

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING AN OATH
Deuteronomy 23:21-23, Hebrews 6:13-18
By Raymond White

There is a big difference between saying you'll do something and promising on an oath to do it. Merely saying, "Okay, I'll go to the store and get some milk," offers no guarantees, only momentary intent and allows for any sort of distraction or inconvenience to derail that intent without loss of integrity. An intended trip to the store might have been waylaid and explained away by: "Sorry I couldn't make it to the store after all. My boss called me into a meeting." And that would be likely met with, "Don't worry about it, I'll go after dinner."

But on the other hand, if there is a really good reason why that milk is needed *now* — the baby is hungry and crying — the mother might meet the father's offer with a doubting, "Are you sure?" And the father might meet that gentle request for a further commitment with, "I promise. I'll go now and come right home." That promise ratchets up the commitment to a reassuring, "This *will* get done, no matter what. Depend on it."

But there are situations where even a personal promise is not enough. Something even more binding is warranted, where a person is not merely inconvenienced by a missed trip to the store, but might for instance be risking his life or someone else's to keep his word. Such situations might well call for an oath. For example, a new monarch might "swear to execute the duties of my office no matter what." Well and good. But what if that later means he has to execute his own son for treason, as Peter the Great of Russia had to do?

Taking an oath is serious business, because it affirms that not only will you do a thing but that you are staking your life, even your soul, on doing that thing. And worse, if you bring God into it — with words such as "I swear to God" which are often said by criminals in interrogation — then you are dragging God into your promise, essentially signing his name to your contract and thus making *him* the liar when you break your word. I imagine that God is not too pleased when his name is bantered about in such ways, securing other people's promises who have no intention of keeping them.

[1] THOMAS MOORE

In the play "Man For All Season" by Richard Bolt, Sir Thomas Moore sits in prison on trial for his life. His crime? Treason, because he will not swear an oath agreeing to King Henry's divorce of his wife Catharine so that he can marry Anne Boleyn. Thomas would rather die than take an oath to affirm what is not true.

In the play there are two dialogs that make the point. In the first, Thomas's wife Margaret visits him in prison and tries to persuade him to take the oath.

Thomas: You want me to swear to the act of succession?

Margaret: "God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth." Or so you've always told me.

Thomas: Yes.

Margaret: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

Thomas: What is an oath but the words we say to God?

Margaret: That's very neat.

Thomas: Do you mean it isn't true?

Margaret: No, it's true.

Thomas: Then it's a poor argument to call it "neat," Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he is holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then — he needn't hope to find himself again.

Anyone who believes that — that taking an oath is like holding your soul in your hands — would be terrified to ever take an oath. And Thomas was.

In the second dialog, Thomas finally did take an oath, not a lying oath, but a true oath, one for which he was willing to bet his soul. He was convicted on the perjured testimony of one man, Richard Rich. To rebut Richard's testimony Thomas takes an oath.

Thomas: In good faith, Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than my peril.

Norfolk: Do you deny this?

Thomas: Yes! My lords, if I were a man who heeded not the taking of an oath, you know well I need not to be here. Now I will take an oath! If what Master Rich has said is true, then I pray I may never see God in the face! Which I would not say were it otherwise for anything on earth.

Now *that* is an oath. The power of this oath is that it is impossible not to believe it. This man, Thomas Moore, who is terrified to take an oath, who would rather die than take a lying oath, and he proves it by putting his head on the chopping block, now he takes an oath offering up his soul as proof of its truth. You simply cannot not believe that oath.

But of course they convicted him anyway, because they were not interested in truth but only in getting a conviction.

To make one final point, why did Richard perjure himself?

Cromwell: Sir Richard, have you anything to add?

Richard: Nothing, Mr. Secretary.

Norfolk: Sir Thomas?

Thomas: To what purpose? I am a dead man. You have your desire of me...

Norfolk: Then the witness may withdraw.

Thomas: I have one question to ask the witness. That's a chain of office you are wearing. May I see it? The red dragon. What's this?

Cromwell: Sir Richard is appointed Attorney-General for Wales.

Thomas: For Wales? Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world... But for Wales!

"For Wales," indeed.

What would you trade your soul for? The world? For Wales? Maybe something less than Wales. Think on that the next time you are asked to take an oath. Are you willing to secure that promise with your soul?

Now to the Bible. What does the Bible have to say about taking oaths? Plenty. So, here we go.

[2] THE LAW

Deuteronomy 23:21 When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, 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. :22 But if thou shalt forebear to vow, it shall be so sin in thee. :23 That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth.

Here we have the basic law regarding oaths. Merely saying that you will do a thing allows for exceptions. But taking a vow to do a thing and attaching God's name to it is binding. You *must* do what you took a vow to do. Why? Because your vow assures people that they can arrange their affairs with total confidence that you will perform. In some situations, they might even trust their lives to your oath. That's why you made the vow, so that they *would* trust you. Therefore, you *must* perform, no matter what.

Here are some of the really important oaths in the bible.

[3] JOSHUA AND THE GIBEONITES

Joshua 9:15 Joshua made peace with them [Gibeon, Hittites] and made a league with them to let them live: and the princes of the congregation sware unto them.

Joshua was tricked into taking a rash oath. The Gibeonites saw Israel coming and knew they (the Gibeonites) were soon on Israel's hit list and that they stood no chance against Israel's war machine. So they came up with a plan. Their leaders came to Joshua wearing tattered clothes looking as though they were concluding a long journey. And they lied and said they had heard of Joshua's conquests in their far homeland, and had come to congratulate him on his successes, and also to make an alliance.

Joshua liked that and made an alliance with them with an oath. Then, when he later discovered that these people were not far as they had claimed, but were near, in fact so near that they were next on the hit-list,

Joshua has a problem. God had said, kill them. But Joshua had taken an oath not to. So which prevailed? The commandment or the oath? The oath did. The Gibeonites were not only not killed but were under Israel's protection. That's how important that oath was to Joshua.

You gotta' hand it to the Gibeonites. They found a way out. This is much like Christians, isn't it? God has marked the whole world for damnation but one group of people, Christians, have found an escape, the only escape: Jesus Christ, whose atonement binds God's judgment by an oath.

[4] SAUL AND THE GIBEONITES

2 Samuel 21:1 Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David enquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.

That oath that Joshua was tricked into making with the Gibeonites was binding not only on Joshua but also on God. God was so determined to honor Joshua's oath that when Saul broke it, God killed Saul's remaining descendents in retribution.

[5] JEPHTHEH AND HIS DAUGHTER

Joshua 11:30 And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands :31 Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

This rash vow will cost Jephthah everything.

Joshua 11:34 And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. :35 And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! Thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back.

The question is — and everyone who has read this story has asked it — did Jephthah really sacrifice his daughter? Here's what it says.

Joshua 11:39 And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed...

The text does not say he killed his daughter, it says he fulfilled his vow. So, did he kill her or not? There are a few things to note here.

First: What Jewish priest would ever agree to a human sacrifice when that's the very issue that separated Israel from its neighbors and God's very complaint against Israel that resulted in the Diaspora (*Jeremiah 7:31* *And they ... burn their sons and their daughters... which I commanded them not*), and the point of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac which God prevented by accepting a substitute ram. If Israel sacrificed every child that was "the LORD's" that would be every firstborn as God slew the firstborn in Egypt.

Second: The word "and" which precedes "I will offer it up for a burnt offering" can just as accurately be translated "or" thus allowing Jephthah the choice. In that reading, he doesn't have to kill his daughter to keep his vow.

Third: The Torah anticipates illegal sacrifices — (e.g. the taking of a human life for a sacrifice to God) — and provides for a legal escape from an illegal vow.

Leviticus 27:2 ... When a man shall make a singular vow, the persons shall be for the LORD by thy estimation. :3 And thy estimation shall be of the male from twenty years old even unto sixty years old, even thy estimation shall be fifty shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary. :4 And if it be a female, then thy

estimation shall be thirty shekels. :5 And if it be from five years old unto twenty years old ...[etc.]... :8 But if he be poorer than thy estimation, then he shall present himself before the priest, and the priest shall value him; according to his ability that vowed shall the priest value him.

So the Bible places a monetary value on a human life.

This is also true in American law as. For instance, in a wrongful death lawsuit, what is the dollar equivalent of a human life? In practice, it depends on the generosity (or stupidity) of juries who routinely award absurd amounts.

But more to the point, a contract must have a legal purpose to be a contract. So that a contract to murder someone is not a legal contract at all and cannot be brought to court either for specific performance or for punitive damages due to breach.

This Leviticus verse allows Jephthah his legal escape — he doesn't have to sacrifice his daughter, he can buy her out. That he did so is virtually certain by the words "he did with her according to his vow" meaning he fulfilled his contract with God by whatever legal means required. Had he sacrificed her, the Bible would have said so.

In any case, the chilling nature of this verse, confirms to us that to take an oath is risky business. To take an oath amounts to signing God's name to your promise. More than "I will perform it," an oath says, "God witnesses that I will perform it." And if you don't perform, you make God a liar. That is why Jephthah said, "I cannot go back."

[6] SAUL AND JONATHAN

1 Samuel 14:26 And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped; but no man put his hand to his mouth: for the people feared the oath. :43 Then Saul said to Jonathan, Tell me what thou hast done. And Jonathan told him, and said, I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and, lo, I must die. :44 And Saul answered, God do so and more also: for thou shalt surely die, Jonathan. :45 And the people said unto Saul, Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? God forbid...So the people rescued Jonathan, that he died not.

Saul's oath nearly cost Jonathan his life, and would have except the people demanded absolutely not. Jonathan was a hero, and should he die for such a trivial thing as eating honey not knowing about his father's rash oath?

But now the question is, did Saul then break his oath but not killing Jonathan? Maybe he did. But Saul had broken other oaths (*2 Samuel 21:1*) so he was not big on oath keeping. Or maybe he used Jephthah's legal escape.

Should Saul have kept his oath and killed Jonathan on a triviality? The lesson is he shouldn't have made the oath!

[7] SOLOMON AND BATHSHEBA

2 Samuel 2:20 Then [Bathsheba] said, I desire one small petition of thee [Solomon, her son the king]; I pray thee, say me not nay. And the king said unto her, Ask on, my mother: for I will not say thee nay.

By contrast, this hasty affirmation that Solomon will do whatever his mother asks, is not an oath but common courtesy, “Of course, mom, I’ll do what you ask.” As it happens, however, what she asked of him was extremely dangerous for the kingdom (though she naively didn’t know that) and of course he will not do it. Had he taken an oath, he would have been bound by it. But since he took no oath, he is free to use common sense. This is why Jesus says don’t take oaths, just say yea or nay.

[8] SHIMEI

2 Samuel 2:43 Why then hast thou [Shimei] not kept the oath of the LORD, and the commandment that I [Solomon] have charged thee with?:**45** And king Solomon shall be blessed, and the throne of David shall be established before the LORD for ever **:46** So the king commanded Benaiah the son of Jehoiada; which went out, and fell upon him [Shimei] that he died. And the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon.

Shimei took an oath to Solomon to remain for the rest of his life at home in a self imposed prison. He broke that oath by traveling to Gath to retrieve two runaway servants. He may have considered that he had good reason to break his oath, but one never has a good enough reason to break an oath. Now that the oath is broken, what is the king to do with him? Solomon has no choice — he must execute him. Because if he will not, than Solomon’s law will mean nothing because an oath means nothing. That’s why Solomon specifically says, *the throne of David shall be established*. Solomon understands you can’t just break an oath to the king and get away with it. If so, than what law would ever hold up? And so Shimei died. Oath breaking was a capital crime.

[9] ELIJAH

1 Kings 18:15 And Elijah said, As the LORD of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him to day.

Elijah tells Obadiah to tell Ahab to come meet Elijah. Obadiah is afraid that Elijah will disappear, again, and Ahab will kill Obadiah. So Elijah takes this oath to assuage Obadiah’s fear — he basically swears, “I’m not going anywhere, tell the king I’m here. You know I will be because I’ve sworn it.”

[10] ZEDEKIAH

Ezekiel 17:16 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely in the place where the king dwelleth that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he brake, even with him in the midst of Babylon he shall die. **:18** Seeing he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, when, lo, he had given his hand, and hath done all these things, he shall not escape.

Zedekiah broke his oath with the king of Babylon and paid a high price for it. Death would have been easy compared to what he suffered. He was forced to watch his sons killed, then his eyes were burned out so that the last thing he saw was the death of his family.

[11] OATHS IN GENERAL

2 Chronicles 6:22 If a man sin against his neighbour, and an oath be laid upon him to make him swear, and the oath come before thine altar in this house; *:23* Then hear thou from heaven, and do, and judge thy servants...

This is why we take an oath in court, because to lie under oath draws not just the wrath of the court but also the wrath of God.

Psalms 15:4 He that sweareth to his own hurt.

In other words, you keep your word even when (especially when) it harms you to do so. That's the point of an oath.

Ecclesiastes 5:4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou hast vowed. *:5* Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

Breaking your word is bad, but breaking your vow is worse because, in a sense, you are breaking God's word because you basically signed God's name to your promise.

Ecclesiastes 9:2 All things come alike to ... he that sweareth, and he that feareth an oath.

This is a stark contrast between those who take oaths easily and those who are afraid to take an oath, as was Thomas Moore: "If I were a man who heeded not the taking of an oath, you know well I need not to be here."

Zechariah 5:3 ...the curse...*:4* ...shall enter into the house...of him that swareth falsely by my name...

This points us to the 3rd commandment, *Exodus 20:7* Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain. We typically take this commandment to mean don't use any reference to God in an expletive. And that's not wrong. But the real point is, don't use God to make a false oath. That will bring a curse on you.

Zechariah 8:17 ...love no false oath.

[12] JESUS ON OATH TAKING

Jesus gives of the best advice of all.

Matthew 5:34 ... Swear not at all ... **:37** But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

You're better off to just not take an oath at all, ever. Just say that you will or will not do a thing and let it go at that. If you have a reputation as an honest person who keeps his word then your simple word, yes and no, is generally good enough. It's only people who habitually don't keep their word that find themselves having to make promises and take oaths to persuade people that *this* time they really mean it. If people often require you to promise, you should be asking yourself, why. Probably because you're unreliable and people have come to expect that when you say you'll do a thing, you don't mean it.

[13] PETER

It appears that Peter took an oath, and broke it.

Matthew 26:74 Then began he to curse and to sware, saying, I know not the man. And immediately, the cock crew.

Peter denied Jesus three times. And the third time, since people were not believing his first two denials, he took an oath. What's really hurtful about this is that Jesus had just chided the Scribes and Pharisees about the recklessness of oath taking (**Matthew 23:16-22**). And now Peter was caught by a lie reinforced by an oath.

But Jesus, ever the forgiver, forgave Peter of even that, and from then on, Peter never doubted, never waived, and when the time came, Peter went to his cross for Jesus and requested that he be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy for his head to be equal to his Lord's. That's devotion. And it says a lot about how far Jesus' love can actually reach, even to the forgiving of a broken oath.

[14] GOD'S OATHS

But the most important oaths in the universe are those that God has taken, for it is on those promises that we bet our eternity.

Isaiah 45:23 I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

Jeremiah 22:5 ...I swear by myself, saith the LORD...

Jeremiah 44:26 ...Behold, I have sworn by my great name...

Jeremiah 51:14 The LORD of hosts hath sworn by himself...

Ezekiel 16:59 For thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even deal with thee as thou hast done, which hast despised the oath in breaking the covenant. **:60** Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee and everlasting covenant.

Hebrews 6:13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, :14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. :17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: :18 That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.

The reason we believe in and trust the salvation that God offers us is not merely because God offered it, and not merely because he promised it, but because he promised it with an oath so that he *cannot* break his promise. That is critically important, especially considering the number of times that God has changed his mind,

[15] CONCLUSION

We can't hide from oath taking. Just showing up for jury duty often subjects us to taking some kind of an oath. What scares the willies out of me is that oath (which is fortunately not so common anymore) to "obey the rules of the court, no matter what!" It's the "no matter what" that scares me. What about law? What about facts of the case that the judge may order you to ignore? I am fearful that the "rules of the court" might require me to acquit a man I know is guilty or convict a man I know is innocent. That or break my oath. Now, I've never been cornered like that, and I don't know what I would do in that situation. But at the very least, I listen real carefully to what the court is asking of me while I have my hand raised.