"Faithfulness & Vows"
Deuteronomy 23:21-23
October 18, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning, we continue our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs God's people as to how they are to live in the land.

And today, Moses turns our attention to the topic of vows.

Now, this is a topic that can seem removed from our day-to-day lives. But it's actually not. Most of us here have taken vows to God of one kind or another. But in addition to this, Jesus reminds us that commandments like these have implications for how faithful we are to our commitments in all settings of life.

And so, with that in mind, let's turn to our text: Deuteronomy 23:21-23.

And please listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

23:21 "If you make a vow to Yahweh your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for Yahweh your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. 22 But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. 23 You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to Yahweh your God what you have promised with your mouth.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray …

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.
And we, as your people, have committed ourselves
to keep your righteous commandments.
As you have accepted our praises this morning,
so now teach us the way you would have us to go.
Incline our hearts to perform your statutes
forever, to the end.
This we ask in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:105-108, 111-112]

Introduction

In our text this morning, Moses is talking about how we approach the commitments we make.

Specifically, he's addressing formal vows that we make to God. But as we'll see, Jesus shows us that laws like this are meant to have implications beyond that one category, to all of our speech, and all of our commitments. And as it does, I think laws like this also point us to the character of God himself.

What I think we see here is that: We should approach vows to the Lord with seriousness, faithfulness, and humility, remembering how the Lord is true to his word with us, and letting that shape how we relate to and represent the Lord.

Let me say that again: We should approach vows to the Lord with seriousness, faithfulness, and humility, remembering how the Lord is true to his word with us, and letting that shape how we relate to and represent the Lord.

Let's break that down together.

Approaching Vows to the Lord with Seriousness

First, we should approach vows to the Lord with seriousness.

And here, we need to consider what a vow actually is.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, a vow or an oath "is the public calling for God to be witness for a statement I make about something past, present, or future. God, the all-knowing One, shall avenge untruthfulness." [Bonhoeffer, 129] In view in our text this morning are specifically oaths made to God about future actions.

This kind of vow would be defined by the Westminster Standards as a lawful oath were someone calls on God to witness the promise he makes, and to judge him accordingly. [WCF XXII.1]

The Heidelberg Catechism defines such oaths as when we call upon God to witness to our statement, and to punish us if we speak falsely. [HC Q#102]

Such a vow is a promise we make, where we call on God to judge us if we fail to keep our commitment.

Such vows can be made publicly, as part of a religious ritual like church membership, baptism, or ordination. They can also be made before the state, as we take oaths before God to enter civic office, or to serve in the military.

But also, vows can be made to God personally as well, as we call on God, and make a commitment before him – particularly a commitment that goes beyond what God's Word requires of us.

And while our text this morning has something to say about all of these types of oaths and vows in which we call on God to witness our commitment, and judge our faithfulness to it, the main

focus in our text seems to be on those personal vows in which people promise before God to do something for him beyond what he's required of them.

These kind of vows, we should note, were optional, as Moses points out in verse 23.

But if you chose to make such a vow, that vow must be kept, and God will hold you accountable if you make such a vow and then fail to keep it [Block, 548; also Wright, 252-253] "Failure to fulfill the vow, or indefinite procrastination, would amount to a sin." [Craigie, 303]

But humbly refraining from such a vow is not sinful. [Brown, 224; Alter, 995]

In this way, the message of this text is very simple: You don't have to make a vow to God to do anything above and beyond what his Word commands. It's okay if you don't make such a vow. But once you do, you'd better keep your vow to God.

That's what this text is about.

Now, let's note a few things about that.

One is that in such vows, there is a real intention, and a deliberate calling on God.

And so, a word might be helpful to those with a more sensitive conscience. Some of you can struggle with anxiety or fear that because you've thought a passing thought, maybe it was actually a vow to God, when you didn't mean it to be a vow to God. It was maybe a thought, or a possibility, or a reflection – but you hadn't intended it to be a vow. But your conscience is sensitive, and you worry. I would urge you not to mistake a passing thought for a vow. As Moses reminds us in verse 23, a vow is something made voluntarily. You cannot accidentally make a vow to the Lord.

But others of you, you have made promises to God … which you intended to be a promise at the time – even if it was made rashly. You spoke words to God and intended to bind yourself with them. And you cannot try to wiggle out of that commitment. Maybe you made the vow foolishly. But you know you made it as a vow. And so, you are bound to it, unless it meets one of the Bible's exceptions for when a vow can be broken.

Which leads us to the next question people often have: When can a vow that we have made to God or before God be broken?

Well, Herman Bavinck outlines three situations in which we are permitted to break a vow.

One situation is when keeping your vow would require you to break one of God's laws and so to sin against God.

Rather than being expected to keep that vow, if we've vowed to do something sinful, we're called on to break that vow – just as David did when Abigail confronted him and told him his vow to kill all the men of the household of Nabal was sinful and wrong. [1 Samuel 25:22-35; Bavinck, 185; WLC #113; Frame, 500-501]

Second, we can be permitted to break a vow when the other party "to a mutual oath breaks it." Then the innocent party to the vow is free from their vow, if they choose to be. [Bavinck, 185] One example is when a husband or wife breaks their marriage vows, through adultery,

unresolvable abandonment, or oppressive abuse, then the innocent spouse has the option of being free from their marriage vows as a result.

Third, Bavinck notes that "we may break a vow when external circumstances beyond our control make it impossible to keep it." [Bavinck, 185]

John Frame adds that there are also situations where a vow can be voided by a higher authority. We see this in Numbers 30[:3-16], in some specific situations, and Frame suggests that this may apply to other comparable situations as well. [Frame, 502]

So we have this list of four categories where a vow could be broken. But it's really important that we note what's not on that list. We cannot break a vow just because keeping our promise would disadvantage us more than we thought it would. We can't break our vow just because we've changed our mind. We can't break our vow because we no longer like the person we've vowed to do something for. In such situations, we are still called on to keep our vows.

All of which is to say, we are to approach vows we make to the Lord with seriousness: taking our commitments seriously.

Approaching Vows to the Lord with Faithfulness

Second, we should approach vows to the Lord with faithfulness.

That's what Moses stresses in verses 21 and 23: when we make a vow to God, when we make a promise in God's name, we must be faithful in doing what we said we'd do.

To break such vows, or to unnecessarily delay our fulfilling them, is to sin, as verse 21 stresses.

Instead, we are called to be faithful to God – and that means keeping the promises we make to him.

To do otherwise will damage our relationship to the Lord – just as it would with any other relationship.

And no relationship in our lives is more important than our relationship to our God and Maker.

And so Moses calls on us here to approach our vows to the Lord with faithfulness.

Approaching Vows to the Lord with Humility

Third, we should approach vows to the Lord with humility.

And this comes up in verse 22. There Moses reminds us that if we refrain from taking voluntary vows, we will not be guilty of sin. And so before taking a vow to God, we should stop and humbly reflect on it.

As I said before, the vows in view in this text are ordinarily things that go above and beyond what God requires of us in his laws – extra things we commit ourselves to do for God. They are voluntary, as verse 23 notes.

And we should be humble before vowing to do what God has not required of us. There is a time and a place for such vows. But we should always approach such things with humility. As the Apostle Paul notes, it's when we are especially confident that we need to beware, lest we fall. [1 Corinthians 10:12]

For that reason, Solomon tells us "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay." and he urges us not to let our mouths lead us into sin. [Ecclesiastes 5:5-6]

It can be hard enough to do what God has called us to do. Before we add to our commitments before the Lord – before we take a vow to do something extra, we should soberly reflect on our hearts, and our ability to fulfill what we're thinking of vowing – to do what we're thinking of promising to God, remembering that it's better that we should not vow than that we should vow and not fulfill what we've promised.

We must approach vows to the Lord with seriousness, faithfulness, and humility.

That's what we see here.

Remembering How the Lord is True to His Word with Us

But why should we approach our vows to the Lord with such seriousness, faithfulness, and humility?

And this is a question worth asking. Because I think often our default is to think that we need to approach vows and commitments we make to God in this serious way, because God is a stickler. We picture God like an overly exacting lawyer or accountant, going over the fine print of the commitments we make and then determined to exact punishment for every way we've deviated from our commitment. But that's not how God is with his people.

He is just and holy. And he calls us to be just and holy – that's true.

But the primary reason God calls us to such faithfulness in our vows to him is not rooted in legal minutia. Instead, it's rooted in the love of a relationship.

God, out of love for us, has been faithful in all his vows, and all his promises, and all his commitments to us. [Brown, 224] And then what he asks of us – what he rightly expects in return – is that we be faithful to him as well.

God has been faithful, and true, and serious about every promise he's ever made to us. And so, we should do the same when we make promises or commitments to him.

Throughout the Bible, God is a God who makes promises – who makes commitments – to his people. And then every time he keeps his promises.

He promises Abraham to make a great nation of him. And then he does. He promises Moses to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt, and then he does. He promises to give his people a land, and then he does. He promises to be with them, and then he is. He promises Adam and Eve that he will send a Savior to crush the head of the serpent and rescue them from sin and death, and then he does when he sends his Son Jesus Christ. He promises that if we place our trust in him – if we call on Jesus in faith – then he will forgive our sins, and make us new, and unite us with his people, and make us his own forever … and he does.

Over and over again, no matter how astounding the promises of God are, he always keeps his word to us, he always fulfills his promises to us – he is always faithful.

And it's in his faithfulness that all our hope lies. His faithfulness is our only unshakable comfort when we are suffering, it is our deepest encouragement when we struggle with doubt, it is the foundation of our eternal hope, and it calls for us to be faithful ourselves to our promises that we have made to him.

We should approach vows to the Lord with seriousness, faithfulness, and humility, because we remember how the Lord has been true to his word with us.

That's what we see in the Scriptures.

And remembering that should affect both how we relate to the Lord, and how we seek to represent him as his people.

How We Relate to the Lord

First, the Lord's faithfulness to us should shape how we relate to the Lord.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience … but it's always a sad and hurtful thing to realize that someone else is more important to you, than you are to them. When you realize that you are striving to be faithful to them, to be there for them, to care for them … but they are not nearly as concerned about being faithful and attentive and caring towards you. It's painful to realize that.

And yet … that is what we so often do to God. He is always faithful to his promises to us – even when it means giving of himself, even when it means sacrifice, even when it means his own death on a cross – he is always faithful to the promises he makes to us … and yet we can be so careless in the commitments we make to him. We forget our baptismal or our membership vows. We shrug off our marriage or ordination vows. We downplay and dismiss promises we've made to God on our own.

God has never shrugged off his promises to us. And recognizing that should make us want to be more faithful to our promises to him.

Seeing how faithful God has been to us should shape how we relate to the Lord.

How We Represent the Lord

But also, in addition to that, the Lord's faithfulness to us should shape how we represent the Lord as his people.

There's something about seeing a Christian we look up to break their vows to the Lord that is especially discouraging demoralizing.

I don't mean when their marriage falls apart … but rather, when we see them overtly breaking their marriage vows. Not just when their ministry comes to an end, but when they clearly break their ordination vows. Not just when they fall short of their ideals, but when they make a voluntary vow to the Lord, and they tell us, and then we see them fail to even try to do what they promised to God. When Christians we look up to overtly fail to fulfill their vows, it can be incredibly discouraging to us.

When we experience such disappointment, we can take comfort that God is faithful even when his people are not.

But at the same time, if we've experienced such discouragement ourselves, then we should know all the more how important it is that we not cause such discouragement for others.

Most of you have taken vows in your life – whether membership vows in the church, marriage vows, ordination vows, vows in the civil sphere, or voluntary vows before God. And there are people who look up to you in the world – who look to you to show them what God's character is like.

That is a heavy responsibility. And it means a few things.

First, it means that you should approach vows with humility. Don't make a vow foolishly or rashly. Have the humility to consider your weaknesses and shortcomings before you make a vow.

Second, it means that when you make a formal vow, you should strive to be faithful and to keep that vow, both out of faithfulness to God, and in order to reflect his character to others, who look to you as an example among God's people.

And third, it means that when you fail to keep a vow, don't ignore it, or deny it, or try to cover it over … but own our failure, and seek grace. Go to God, seeking his forgiveness, and go to people, humbly asking for their forgiveness as well.

In all these ways, this passage applies to vows themselves – in how we both relate to and represent the Lord in them.

But the implications of a text like this also extend beyond the category of formal vows, to all kinds of other words we speak.

And we know this because that's what Jesus tells us.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, urged his disciples not to think that their words and commitments mattered only when they take certain kinds of vows, and that with other, weaker vows, or no vows at all, they were just free to deceive or to shrug off their promises. He told them

instead: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." [See Matthew 5:33-37][1]

Jesus's point is that God's people should always be faithful to their word – we should be people who keep our commitments to God and to our neighbor, without needing a vow to enforce that. Because we serve and we represent a God who always keeps his word to us. And so, we should be a people who do what we say we'll do, and who refrain from making empty commitments or claims about the future.

And that should play out in our relationships of course. But it should also play out in how we speak about the future. Specifically, it should lead us to resist arrogant self-righteous boasting about the future.

This is less about holding ourselves to our boasts about the future, and more about not making such boasts in the first place. After all, these aren't usually vows or promises we make in God's name or to anyone in particular, and in that sense we're not really obligated to fulfill these boasts. But we shouldn't speak such foolish words. Because, among other things, they make us untrustworthy.

Jeff Meyers refers to this category of speech as "look-at-how-pious-I-am radical resolutions." [Meyers, 114]

And Meyers explains it like this – he says:

"While there are many examples of this, I have been dismayed by this kind of talk particularly among young parents who are eager to set themselves apart as more holy than those parents who have older children. The verbal offering of look-at-how-pious-I-am radical resolutions comes too easily to their lips. Beware of the words *never* and *always*:

'I'll never send my children to day care.'
'I'll never put my children in a public school.'
'Well, I will never allow my teenagers to do such and such.'
'I'll always homeschool my children.'

"These are easy words to utter when your children are very small. Despite being easy [to say]," Meyers continues, "the ones who make [such statements] often act as if making them is some great deed on their part. These are pompous, holier-than-thou, look-at-how-radically-committed-I-am words.

"Wise men and women, Christians who guard their steps, don't make foolish promises like that. These are words that you may one day have to eat. Such words are evidence of foolish dreaming, not sober self-evaluation." Meyers concludes. [Meyers, 114]

And, of course, it's not only about parenting that we can be tempted to make such empty boasts. We can make similar statements about our work, or our retirement years, or our marriage, or our devotional life, or our money, or something else – any time we look at other Christians who are farther along in life than we are, and we effectively say "They all do it that way. But I'm so much holier than them, that I know I'm going to do this better way" – whenever we speak like that, we're

[1] Contrary to how some have taken his words, Jesus wasn't disagreeing with Deuteronomy in Matthew 5:33-37, and he wasn't saying that there's no place at all for vows. What Jesus was critiquing in his day was an over-reliance on vows, and a division of speech among some of God's people, where a certain type of vow would ensure someone's truthfulness or faithfulness to their commitment, while the absence of a vow, or the use of a less serious vow, left one free to be untruthful or to break your word.

making empty boasts about the future. Instead of humbly weighing our words about the future, as our text exhorts us to do, we are sinning with the empty resolutions that pass through our lips.

And it's easy to do. As Meyers notes: "It is always easier […] to boast about tomorrow than it is to show humility in the present." [Meyers, 115]

We should avoid self-righteous radical resolutions, even when they don't take the form of a formal vow.

That's one way this law applies beyond the realm of technical vows.

But another way it applies, as Jesus points out, is with how we approach our commitments to others in general. [Brown, 225] Jesus says we must let our yes be yes and our no be no. Or, as Moses puts it in verse 23: "You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips."

As followers of Jesus, the Lord who always keeps his promises … as children of Yahweh, the God who always keeps his word – we should strive to be people who keep their commitments to others, even when no vow at all is involved.

That means first, that we should be careful about what commitments we make. Some of us, in a desire to please everyone, in a smiling and friendly kind of pride that refuses to admit we are limited creatures – some of us fail in this by overcommitting ourselves … by agreeing to do all sorts of things, even when it's not wise, or maybe when it's not even possible. In an attempt to please everyone, we end up breaking our word, and we misrepresent our God. If that's you, then your calling may be to accept that God has made you finite, and so to exercise humility in what you commit to, and agree to do.

But with that, it means that when we do commit to do something, we follow through on it even when it's difficult – even when it will cost us something, even when it will cost us more than we expected. Because our God has kept his word to us even when it cost him greatly. And so, as his people, as his hands and feet out in the world, we should desire to keep our word to others, even when it's costly.

From time to time, we each need to honestly ask ourselves: Are we someone who keeps their commitments? Do people trust our word to them about what we'll do? Or do they view our commitments with a bit of doubt … because we tend to let them down? It can be a convicting question – I know it is for me.

Can your co-workers trust your word when you say you'll do something? What about your fellow church members? Or your neighbors?

Or, even more importantly than that: What about your spouse? Or your children? Or your siblings? Or your parents? What about those closest to you? Do they trust you to do the things you say you'll do.

Now, none of us are perfect with this – I know I'm not. And these sins are forgivable, of course – Christ is merciful when we fall short.

But often we don't even think that much about these kinds of sins. We shrug off the commitments we made to our children, or our spouse, or some church ministry. But when we do that, we misrepresent our Heavenly Father.

We are called to be people who take their commitments seriously … because God takes his commitments to us so seriously.

For some of us that means following through better on what we commit to. For others it means being more humble about which commitments we make, and which we don't. For many of us it means a bit of both.

But this isn't just a negative lesson on what to avoid. It's also a positive lesson on a beautiful goal for us to pursue.

Because there is something incredibly beautiful about when people keep their commitments. When someone does what they said they would … even when it's hard … even when it's costly to them … even when they have to be deliberate and intentional about it … when someone does that for us or for others … it touches us. It's beautiful.

And Jesus invites us to be another source of that beauty in the world. He invites us to show that kind of beautiful faithfulness in the lives of others, when we commit ourselves to help them and serve them, and then we are faithful to do what we said we'd do, even when it costs us. That is what love looks like. That is what faithfulness looks like.

And so, as we receive God's grace and forgiveness for our past failures to live out that kind of beautiful faithfulness, God invites us, once again, to live out that beautiful pattern of faithfulness as we go forward – pointing others to his character, as we seek to reflect his beautiful faithfulness in how we live our own lives.

Conclusion

Our God has taken his commitments to us so seriously. He has given us his word. And he has always been faithful to his promises.

And so, brothers and sisters, as we rest in his promises and his faithfulness, let us seek to walk in our Lord's footprints. So that, as others see our love and faithfulness, it would point them in some small way, to his love and faithfulness.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary.* New York, NY: Norton, 2004.

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Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy.* NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.