

CHAPTER 23 – LAWFUL OATHS AND VOWS

Lawful Oaths

1. *A lawful oath is an aspect of religious worship in which the swearer, having God's truth, justice and righteousness in view, solemnly calls God to witness what he swears, and to judge him according to the truth or falsity of his word.*

2. *An oath is only lawful when it is taken in the name of God, with all holy fear and reverence. To swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and dread name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful and to be abhorred. God's Word sanctions the taking of an oath when weighty and momentous matters are engaging attention, and when truth requires conformation and an end to strife is desired. In such circumstances it is permissible to take a lawful oath imposed by lawful authority.*

3. *Each and every person who takes an oath agreeably to the Word of God must well consider the seriousness of such a solemn act, and be extremely careful to assert nothing but what he knows to be truth; for by rash, false and empty oaths the Lord is provoked, and by reason of them a land is brought to misery.*

4. *An oath is to be taken in the plain and usual sense of the words used, without equivocation or mental reservation.*

The background to this section on "Oaths" is the refusal of many Anabaptists, from the time of the Reformation, and later of the Quakers, to take any oaths.

(a) **Definition of an oath** (section 1) – An oath is calling upon the Name of God to be a witness of what has been said as being true, or of a promise to do something in the future.

1. Biblical evidence that it is lawful to take an oath, whether in conversation or a law-court.
 - The third commandment (Exodus 20:7, see Leviticus 19:12) forbids swearing vainly. This assumes their lawfulness, and there are commands to swear in God's Name (Deuteronomy 6:13, 10:20), but only in His Name.
 - God Himself makes use of an oath (Hebrews 6:13-16), and Christ responded to the oath of the High Priest (Matthew 26:63-64).
 - God's people use God's Name in making oaths (Genesis 24:3, 50:25, 1 Kings 17:1, Ezra 10:5, Nehemiah 13:25, Romans 1:9, 2 Corinthians 1:23).
2. The problem of Matthew 5:33-37. Do not these verses teach that we should never swear at all? Our Lord is teaching against the Pharisees who believed that if an oath was made *without* using the name of God then it was not so important to tell the truth or to keep it. So in daily talking oaths began to multiply, "by heaven", "by earth", "by Jerusalem", "by the temple", "by the altar" (Matthew 23:16-22) to cover lies and promises that were never meant to be kept. The Pharisees believed this was acceptable as long as the Name of God was not used. Jesus taught that such a use of oaths is *totally* forbidden. In ordinary daily conversation it ought to be enough just to say "Yes" or "No". Section 2 teaches when oaths ought to be used and in whose name an oath ought to be made.

(b) **The name in which an oath is to be made** (Section 2, lines 1-3) – To swear by any other than Jehovah God is a wicked denial of God's omnipresence, omniscience, justice and sovereignty (see Joshua 23:7, Jeremiah 5:7). To swear by a false god is the same as worshipping that god; to swear by any thing or place is to be guilty of idolatry. This is why an oath is regarded as a part of religious worship.

(c) **The occasions for taking an oath** (Section 2, lines 3-6) – Only where “weighty and momentous matters” are involved, or where the authorities demand it, and not in ordinary conversation. Look at the Biblical examples cited above. They are used where confirmation of truth is required (Hebrews 6:16).

(d) **The seriousness of taking an oath** (Section 3) – We must be absolutely sure that what we are saying under oath is true, otherwise we are guilty of taking the Name of the Lord in vain (see Exodus 20:7, Jeremiah 4:2). A mark of the godly man is that he fulfils what he promises under oath, no matter how much it hurts him (Psalm 15:4, 24:4). While this should be our character even when we have not taken an oath, it is even more awful to sin when we have taken God’s Name on our lips.

(e) **The sincerity of our oath** (Section 4) – What we say is exactly what we are to understand in our own mind. We must not impose another interpretation on the oath in our mind contrary to what we know the witnesses understand; nor must we add any words secretly in our minds to change the oath. Catholics have allowed this in certain cases when dealing with ‘heretics’.

Lawful Vows

5. Vows are to be made to God alone and not to any creature. Once made they are to be performed scrupulously and faithfully. But monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, that pertain to the church of Rome, so far from representing superior sanctity, are merely superstitious and sinful snares in which no Christian ought to entangle himself.

Oaths and vows are similar. *Oaths* are solemn promises made to man before the Lord. *Vows* are solemn promises made only to the Lord. Therefore, both are solemn promises, acceptable to God, part of our total religious worship, and to be kept very faithfully. The purpose of oath is to confirm what is spoken as being true; the purpose of a vow is commitment to a certain course of action.

Note the following examples of vows in the Bible – Genesis 28:20-22, Numbers 6:1-21 (Nazirite vow), 21:2, 30:1-16 (laws about vows), Deuteronomy 23:21-23, Judges 11:30-31, 1 Samuel 1:11, Psalm 132:1-5, Ecclesiastes 5:4-5, Malachi 1:14, Acts 18:18-19, 21:17-26. We must not make a vow to do that which is unlawful or impossible, for we are under obligation to keep our vows before the Lord.

Specific reference is made to vows of the Roman Catholics, for they hold such things as very important. To them it is a mark of holiness to go out of the world, and into a monastery, promising never to get married, to live a life of poverty, and to unquestioningly obey the superiors in the monastery. Yet this is not the way to holiness, for it only deals with the body and not the sinful flesh (Colossians 2:20-23).

The only two examples of vows made in the early church are with Paul and they are obviously specifically Jewish. As with oaths, we ought to treat **every** promise we make, whether in the form of a vow or not, as made in God’s presence, and therefore binding upon us. Think more carefully what you pray and the promises you make to God in prayer; think of what you tell the Lord in your heart when you are challenged by the preaching of the Word.