taking the Lord your God seriously—treating Him not as a buddy with whom you want to hang out. There is no one like your God. He is a consuming fire. And yet, dear ones, He is like a father who pities His poor children in their weaknesses. He is like a bird that gathers its chicks under its wings in the midst of trouble. He is a God who loves undeserving sinners (like you and me) with an everlasting love, and has pulled those whom He loved from eternity out of the pits of hell which they deserved by sending His Only Begotten Son to suffer His wrath in their place. But dear ones, never ever forget that your God is a consuming fire, who will not be mocked. If you play games with God (as did Jonah, who thought he could outrun God or outsmart God), you will be humbled every time. And praise be to God—He will reveal that He is the Potter and we are the clay. For until you humbly and cheerfully receive by faith such a great and mighty God, you will never enjoy Him nor find your pleasure and delight in Him. Have you come to that place in your life where you know that you cannot fight against the Lord or outsmart Him? You cannot win a battle of wits against Him or beat Him in an arm wrestling match. The sooner you stop fighting against Him and humbly submit to Him by His grace, the sooner you will be on the path to finding that peace and joy for which you seek.

B. In this first rule, Solomon directs you to keep and to honor the vows you have made to God in a timely manner: “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it” (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

1. Don’t be slow in keeping your promises to God, as if it is no big deal when you get around to it. For to do so is to treat your sovereign Lord (who owns all that you have) worse than you would treat a stranger from whom you borrow money and promise to pay it back in monthly installments. Do you have greater fear of the consequences from your creditor than you do from Almighty God, if you are late in your payment? If so, you do not take God seriously.

2. Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, vowed to the Lord to give back to Him her son to serve God all of his life in the House of God, if God should bless her with a son (1 Samuel 1:11). The Lord bent low His ear unto the cry and vow of Hannah, and gave her a son, whom she named Samuel. It would have been about that time that perhaps many of us would have been rethinking the vow we made to God or putting it off

perhaps until Samuel was an adult. Remember Hannah did not have any other children to love and to cherish at this time. Samuel was her only child, and we do not read in Scripture that God had promised to give her any more children after Samuel. However, this woman of God (a godly example to us all) did not delay in keeping her promise to God, even to her own pain—a pain that only a mother might fully understand in such a case. When Samuel was weaned, she took him to the House of the Lord, and the Scripture emphasizes her amazing faith, love, and obedience when it says about Samuel: “and the child was young” (1 Samuel 1:24).

C. Solomon gives us a reason why we must obey this first rule: “for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed” (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

1. To have “no pleasure” means to have God’s holy anger and displeasure kindled against those who would treat Him with such disrespect as to ignore or neglect paying a vow in a timely manner, as promised to Him. Dear ones, it is not popular to speak of a God of anger in our present political and ecclesiastical climate. We hear from many today, “Well if that is the kind of God that He is, I will not serve Him.” Such a statement treats God as if He was one of us, and as if we could hurt Him or shame Him by not serving Him. If you find in your heart that you do not like the fact that God is just and righteous and is angry with those of you who are fools, then think not that you can change Him. He is eternally who He is, and He is unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Be humbled before Him, rather than emboldened against Him with pride. For God is angry with us when we treat Him worse than we would treat one another in making timely payments for our debts (and so He should be). We act as though because He cannot be seen, we do not have to take Him seriously—out of sight, out of mind. What an error of infinite magnitude. I cannot see electricity either, but if I stick my wet finger into an electrical socket, I may not recover from what the unseen can do to me. Dear ones, God is ready to forgive all who come to Him, beating their chest and crying out to Him, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” However, those who will not pay their vows in a timely manner will know the power of the unseen invisible God.

2. What promises to God are you delaying to pay? What about your baptismal vows that you would fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil all the days of your life? Those vows remain upon you, dear children, young people, and adults. You cannot disavow yourself from that covenant relationship with God and treat His promise made to you and your promise made to Him as if it was nothing. You can only humble yourself before the Lord, confess your sin, and receive by faith alone Christ as Savior and King of your life. There is no joy, no peace, and no satisfaction that lasts in running away from God and in delaying to pay your vows.

D. Solomon says in regard to voluntary promises we make to God: “Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay” (Ecclesiastes 5:5). There are solemn covenants with God which you VOLUNTARILY make (and Solomon refers to these at this time). However, there are also solemn covenants with God into which you are born and which you acknowledge and renew inwardly and outwardly as you are able.

1. Those vows that you voluntarily make are like certain of the Nazarite vows that you find in Numbers 6. Nazarites would devote themselves to the Lord (usually for a specified period of time) to abstain from some comfort or delight in order to obtain some request or blessing from the Lord or in order to offer some tangible means of thanking the Lord for His goodness to them. For example, if one needed an enormous harvest from the Lord in the upcoming season to provide for his family and to pay off his creditors, he might take a Nazarite vow in which for that period of time he would abstain from all forms of the grape (whether in wine, grape juice, vinegar, raisin, or the grape itself), abstain from cutting his hair, and abstain from physical contact with those who had died. When the time of the vow had expired, he would shave his head and burn the hair in the fire upon the altar before God. Or if one received an enormous harvest from the

Lord (far beyond anything he imagined), he might voluntarily express His thankfulness to the Lord by taking upon himself a Nazarite vow for a specified period of time (wherein he would follow the same procedure just mentioned). Likewise, you can engage yourselves unto the Lord in a special way in making voluntary promises to Him to perform some lawful duty, as a superadded bond upon you, if, for example, you struggle with a sin or a bad habit in a particular area of your life. Let's say, you struggle to get out of bed in the morning to have some time in secret worship with the Lord. You may increase the seriousness of that duty (by which you are already bound by the Law of God) by making a vow to God to get out of bed at a specific time (for the next 3 months), praying that a godly habit will develop during that time and continue for the rest of your life. Or let's say that God gives you a promotion at work that you were not expecting. You may voluntarily vow to devote a specific monetary amount to the Lord as a way of giving thanks to the Lord. Solomon says that all such voluntary vows must be paid. Since they are voluntary, it would be better not to make such a promise to God in the first place than to make it and not to pay it or to delay in cheerfully paying it.

2. However, there are also vows (or covenants) made to God, which in some respects are not voluntary to some. When Hannah made a vow to God for Samuel to be devoted to the service of God, it was voluntary to Hannah, but it was not voluntary to Samuel. Likewise, when Jonadab made a vow to God on behalf of himself and his posterity, that he and they would not drink wine, not build permanent houses, and not sow permanent crops, while the land of Israel and Judah were ready to be destroyed by God, it was a voluntary vow for Jonadab, but not so for his posterity (as we see in Jeremiah 35). Jonadab's posterity at the time of Jeremiah were even commended by the Lord for keeping it. Likewise, when our faithful forefathers in England, Ireland, and Scotland engaged themselves in a national vow or covenant to the Lord on behalf of themselves and all their posterity, it was voluntary to them, but not voluntary to us. Just like Samuel, just like the posterity of Jonadab, the lawful covenant of our forefathers likewise binds us to keep it even though we individually and personally did not make it. You may complain about such covenant arrangements, because you do not want to be bound by a promise you did not specifically make. However, I can guarantee you that if the promise that was made to God by your parents was to leave one million dollars to you, you would not feel the same way. You would gladly receive the benefit of that promise made to God. So you see, the real issue is not that you object to a promise being made to God on your behalf. The real issue is that you do not like the promise that your parents made to God on your behalf, when you were infants. Nor do you like the promises that your faithful forefathers made to God (in the *Solemn League and Covenant*) on your behalf to uproot false teaching and to avoid attending churches that promote schism and denominationalism. But dear ones, those solemn promises made in your baptism (whether as a child or as an adult) and in the *Solemn League and Covenant* (when you were yet unborn) are binding, and God likewise says to all of you: Pay them for I take no pleasure in fools. You should renew your vows when you come to worship your God each Lord's Day and when you come to the Lord's Supper, for these are covenant occasions in which God speaks to you as His covenant people, and you renew your vows to be His people and to walk in loving obedience to His commandments. This is a solemn gathering between God and His people each Lord's Day. Let us rejoice together in the mercies of God, but the mercies of God call us to renew our covenants with Him as His people.

## **II. Rule #2: Watch Your Words in the Vows You Make to God (Ecclesiastes 5:6-7).**

A. Let me briefly say that because making promises to God is a most serious act of worship, you should carefully watch the words you use in making your solemn promises to God ("Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin" Ecclesiastes 5:6). This rule focuses upon your inward preparation in coming into the presence of the Lord. When you worship the Lord (and especially when you make vows to the Lord your God), don't just show up and utter some words to make yourself feel good, or to salve a guilty conscience, or to perform some mere outward duty. Thoughtfully, prayerfully, and cheerfully engage to be the Lord's people

and to serve Him for His glory and for the good of yourself and others. The very point that Solomon emphasized last week needs to be repeated at this point. When you merely go through the outward form of worship (and I would add especially in making solemn promises to God), you offer to God the sacrifice of fools (Ecclesiastes 5:1). For God calls you to worship Him, not only with your outward sacrifices, but with your inward sacrifices of a broken and contrite heart, which David says the Lord will not despise (Psalm 51:17). Apart from faith in Christ, love for Christ, and obedience to Christ, your worship (and particularly your vows) do not bring the joy of the Lord, but rather bring the holy displeasure of the Lord.

B. When you are careless in approaching your holy God, you tend to speak now and think later about what you have vowed. When the lawful vow made becomes uncomfortable, is difficult to keep, or hinders from some of the pleasures one wants to enjoy, the tendency on the part of fools is to want to neglect those vows, to backtrack, and to remove that which leads to one's discomfort, difficulty and displeasure. But God says through Solomon, once the vow is made (provided it is lawful and agreeable to God's Word), you cannot shrink back from performing it ("neither say thou before the angel [or "messenger", which most likely refers to the minister of God as we see in Malachi 2:7 and Revelation 1:20], that it was an error"). Of course, if the vow binds you to do that which is unlawful (as did Herod's oath in Mark 6:26, which bound him to slay John the Baptist), it cannot lawfully bind one to keep it. In such a case, one's duty is to repent of the unlawful vow, to seek God's forgiveness, and to break it. That is why it is a very good idea to write your vows down on paper and to seek the advice of a parent, spouse, minister, or elder before making them.

C. Again we see God's attitude toward a frivolous and careless approach to Him in worship: "wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands" (Ecclesiastes 5:6)? God will not be mocked, dear ones, for whatever you sow that will you also reap.

D. Just as there is much vanity in many dreams, so there is much vanity and emptiness (rather than the joy of the Lord) in many words, which are uttered from an unprepared heart in the presence of God (Ecclesiastes 5:7a).

E. The remedy to this careless approach to worship is to fear the Lord ("but fear thou God" Ecclesiastes 5:7b). Take God seriously; for you cannot trust God or enjoy Him, when you do not reverence Him. He will simply be a big joke to you. He will be one that you believe you can take advantage of without any consequences. This, dear ones, would be to embark upon a mistake of catastrophic proportions. There is joy in the Lord, but it is a joy that is firmly rooted in a holy, almighty, and merciful God, who is to be taken seriously.

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