

Hasty Words (2)

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Late Payments

“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay” (5:4-5). It is just as our Lord puts it in Matthew 5:37, *“Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’”* And also, James writes, *“But above all, my brethren, do not swear, wither by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment”* (James 5:12). If we are going to make promises, we must keep them – whether it be to our parents, to our manager at work, or to our spouses. Especially when it comes to keeping a promise before the Lord, we must be prepared to follow through with it. It is too often that people make vows to God with so much hope and promise, only to falter when things get tough. As the text says, it is better to just not make any oaths than to make and break them.

“Pay what you vow!” I love how the writer places so much emphasis on this phrase, as if he has had personal experience with this problem. Anybody who has ever experienced the trouble of a flighty friend can commiserate with God. We know how it feels when a companion does not return a borrowed tool, or when a friend fails to show up on time to help with a task, or when a contracted worker does not finish a job in the time he designates. Now amplify these discouraging situations a thousand fold and you get a picture of how disappointed God is when we do not keep our promises.

When we make a promise to do something, it is only evil when we fail to come through, especially when the promise has been made to God. The Lord hates those who despise promises and fail to live up to their words. Consider:

- A good example of this would be the parable of the two sons who made certain statements but acted in very different ways in Matthew 21:28-32. *“A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went.”* This first son had a rebellious streak in him, being unwilling at first to obey his father’s request. Indeed, the command was not unreasonable, for we can all see that if a young man is going to live under the roof of his father, then it is only fair for that father to expect the son to carry his load of daily chores. Being a contemplative person, though, this son regrets his former rudeness and chooses to obey the father without saying a word.
- *“The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sire’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”* (Matthew 21:30). The second son was one who only appeared to be obedient on the outside. He said the right things and made himself verbally obligated to go to the work. However, in the end he chose to disregard both the command of the father and his own acceptance of responsibility. And which of these two actually ended up being obedient?

“It was a mistake!”

“Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?” (5:6) Implied by this verse is the idea that we have the power to control our speech. *“Do not let...”* means when my speech causes me to sin, I bear the responsibility. While it is very true that **James 3:1ff** paints a bleak picture, the very fact that God has spoken on the subject should give us hope that we have the potential to control our language. I do not buy the excuse that things “just slip out.” Often, what we let “slip out” is how we actually feel – it is a reflection of our true nature on the inside.

As a final word on the topic of broken vows, Solomon finally concludes that one must never use his mouth to bring sin upon himself, i.e., by his broken promises. Sometimes we say things that are just not true, or we exaggerate just a little too much. Why should we bring destruction upon ourselves for a little bit of exaggeration? In any case, God is vindicated, whether it be a small promise or a big promise that we abandoned. When the judgment of God comes upon us, will we just be able to shrug our shoulders and say, “Hey, it was a mistake, God!”