

IS YOUR WORD A BOND OR A BIND?

Today's Text: Matt. 14: 1-12

Extracts:

But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison [Matt. 14: 6-10]

On 18 August 1988, the then Vice-President of the United States, George H.W. Bush, accepted his nomination as the presidential candidate of the Republican Party.¹ In his acceptance speech, he said emphatically, "Read my lips: no new taxes." That pledge not to raise the taxes of American taxpayers if he was elected president formed a major plank in his 1988 election platform. He won that election and became the 41st President of the United States. However, once he became president, Bush raised taxes so as to be able to reduce the national budget deficit. In the 1992 presidential election, he failed to win a second term, in spite of the fact that he was a war hero, having led the US and coalition forces to victory during the Persian Gulf War, 1991. Analysts were of the view that breaking his pledge on taxes hurt him. His word, they claimed, was not his bond.

Some of us have found themselves facing a similar dilemma. They have agreed to do something when they needed help or cooperation from others. However, now that it is time to deliver on their word, they have found themselves under pressure to renege. If they want to make their word their bond, circumstances may make that choice risky or self-defeating. If they renege, they may be considered unreliable. Either way, they now find themselves in a bind.

Is it ever appropriate to break your word? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Based on "Read my lips: no new taxes," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Read_my_lips:_No_new_taxes

1. Background: The case of Herod

Herod was the tetrarch (i.e., ruler of a quarter of a territory) of Galilee while his brother, Philip, was the tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis [Lk 3: 1] in the eastern provinces of the then Roman Empire. Both were the sons of King Herod the Great, the one who masterminded the massacre of infants in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus [Matt. 2: 1]. For marrying Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife, Herod was the butt of John the Baptist's stinging sermons against adultery. Consequently, he put John in prison to shut him up [Matt. 14: 1-3]. He wanted to kill John but he was afraid of the people who regarded John as a prophet [v. 5]. Herodias had a grown up daughter, apparently born to her former husband. Therefore, Herod the tetrarch was both her daughter's uncle and step-father!

One day, Herod held a big party to mark his birthday. You can imagine what that occasion looked like. Top Roman military and administrative officials would be there to represent Tiberius Caesar, the emperor. There would be local (Jewish) dignitaries and musicians. There would be a great deal of food and drinks, served by well-trained and smart-looking servants. Of course, there would be the most beautiful girls from Galilee to grace the occasion. Sooner than later, some people would get drunk and behave foolishly.

That was the setting when Herodias' daughter came out to dance and her dancing "pleased Herod." So "he promised with an oath to give her *whatever she might ask*" [vv. 6-7]. Having been prompted by her mother, the young lady said to Herod, "Give me John the Baptist's head *here* on a platter" [v. 8]. She did not want it later or in another place. She wanted it immediately and in the presence of all the guests. That put Herod on the spot. We are told, "The king was sorry; *nevertheless, because of the oaths; and because of those who sat with him*, he commanded it to be given to her." He sent his officers to the prison to behead John and bring his head to Herodias' daughter [vv. 9-11].

If you had been in Herod's place, what could you have done? Having married his brother's wife, he was not necessarily a paragon of moral excellence. So, what would it matter for him to break another word of honour by saving John's life? After all, did he not say that he feared the people who believed that John was a prophet as the reason for keeping him in prison? If he chose to honour his word to Herodias' daughter, then, there must be more to vows than meets the eye. Let us dig deeper.

2. Your word as your bond

A promise with an oath is called a vow. It is a pledge that you have made with another party to fulfill an agreement. It can be made with humans or with God. For example, when Jacob had fled home after obtaining by trick the birthright due to his brother, Esau, he came to Bethel. He fell asleep and dreamed of a ladder on which the Lord stood. The Lord assured him that the promise of Abraham would

pass to him and his descendants. When he woke up, he said, “Surely, the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it.” We are told, “Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going; and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace; then, the Lord shall be my God, and this stone which I have set as a pillar, shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me, I will surely give a tenth to You’” [Gen. 28: 1-22]. Almost two decades later, as Jacob was returning to his father’s home, with a huge family and great wealth, he stopped at Bethel (originally known as Luz) and he built an altar there and called the place “El Bethel”, that is, God of Bethel or the House of God [Gen. 35: 7]. For fulfilling his vow, God appeared again to him and blessed him, saying, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name” [vv. 9-10]. God added that kings would come from his descendants [v. 11]. Jacob set up a pillar in the place where God spoke with him, “a pillar of stone” where he poured offering and oil [v. 14]. He had fulfilled his vow.

We learn from that story that your word given in a vow is not to be taken lightly for “it is a snare for a man to devote *rashly* something as holy, and afterward to reconsider his vows” [Prov. 20: 25]. So, how can we differentiate a vow from saying what we do not mean? Here are the key features of a vow:

a) *It is voluntary*

Nobody forced Herod to promise with an oath to give Herodias’ daughter whatsoever she asked for. He did it voluntarily. The word of God says, “If you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you (but) that which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, *for you voluntarily vowed* to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth” [Deut. 23: 22-23].

b) *It must be uttered*

It is not something that is only on your mind. It must be uttered, that is, it must go out from your lips [Deut. 23: 23]. Herod spoke to the hearing of his guests. Jacob spoke his vow to the hearing of God.

c) *It is binding*

The word of God says, “When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed—better not to vow than to vow and not pay” [Eccl. 5: 4-5]. Herod was sad to hear Herodias’ daughter ask for the head of John the Baptist but his vow was binding on him. So, he had no choice but to fulfill it.

Recall the sad story of Jephthah who led the Gileadites to victory over Ammon during the days of judges in Israel [Judg. Chap. 11]. Earlier in

his childhood, he had been rejected by the elders of Gilead because his mother was a harlot. He was forced to flee from his own people and live with “worthless people” with whom he later formed a raiding band [vv. 1-3]. However, when the Gileadites faced defeat in the hands of the Ammonites, they made peace with Jephthah and swore (by the Lord) to make him their leader, a vow that they fulfilled [vv. 4-11]. He was apparently impressed by the binding power of vows as demonstrated by the elders of his people. So, when he faced a situation to lead them to war against Ammon, “Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, ‘If You will in deed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then, it will be that *whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering*” [vv. 12-31].

He won a great victory over Ammon. Can you guess who came to the door of his house at Mizpah, to receive him with musical instruments? His only child, a daughter! In deep pain, Jephthah cried out, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot go back on it!” So, he offered his daughter to God as he had vowed [vv. 32-40]. Clearly, a vow cannot be broken but rashly made, it can put us in a bind.

3. So, how are you doing with your vows?

From the foregoing, we learn that once properly made, a vow is binding and cannot be broken. A vow is properly made and irrevocable if you do it voluntarily and utter it from your lips. In such cases, your word becomes your bond. Do not make your vows rashly like Herod or Jephthah so that you do not put yourself in a bind. Let us see how you are doing by reviewing some of the vows that you have made as a *true* follower of Christ:

a) *Tithes and pledges*

When you gave your life to Christ and sealed it with water baptism, you swore to renounce Satan and all his works. You swore to obey God with all your heart, mind and spirit. The revealed word of God is best summarized in the Scriptures that we call the Holy Bible. God has made it clear in His word that we are robbers if we owe Him tithes (one-tenth of our income) or offerings (based on pledges that we have made) [Mal. 3: 8-10]. In fact, if we delay to pay tithes, we are required to add interest at the rate of twenty percent [Lev. 27: 31].

Audit your practices. Do you hide under the guise that tithes are not taken in your place of worship to forgo paying? Tithes are to God as taxes are to

the state. Can anybody exempt you from paying your *due* taxes? So, if they do not collect tithes in your church, pay them into their collection boxes or trays (in sealed envelopes, of course!). The reason you should do that is to qualify and obtain God's promise to those who comply, namely, He "will open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it" [**Mal. 3: 10**].

There are also certain pledges that you have not redeemed. For example, during the annual thanksgiving (called harvest in some churches) or special launchings in your church, you stood up in the presence of everybody to gleefully announce a donation towards one thing or another. It is immaterial that you were trying to impress your pastor or fellow worshippers! You uttered it with your mouth and of your own volition. You have to accept responsibility for it! God expects you to pay and until you do, He will continue to count it against you. God has made the point very clearly in the following words [**Ps. 50: 12-15**]:

If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness... Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me

b) *Marital fidelity*

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman and it is the only plan that God has sanctioned for the perpetuation of the human species on earth [**Gen. 1: 26-28**]. God expects a man and his wife to relate to each other as *one flesh*. That was why even when Adam and Eve were naked, they were not ashamed [**Gen. 2: 24-25**], just as no one is ever ashamed when s(he) is naked while alone! A man who loves his wife loves himself [**Eph. 5: 28**] and vice versa. Those principles have been incorporated into the marital vows that couples take when they come to church to solemnize their marriage.

The husband and wife exchange their vows to the hearing of the congregation. If a wife utters her vows from her lips by which she binds herself "and her husband hears it and makes no response (to contradict her), her vows shall stand, and her agreements by which she bound herself shall stand" [**Num. 30: 6-7**]. Her husband's vows are equally binding on him. Therefore, whatever either of them does to break their vows is a grievous sin before God. So, just as Christ is faithful to His bride, the church, the husband is required under his marital oath to be faithful to his wife until death separates them. The same applies to the wife. Therefore, where there is fear of the Lord in a marriage, divorce or infidelity are not even options. The world may applaud or refuse to notice such sexual

immorality but you will account to God for unkept vows when you appear before Christ's judgment throne.

c) *Political office*

Politicians who put their hands on the Bible to take their oath of office at the swearing-in ceremony speak to the hearing of all, both those at the venue and those watching on television. In the presence of such multitudes, you have sworn to "faithfully" uphold the honour and integrity of your high office. In some countries, including the United States, you end the oath-taking by saying, "So help me God!" That oath is binding on you, and it applies to all those in leadership positions in business, church or family, even when it is not formally administered. By it, you have sworn to God that you will not use your position for undeserved and unearned personal gain. That means that you will serve the interests of the needy placed under your care, that you will fight corruption and waste. To do otherwise is to incur the wrath of God and He will require it of you sooner than you think.

4. Conclusion: God has met His own side of the bargain!

Herod made a vow to his step-daughter and regretted it. Nevertheless, he had to honour it because a vow cannot be broken. Your word should be your bond. What God says He will do, He does. He promised the Messiah [**Is. 7: 14**] and His word became flesh in the womb of a virgin girl, Mary, the mother of Jesus [**Lk 1: 31; 2: 7**]. Jesus died in our place to redeem us from sin and He has risen to sit at the right side of His Father as our Advocate [**1 Jn 2: 1**]. Therefore, God has fulfilled His own oath to you and He who promised has been faithful [**Heb. 10: 23**]. Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you [**Heb. 13: 5**].

The ball is now in your court to honour the vows of your baptism as a follower of Christ. To live with Him, you must be ready to die with Him (by fulfilling all your vows to God). If you deny Him, He will deny you. If you are faithless, He remains faithful because He cannot deny Himself [**2 Tim. 2: 11-13**].

In Christ Jesus, your word will be your bond, not your bind.