

Praise Keeps Promises

Part 2 - "Our Words"

Psalm 66:13-15

A man was adrift on a raft in the open sea. Terrified, he prayed: "O Lord, I've broken most of Your commandments. I've got some nasty habits - I drink, curse and steal, I treat people like dirt. If You save me, I will change. I'll never curse again. I'll start giving to my church. I'll do volunteer work. I'll ..." Suddenly, he stopped and said, "I'll get back to You, Lord. I think I see a ship."

In a moment of distress, the author of Psalm 66 had cried out to God with some hefty promises:

¹³I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfill my vows to you -

¹⁴vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
when I was in trouble.

¹⁵I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams;
I will offer bulls and goats. *Selah* - Psalm 66:13-15

The crisis faded, but, unlike many who make such promises to God, only to forget them, we find the psalmist in the temple, making the whole "burnt offering" that expressed the wholeness of his devotion to God as well as additional sacrifices he had vowed to bring. Everything he has taught us about worship to this point becomes very hollow if he proves not to be good to his word.

In Part 1 of this message, we focused on the "gifts" we promise to bring to God. Whether these are gifts of means or gifts of service, they must be the best we have to offer. In Part 2, we will address the actual "words" of our promises, the vows themselves. Why do we make such promises? Are vows as binding now as they were in ancient Israel? Are they even useful to us today?

Vows were solemn promises made to God regarding things to be given, done or refrained from. Vows were always voluntary. Under the Law of Moses, a man was not considered any more pious if he was to make a vow, but, if a man did make a vow, for whatever reason, he must keep it.

The psalmist had now come to make good on "... vows my lips promised ... when I was in trouble" (verse 14). That word "promised" means "open" or "wide open." The man opened his lips and blurted out a promise as if the trauma of his crisis squeezed the words right out of him. We are not adequately informed to judge whether or not this was a wise vow or a rash vow. That was not an important legal consideration. The most important thing according to the Law was to deliver.

To God, words mean things; a lesson desperately needed these days. If there is to be any basis for fellowship between man and God, man must mean what he says, for God always means what He says and speaks only what is true. Our most vivid display of integrity is that we keep our promises to God and to others, for every promise we keep reflects the importance of our own words to us. How we live in relationship to our own words goes a long way in determining whether we dwell in the open air of truthfulness or in the dank darkness of secrecy. God places tremendous expectations on our spoken words.

I. The Pressures that Blow Open Our Mouths

A. Fear

Fear is a great inducement for people to word big promises to God. There's nothing like being scared stupid to make us rethink our loyalty to heaven. One noteworthy vow uttered from the bowels of fear was followed by this song of praise: "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). Those words were uttered from inside a fish by the prophet Jonah after he had disregarded God's direct order. Apparently, this references a vow that was voiced by the prophet while he was bobbing about in the open sea.

As Isaac's firstborn, Esau, was entitled to special rights of inheritance regarding the family fortune. Jacob, the younger brother, took advantage of Esau's impulsiveness and purchased that birthright for a bowl of stew. Later, Jacob deceived his old, blind father and stole a verbal blessing intended for Esau. Words meant things to Isaac. The blessing could not be withdrawn. Esau hated Jacob, and Jacob feared Esau. Isaac sent Jacob to stay with relatives for his safety. In a dream, God confirmed to Jacob that he would indeed be the blessed brother, the one through whom God would build His nation. But, Jacob had to process that promise through his terror of Esau, so he made this vow:

²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God ²²and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." - Genesis 28:20-22

God had already spoken, and His promise would not be broken, but fear still makes big promises.

B. Compounded Distresses

A man may not be in imminent danger, but he can easily be overwhelmed by trials, especially when they seem to multiply. In other words, sometimes, it's just that kind of day. My own twin sister forgot my birthday. I count on her to remember so that I'll remember hers. Perhaps, your car horn goes off on the drive to work and remains stuck as you follow a band of Hell's Angels on the freeway. You call Suicide Prevention, and they put you on hold.

After we live through an extended period of spiritual drought, we tend to make promises to God about doing better. We haven't prayed as we should. We haven't read our Bibles. We haven't been very active with the Lord's church. We have even gotten tangled up in sin. We have neglected God and we are simply weary of the spiritual barrenness of our lives, so we cry out to God in a simple pursuit to feel better. Again, there is nothing wrong with that. It is good that despair drives us to God. Still, we should carefully think about whatever promise we make, for our words will bind us.

C. Unexamined Emotions

Every vow is sacred. Think before you speak. A "vow" most often draws a preacher's mind to the marriage vows. Nobody has any real idea what they're doing when they get married. They just "love" each other. My task is to get couples, in advance, to understand covenant and vows in an age where words are not very sacred. Always open to new resources. I ran across this checklist:

Questions men should consider before proposing marriage to the woman:

- In the kitchen, has she ever referred to an oven as "that square thang"?
- Is she making monthly payments of more than \$300 to any plastic surgeon?
- If she works as a clerk at K-Mart or a cashier in an all-night diner, did she bet more than \$10,000 on the last Super Bowl?

Questions women should answer before accepting a marriage proposal:

- On your first date, did he pick you up early so you could help with his laundry?
- Is his idea of a classy restaurant one where every table has its own stack of ketchup packets?
- Has he ever bragged about seeing every episode of "Gilligan's Island" at least four times?

The biggest detriment to marriage today is that the emotion of a moment means more in our culture than keeping a promise. Sober thought should go into every promise. Romantic emotions are not the only emotions that issue in big promises, especially when we think of our relationship with God. How many spiritual resolutions are born of guilt, sentimentality, conviction or gratitude? It's not that such promises are not worthwhile. It's just that emotions swing back and forth. That is why the Scripture teaches that we should be slow to make vows, but quick to keep them. "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it ..." (Deuteronomy 23:21).

II. The Persona that Binds Us to Our Words

A. Integrity

In an episode of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, a little girl wraps her celery and carrots in a napkin, unaware that she is on tape. When asked if she ate them, she lies like a rug. Of course, she's such a cute little liar that her video won the \$10,000 prize. In the short-run a lie might be rewarded.

Words have consequences. In 2005, British shock-radio host Tim Shaw learned that lesson. While working his usual 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. shift, Shaw told the pin-up girl he was interviewing on air that he was willing to leave his wife and two kids for her. Minutes later, his wife, Hayley, created an eBay auction for her husband's car, a \$45,000 Lotus Espirit Turbo. The auction page was almost completely blank except for a picture of the car and the following words:

"I need to get rid of this car immediately - ideally in the next 2-3 hours before my cheating husband gets home to find it gone and all his belongings in the street. I am the registered owner and I have the registration. Please only buy if you can pick up tonight."

The car was listed with a "Buy-it-Now" price of 50 pence (\$.90), and the auction lasted exactly 5 minutes and 3 seconds before an anonymous buyer paid for it and drove away.

Jesus spoke forcefully about verbal integrity:

"... ³⁶But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." - Matthew 12:36, 37

B. Thoughtfulness

The ultimate biblical example of a thoughtless vow is that of a judge in Israel named Jephthah. He was facing a showdown with those despicable Ammonites when he swore to the LORD:

"... If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." - Judges 11:30, 31

After the victory, Jephthah was horrified when his daughter, who was his only child, rushed out to meet him. With the courageous child's encouragement, Jephthah fulfilled his vow.

The story troubles us, but if Jephthah had not made such a stupid vow, he would have spared himself great trauma. God didn't ask for the vow, but Jephthah lived in a day when words meant things. The young girl and the Law were in agreement. A community called to be holy needed to be reminded of the impact of vows uttered to a holy God. In our day, grace covers many stupid things that we say and do, so the last thing we want is to live under the weight of law. But, for all Jephthah knew, he might have to keep this vow if he was ever to expect God's help again. And, the story stands in Scripture, bitter as it is, as a reminder to us of the weight of words uttered in God's presence.

C. Accountability

Several times in the psalms, the worshipper speaks of fulfilling his vow in the presence of others:

²⁵From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows. – Psalm 22:25

^{14, 18}I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people. – Psalm 114:14, 18

We can commit something to God and be too private about it. Perhaps, the days are gone when people readily march down a church aisle to publicly unload their baggage. Still, accountability to someone is crucial if we really intend to act upon those life adjustments we need to make and yearn to make. We should act quickly and be accountable to someone when we make a promise to God, for delay and the pathological yearning for privacy will inevitably sandbag even the best intentions.

D. A Sense of the Holy

Jesus downplayed oaths because in reality, a religious promise is no more binding than any other promise. To the degree we really sense the presence of a holy God, we will speak the truth. In Jesus' day, the experts in the Law were the same folks most adept at tinkering with the Law to serve their own ends. The rabbis created formulas for swearing oaths when they really meant it and other formulas for swearing oaths when they were just kidding. They typically swore oaths using God's Name if they intended to keep their word. If they wanted to sound convincing but not be bound to their word, they would swear by other noble things. Cute and clever as that was, it carried no more weight in heaven than if they were to make a promise with their fingers crossed. Jesus said:

³³Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. – Matthew 5:33-37

In short, God is everywhere and He hears really well. His holiness surrounds us. We may as well keep the promises that come out of our mouths simple, because while we may fool people with grandiose and holy rhetoric, God compares all of our spoken words to the intentions of our hearts.

III. A Predicament when Considering Most Vows

A. There May Be Value in Some Vows

One man might make a vow with no strings attached, simply because he realizes that he should be living more closely to God than he has been. He asks for nothing in return. I could fathom how a vow might be used by a believer in a sincere attempt to determine God's will in some matter. It could be worded: "Lord, if you show me this, or do this, I will do such and such." It may not always be a matter of just trying to wrestle something out of God's hand. I can even fathom how a vow, for some, might be a mechanism for growing in faith. We all need to stretch ourselves, and perhaps, if God responds to our need in a certain way, it may very well be His signal to us that it is time to journey forward to the next plateau of faith and sacrifice.

I suspect that God deals with each of His children according to their needs and according to how they are wired. I am not qualified to discourage anyone from taking a vow. BUT ...

B. For the Most Common Vows, I Cannot Find a Place

This psalm addresses vows that come from mouths that are blown open in times of trouble.

I stand here week after week, trying to communicate what I have come to understand about this or that Bible text or theme, but in regard to the value of vows for us, I have hit a brick wall. From the depths of intense sorrow, worry and fear, I have explored the idea of making a vow. If God would just perform as I need Him to; Should I promise to do this? Should I vow to give that? Should I swear an oath to serve God in some additional capacity than I am serving Him now? Should I pledge to give up this or that questionable habit or amusement?

A point always comes when that whole barter approach crumbles, and I cannot make any vow pass my lips. I recall that the objective for being in Christ is to love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I recall that He calls me be his whole burnt offering, albeit "a living sacrifice." It strikes me that if there is some additional thing I could be doing or sacrificing that would serve His kingdom, why have I not already been exploring how to make that happen? Should I not be moving in that direction no matter how God behaves in my immediate crisis? Has He not already done enough to warrant my best whether or not there is any additional payoff to be gained?

Jesus did not encourage vows, and the Old Testament did not require them. Might that be in part because so many vows are indeed just foxhole promises that only risk bringing to the surface of our minds those things that we already suspect, in the recesses of our minds, we ought to be doing for a God Who has already done immeasurably more for us than we ever deserved?

I make no vow and I am guaranteed no prize. The wisest thing I can do is to begin, or, to resume living, giving and serving as I should. If God performs according to my prayer, it is because He loves me and has only good in store for all His children. If He prolongs my trial or resolves it in some way I don't prefer, it is because He loves me, has only good in store for all His children and is smarter than me. His ways are higher than my ways. Either way, vow or no vow, I gain – not because I have inspired God to act, but because I have learned to trust. And, vow or no vow, I still need to examine whether I am serving God as I should and make the proper adjustments.

Think before making a vow to God. Even in the thought process, you may find you are already bound to a life of greater sacrifice, whether God plays along or not. I don't know enough about vows to discourage them across the board, but I do know that every sacrifice that binds you to God has already been made. So, if you are holding back any part of your life, give it up now.