

S T U D Y G U I D E



Oaths and Vows

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Introduction

The living God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is a covenant-keeping God. Man, on the other hand, is a covenant-breaker who demonstrates this aspect of his fallen nature on a regular basis. Human beings break promises and lie to themselves, to their spouses, to their children, to their churches, to their friends, and amazingly enough, even to God. Our modern culture contributes to the problem by minimizing or even denying the sanctity of truth. Lies surround us, and lies continually come forth from us.

Throughout the biblical history of redemption, men have sought to overcome the propensity for falsehood found within fallen human nature by taking vows before God as a compelling incentive for them to tell the truth. Sometimes in the history of man, the taking of these vows has been abused by those who have taken frivolous or superstitious vows, by those who have vowed to do evil deeds, and by those who have knowingly made vows they cannot possibly keep. In order to honor God as well as the sanctity of truth, Christians must be able to distinguish between lawful and unlawful vows. They must also understand when they may take a vow as well as why they are obliged to fulfill that vow.

May this series enable you to understand the sanctity of truth and the importance of keeping the promises that you make before God.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "R.C. Sproul". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "R.C." written in a more compact, stylized manner than the last name "Sproul".

R.C. Sproul

Yes or No?

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

During the sixteenth-century Reformation, the issue of oaths and vows was a matter of great controversy because many elements of the medieval Roman Catholic church centered on sacred vows. There were vows to the priesthood, vows of celibacy, vows of poverty, and many others. Some Protestants reacted to this by saying that all vows should be completely prohibited, while others attempted to discern the difference between lawful and unlawful vows. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul examines the scriptural foundation for the Reformed understanding of oaths and vows.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain the sixteenth-century origins of the controversy over vows
2. To be able to explain what Jesus meant when He spoke about vows in the Sermon on the Mount

QUOTATIONS

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment.

— James 5:12

So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.

— Acts 18:18

Though I dare not prescribe anything about number or time, anyone who obeys my advice will undertake only sober and temporary vows. If from time to time you go to excess in making vows, the whole religious character of it will be cheapened by the very repetition, and will tend to lapse into superstition. If you bind yourself with a perpetual

vow, either you will fulfill it with great trouble and tedium, or else, wearied by its long duration, you will one day venture to break it.

— John Calvin

LECTURE OUTLINE

A. Introduction

1. The Westminster Confession of Faith includes a chapter that some may consider strange—a chapter titled “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows.”
2. From the perspective of the twentieth century, we may wonder why theologians would devote space in a creedal statement to articulate principles with respect to lawful oaths and vows.
3. During the Protestant Reformation, the issue of oaths and vows became a matter of great controversy because so much of what happened in the medieval church centered on sacred vows.
4. One group of Protestants in the Reformation, the Anabaptists, repudiated the taking of vows altogether.
5. Within the Reformed church, an effort was made to steer a course between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and the Anabaptists by articulating a doctrine of lawful oaths and vows.

B. Jesus and James on Oaths

1. In the Old Testament book of Micah, we find this question in 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you?” and the answer is, “To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”
2. What would Jesus say if we could ask Him, “LORD, what is the most important thing You want from me?”
3. We don’t know exactly what He would say, but we do know what His brother James said.
4. In James 5:12, he says, “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ lest you fall into judgment.”
5. James’ words seem like an absolute prohibition against any oath-taking or swearing of vows.
6. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says in Matthew 5:33–37: “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the LORD.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”

7. When we read passages such as the ones in Matthew and James, we can better understand the conclusion to which the Anabaptists came.

C. Scripture Interprets Scripture

1. The cardinal rule of biblical interpretation in church history is the so-called analogy of faith—the interpretation of Scripture by Scripture.
2. The broader context of Scripture would suggest that in some situations it is perfectly legitimate to swear oaths and that Jesus is warning against the rabbinic interpretations of the Old Testament law—the *halakah*, or oral tradition of the Jews.
3. We know, for example, that Jesus submitted to oaths.
4. The very foundation of our salvation is based on the promises of God confirmed in covenants with man.
5. We also know that God called upon believers to swear their fidelity to Him by vowing obedience to these covenants.
6. In the New Testament, we know that the Apostle Paul took vows.
7. Our interpretation of Jesus' words must take all of this into account.

D. The Meaning of Jesus' Words

1. Jesus' statement sounds as if it is set over against the law of God.
2. We know that it is not because that would be sin.
3. However, Jesus frequently disputes the traditional interpretation of the law.
4. In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not correcting the law; He's correcting the oral tradition.
5. He is absolutely prohibiting swearing by things that are not appropriate to swear by.
6. The central concern about the swearing of vows has to do with the relationship between sacred oaths and the sin of idolatry.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Which group of Protestants at the time of the Reformation repudiated the taking of vows altogether?
 - a. The Anglicans
 - b. The Anabaptists
 - c. The Lutherans
 - d. The Reformed
2. Which group tried at the time of the Reformation to steer a middle course between two extremes by articulating a doctrine of lawful oaths and vows?
 - a. The Anabaptists
 - b. The Roman Catholics
 - c. The Reformed
 - d. All of the above

3. In the Old Testament book of _____, we find this question: “What does the LORD require of you?” and the answer is, “To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”
 - a. Exodus
 - b. Micah
 - c. Song of Solomon
 - d. Ezra

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read each of the following Old Testament passages. How does each contribute to an understanding of oaths and vows as they were understood under the old covenant?
 - a. Exodus 20:7
 - b. Leviticus 19:12
 - c. Deuteronomy 10:20
2. What do Matthew 5:33–37 and James 5:12 teach us about the taking of oaths and swearing?
3. How do each of the following passages shed light on our interpretation of Matthew 5 and James 5?
 - a. Acts 18:18
 - b. 2 Corinthians 1:23

DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONS

1. Why did the issue of oaths and vows become a matter of controversy during the sixteenth century?
2. How is it possible for the taking of oaths to devolve into a superstitious practice?
3. Should Christians take oaths and make vows? Defend your answer.
4. What are some of the dangers involved in taking oaths and making vows?

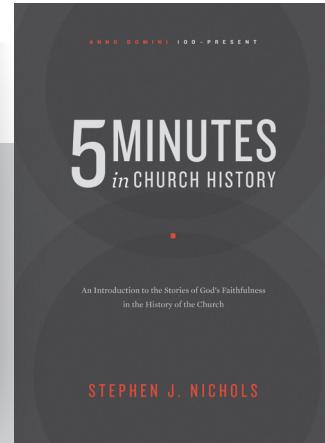
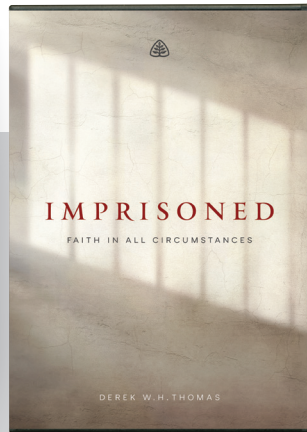
APPLICATION

1. Meditate on what Scripture says about oaths and vows, seeking to conform your mind to the Word of God.
2. Have you broken vows you have made to God? If so, have you repented? If not, do so now.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV:13

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