

SESSION 18: Ties That Bind

Readings

Montgomery, “Divorce” and “A Parable of Grace and Chocolate” (Appendices 2 and 3)

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 119-120, 124-125

WCF	WLC	WSC
22, 24		

Introduction

In the last session, we considered the issues of Christian liberty in life and in worship. In so doing, we saw that our confession distinguishes between ordinary and extraordinary parts of worship. Among the former are praise, prayer, reading, and preaching. Among the latter are “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions,” (WCF 21.5). It is the matter of oaths and vows – and marriage as a particular instance – to which we turn in this session.

Definitions & Distinctions

Our confession defines a “lawful oath” as “a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth,” (22.1). In this definition we see several components: an *obligator* (the person swearing), an *obligation* (the thing asserted or promised), a *witness* to the obligation, and an *enforcer* of the same. In these general features, “a vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath,” (22.5).

Why are oaths and vows considered acts of worship? A.A. Hodge’s explanation is helpful: “An oath is an act of supreme religious worship, since it recognizes the omnipresence, omniscience, absolute justice and sovereignty of the Person whose august witness is invoked, and whose judgment is appealed to as final.” For this same reason, “it is a sin equivalent to that of worshipping a false god if we swear by any other than the only true and living God; and a sin of idolatry if we swear by any thing or place, although it be associated with the true God.”²¹²

How do oaths and vows differ? Our confession makes several distinctions. An oath may be “imposed by lawful authority” (22.2), whereas a vow is “to be made voluntarily” (22.6). And whereas an oath is made to men – even “heretics, or infidels” (22.4) – a vow is “not to be made to any creature, but to God alone (22.6). In an oath, we swear by God to a man. But with a vow, we swear by faith to God.

Sobering Obligations

Oaths and vows are to be taken quite seriously. Since God himself is invoked, it is foolish and sinful to swear “vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name,” (22.2). Notice a few of the proof texts cited here. One is a direct statement of our Lord: “But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil,” (Mt 5.34-37). Another is a strong statement of our Lord’s brother: “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation, (Jas 5.12).

²¹² Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 287.

What are we to make of these statements? On the surface, they seem like blanket prohibition against oaths and vows. But are they? Compare them with four other passages from Scripture:

So that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes. (Is 65.16)

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mt 26.63-64)

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. (Acts 18.8)

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. (Rom 1.9-10)

But I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. (2Cor 1.23)

If our Lord intended a blanket prohibition against all oaths and vows, how could he prophesy of oaths in the Messianic age? How could he himself submit to adjuration (Gk. *exorkrizō* – to put under oath)? How could Paul call God to witness against him or place himself under a vow?

It appears, then, that what both our Lord and his brother intended to prohibit were not *lawful* oaths and vows invoking God "in matters of weight and moment" (22.2), but rather *frivolous* or *false* oaths or vows (22.3-4). Reflecting these passages, Hodge concludes: "It is evident, therefore, that the words of our Saviour... cannot be intended to forbid swearing upon proper occasions in the name of the true God, but must be designed to forbid the calling upon his name in ordinary conversation and on trifling occasions."²¹³

Restrictions

Both oaths and vows must be used lawfully. On this point, our confession is clear. An oath "cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt; nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels," (22.4). Likewise "no man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God," (22.6).

In its historical context, our confession was taking aim at two specific errors of the Roman Catholic Church. Regarding the first, Hodge explains:

The Romanists excuse the practice of their Church of releasing persons from the obligation of oaths to infidels or heretics, and of breaking faith generally with all with whom she has controversy, on the plea that an oath cannot bind to that which is unlawful or release from a prior obligation, and that the highest of all obligations is to subserve at all cost the interest of the Church. But they deliberately make the oath in order to break it, and therefore both lie and profane God's holy name in the making and the breaking.²¹⁴

²¹³ Ibid., 288. Hodge also considers lawful oaths and vows an implication of the third commandment.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 290.

As an historical example of such treachery, one need think no further than the case of Jan Hus – the Czech proto-reformer whose safe passage to the Council of Constance was cancelled on the ground that he was a heretic. As for biblical counterexamples, see Joshua 9.18-19 and Ezekiel 17.11-21.

Regarding the second error of the Reformation era, our confession itself describes “Popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience” as “superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself,” (22.7). In such cases, “the sin is in taking the oath to do the unlawful thing, not in breaking it. Therefore Luther was right in breaking his monastic vows.”²¹⁵

Finally, citing Numbers 30.1-8, Hodge notes that neither oath nor vow can be taken lawfully “by a child or other person under authority and destitute of the right to bind themselves of their own will.” He then offers the following sound conclusion: “The multiplication of self-imposed duties dishonours [God], and greatly harasses us and endangers our safety. Vows had better be restricted to the voluntary assumption and promise to observe, with the help of divine grace, duties imposed by God and plainly revealed in the Scriptures.”²¹⁶

The Definition & Purpose of Marriage

One of the most common and familiar instances in which people engage in public adjuration is marriage. Our confession defines marriage in clear terms as a relationship “between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time,” (24.1). According to Scripture, marriage is *exclusive*, *heterosexual*, and *monogamous*.

Our confession goes on to describe the threefold *purpose* of marriage: “the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness,” (24.2). According to Scripture, marriage is *helpful*, *fruitful*, and *protective*. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD,” (Prov 18.22). And so far from being prudish, Scripture often extols the act of marriage in very explicit terms.²¹⁷

In understanding this threefold purpose for marriage, the present author believes there is a sound answer to a commonly raised question: if marriage existed before the Fall, and if it is good, then why does Jesus say that there is no marriage in the resurrection (Mt 22.30, Mk 12.25, Lk 20.35)? In the new creation, nobody will be alone or lacking for help. Nor will there be any more uncleanness (Rev 21.4, 27). Finally, in the resurrection humanity will be a complete host. As Bavinck so beautifully describes: “Not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being... it can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members.”²¹⁸

So marriage is good, but it is not humanity’s chief good. Our chief good is God, and in the resurrection we will glorify and enjoy him together. Marriage will disappear – not because it is bad, but because it is finished:

²¹⁵ Ibid., 289.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 291.

²¹⁷ See Prov 5.19. See also the entire Song of Solomon.

²¹⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.577.

Hunger and thirst being no more – there shall be no need of food. Weariness and fatigue being no more – there shall be no need of sleep. Death being no more – there shall be no need of births to supply the place of those who are removed. Enjoying the full presence of God and his Christ – men and women shall no more need the marriage union, in order to help one another. Able to serve God without weariness, and attend on him without distraction, doing his will perfectly, and seeing his face continually, clothed in a glorious body, they shall be ‘as the angels which are in heaven.’In the world to come, all shall be changed. Nothing shall be lacking to make his happiness complete.”²¹⁹

Restrictions on Marriage

Marriage is not only for believers: “It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent.” However, as an institution established by God, marriage is bound by God’s parameters. Consequently, “it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.” A believer “should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies,” (24.3). Marriage should foster *spiritual unity* – not undermine it.

In addition to spiritual restrictions, the Scriptures also outline *physiological* restrictions on marriage. There is such a sin as *incest* – engaging in a sexual relationship “within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden by the Word,” (24.4). The Levitical code contains strict prohibitions on incest (Lev 18.6-18, 20.19-21). The extent to which these carry over into the ethics of the new covenant is debatable.²²⁰ However, the New Testament makes clear that certain relationships are still *a priori* forbidden (Mk 6.18, 1Cor 5.1).

So marriage is for all, but so are God’s rules. Hodge’s words sound prophetic:

Hence it follows that marriage is a religious as well as a civil contract. No State has any right to change the law of marriage, or the conditions upon which it may be lawfully constituted or dissolved, as these have been ordained by God. Neither has any man or woman a right to contract any relation different in any respect, as to its character or duration, from that which God has ordained as marriage.... The law of the land is to be obeyed for conscience’ sake whenever it does not contravene *the higher law of God*. When it plainly does so, then Christian men and church sessions are to act themselves and treat others just as if the ungodly human enactment had no existence, and then take the consequences.²²¹

That marriage is for all does *not* mean that all are required to marry. Both our Lord and the apostle Paul indicate that there are some circumstances in which and certain individuals for whom singleness is preferable (Mt 19.10-12, 1Cor 7). “In times of persecution and public danger, and with reference to some special kind of service to which God providentially calls a man, it may be both his interest and his duty not to marry.”²²²

²¹⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, vol. 2, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 204.

²²⁰ As the footnote in Smith’s *Harmony* indicates, a portion of the original text of WCF 24.4 was deleted by the PCUS in 1886. It was also deleted by the PCUSA in 1887. Consequently, it appears in neither the OPC nor PCA versions of the standards.

²²¹ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 302-303.

²²² *Ibid.*, 304.

Dissolution of Marriage

The last two paragraphs of WCF 24 deal with the undesirable circumstances in which an engagement (a 'contract' was a public announcement of an engagement) or a marriage may be dissolved. Following the teachings Scripture, our confession recognizes two such situations – and only two: “nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.” Yet in both cases, it adds that “a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case,” (24.6).²²³

Important Questions:

1. What examples of lawful oaths/vows exist in our society today? Unlawful oaths/vows?
2. What danger regarding vows is identified in the “Parable of Grace and Chocolate”?
3. At a wedding, what parts of the service are vows? What parts are oaths? Explain.
4. What restrictions apply to all marriages? What additional restrictions apply to Christians?
5. Should a church member ever seek divorce without consent of their session?
6. Is marriage a religious institution, a civil institution, or both? Why does the question matter?
7. How should our church respond to the subversion of marriage present in society today?
8. In his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller discusses how the Enlightenment affected the way people think about meaning and marriage:

Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the fruit of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning through self-denial... marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.... In short, the Enlightenment privatized marriage, taking it out of the public sphere, and redefined its purpose as individual gratification, not any “broader good” such as reflecting God’s nature, producing character, or raising children.²²⁴

- a. In what ways has this shift led to the cultural denigration of heterosexual marriage?
- b. In what ways has it led to the cultural legitimization of homosexual ‘marriage’?

Additional Resources:

Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 121-123, 126-131, 148-150, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
23, 25-26, 30-31	61-66, 82-83, 86, 90	36-38

²²³ For a further discussion, see Montgomery, “Divorce.”

²²⁴ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 28.

APPENDIX 2: Divorce

Jeremiah W. Montgomery²⁶¹

Introduction

“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

Commenting on this passage, Jay Adams describes marriage as a covenant of companionship.²⁶² Indeed, companionship is the first purpose delineated by *The Westminster Confession of Faith*: “Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.”²⁶³ So God ordained marriage for companionship, fruitfulness, and holiness.

The reality of sin means that there are tragic situations in which this covenant of companionship is dissolved in divorce. Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce. Yet the Scriptures also teach us that *some* divorce is biblically legitimate. Jeremiah 3:8 says that God himself divorced Israel for their idolatry. Thus, “even though God hates divorce, because there is sin behind every divorce as its cause, *not every divorce is sinful.*”²⁶⁴

When is divorce legitimate? *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states that there are only two legitimate grounds for divorce: “nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.”²⁶⁵ As it stands, this summary of biblical teaching is accurate. Yet in order to understand it in its fullness, certain questions must be answered. To these we now turn.

Adultery

It was our Lord himself who authorized divorce in the case of adultery. In Matthew 19:9 he said: “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”²⁶⁶ But our Lord’s statement leaves us with a question: what counts as “sexual immorality”?

In both Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:9, the Evangelist uses the Greek word *porneia*. There are two important things to note about this word. The first is that it has a broad application. It is not limited to adultery proper,²⁶⁷ but refers to “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.”²⁶⁸ In 1 Corinthians 5:1 it is used for a case of incest. In Jude 7 its verb form is used to refer to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. Following from this, the second thing to note about *porneia* is that it refers specifically to sexually perverse *action*. It is *not* the same word used to speak of lust. In Matthew 5:27-28, our Lord equates the verb form of lust (*epithumeō*) with the verb form of adultery (*moicheuō*). But he does not equate lust with *porneia*.

²⁶¹ Adapted from a paper prepared for a seminary course on biblical ethics and submitted April 30, 2012.

²⁶² Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 8.

²⁶³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Willow Grove, PA: OPC, 2005), 24.2. Hereafter *WCF*.

²⁶⁴ Adams, *Marriage*, 30.

²⁶⁵ *WCF*, 24.6.

²⁶⁶ All Scripture quotations from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

²⁶⁷ In Matthew 15:19, “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) is listed alongside ‘adultery’ (*moicheia*), showing us that two terms are not synonymous.

²⁶⁸ F. Wilbur Gingrich, “*porneia*,” in *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 180.

These two distinctions help us provide a biblical definition for the confessional term ‘adultery.’ Lust is a violation of the seventh commandment,²⁶⁹ and is doubtless involved in every case of adultery. Yet lust alone is *not* grounds for divorce. The word *porneia* requires *physical action*. Thus it seems appropriate to define ‘adultery’ confessionally as “any physical contact intended to receive or satisfy lust.”²⁷⁰ When adultery in this sense has occurred, our Lord Jesus Christ gives the offended party the right to seek a divorce.

Willful Desertion

The other legitimate ground for divorce is “such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate.” What is this “willful desertion”? To answer this, we must consult Paul’s teaching on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. Here there are three things to note.

The first is that in these verses Paul addresses two distinct groups: “to the married” (vv. 10-11) and “to the rest” (vv. 12-16). By “the married” he refers to believers who are married to one another – i.e., those marriages in which both husband and wife are professing Christians. “The rest” refers to spiritually mixed marriages – i.e., those in which only one partner is a professing Christian.

The second thing to note is that Paul does not deny the divine authority or inspiration of vv. 12-16. When he contrasts “not I, but the Lord” (v. 10) with “I, not the Lord” (v. 12), “the distinction is rather between teaching that was expressly given by Christ in the days of his flesh and the teaching that did not come within the compass of Christ’s own deliverances while upon earth.”²⁷¹

The third thing to note is what Paul communicates by these first two distinctions.

In referring the first group to the teachings of the Lord, he is telling Christian married couples that willful desertion is not an option for them. For them, the only legitimate ground for dissolving their marriage is that which was mentioned by our Lord. But in the absence of *porneia*, they should neither divorce nor separate. And “if separation has actually taken place, then certain provisions must be adhered to. Let the breach be healed. Failing that, under no conditions may another marriage be undertaken.”²⁷²

Yet in bringing his own apostolic teaching authority to bear on the second group, Paul is telling Christians in spiritually mixed marriages that there is an additional ground for divorce *not mentioned* by our Lord in the Gospels. This ground involves such cases where “the unbelieving partner separates,” (v. 15). Willful desertion a very real possibility in spiritually mixed unions. In such marriages, John Murray warns that “the believing partner must not take any initiative in leaving or sending away the unbeliever.”²⁷³ Yet “if the unbeliever willfully departs, let separation take its course, let it become an accomplished fact; the believer is not under any obligation to pursue the deserting spouse and is freed from all marital debts and duties. Here is decisiveness.”²⁷⁴

Adams puts it even stronger than Murray. When an unbeliever separates, “the Christian must not stand in the way of separation. Paul uses a permissive imperative: ‘let him separate.’ This is a

²⁶⁹ See *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Willow Grove, PA: OPC, 2005), 139.

²⁷⁰ The present author is indebted to Mr. Jim Stevenson for this definition.

²⁷¹ John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 63.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

command; it is the one instance in which divorce is *required*.²⁷⁵ After the divorce is accomplished, “the brother or sister is not enslaved,” (v. 15). “All the bonds of marriage have been removed. He is released entirely from every marriage obligation, and is a totally free person. Nor is there any obligation to be reconciled in marriage.”²⁷⁶ Indeed, the Christian partner could *not* remarry a non-Christian partner, “since to do so would violate another biblical command to marry ‘only in the Lord’ (v. 39). A believer must not marry an unbeliever, even if the unbeliever is a former spouse!”²⁷⁷

Abuse and Remediation

What about such cases involving abuse or dangerous neglect? Under what obligation does a Christian marriage partner remain when their spouse has committed no *porneia*, has not moved out, and yet will not repent of behavior that is threatening the safety and welfare of the family? What should the Christian spouse do in such cases?

Matthew 18:15-18 suggests the solution. If personal appeal fails, there is to be witnessed confrontation. If witnessed confrontation fails, the matter should be referred to the court of the church – i.e., the local session. Our Lord has vested the authority to bind and loose not in the individual Christian, but in the plurality of elders (v. 18 – the ‘you’ is plural). And these cases, the session must make two very important determinations. The first determination is whether or not the offending party is a believer. If he is, session must adjure him to repent. If he is not a believer, or if by persistent refusal to heed session he incurs excommunication and must be regarded as a non-believer, then session must make a second determination: does the sin in which he is engaged rise to the level of ‘separation’?²⁷⁸ If so, and if there is no further civil or ecclesiastical means of remedying the situation, then the believing partner has grounds for divorce.

The involvement of the church in such cases is essential. It is the church whom our Lord has empowered to apply the relevant passages of Scripture to messy situations. Consider the myriad issues surrounding a spouse caught in the use of pornography who then accuses the other spouse of refusing the regular exercise of sexual relations. Or take questions of financial support when there is a separation but not a divorce. Few situations are simple.

Remarriage

What happens when all the foregoing has been ignored? When unbiblical divorce has become a *fait accompli*? It is perhaps at this point that things get most difficult. Yet a few things seem clear.

Two Christians who divorced wrongly and have remained unmarried should reconcile. If one of them instead gets married to a third party, that action is adultery. Nevertheless, this adulterous remarriage is a real marriage.²⁷⁹ Not only does it therefore bind the remarried spouse, it also frees the unmarried spouse from any further obligation to *restore* the first marriage – though one or both of the original spouses remain under obligation to seek *forgiveness* for its dissolution.

²⁷⁵ Adams, *Marriage*, 48.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., fn. 10.

²⁷⁸ The Greek verb translated ‘separates’ is *chōrizō*. In an active sense, it means “divide, separate.” This is evident in Matthew 19:6, where Jesus adjures: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” In a passive sense, it can have two meanings. The first is “separate (oneself), be separated of divorce,” as seen here in 1 Corinthians 7:15. The second is “be taken away, take one’s departure, go away.” This sense occurs in Acts 18:1: “After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.” See Gingrich, “*chōrizō*,” in *Shorter Lexicon*, 238.

²⁷⁹ How could our Lord warn against marrying another in Matthew 19:9, if this were not possible?

On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 teaches us that unbelievers with sexual sin in their past are washed when they come to faith in Jesus Christ. Their history is forgiven. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Finally, adultery is not the unpardonable sin. Adams cites the case of David and Bathsheba as a prime example, and concludes that even for believers “remarriage after divorce is allowed in the Bible and that the guilty party – after forgiveness – is free to remarry.”²⁸⁰ This will necessarily involve settling “some matters from the past that may yet be present even after forgiveness.”²⁸¹

Of course these clear points stand amidst many other questions which are less clear. Both Adams and Murray provide some helpful discussions of particular cases.²⁸² Yet the bottom-line is that in such thornier situations, specific study will be necessary not only by the individuals involved, but also by the sessions whom our Lord has charged with adjudicating their situations.

²⁸⁰ Adams, *Marriage*, 95.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 95-96. Adams provides a helpful list of questions to use in this process.

²⁸² See Adams, *Marriage*, 84-98, and Murray, *Divorce*, 96-117.

APPENDIX 3: A Parable of Grace and Chocolate²⁸³

Robert was a Christian young man in turmoil. To all outward appearances, there was nothing wrong: he had a steady job, was faithful to his church, and took constant thought to his obligation to love God and neighbor. He read his Bible and prayed seriously, and he was diligent to attend and participate in his church's public worship. He supported his church community in whatever way he could: he gave regular offerings, he helped with maintenance of the church grounds, and he was generous in his friendships.

And yet, as I said, Robert was in turmoil. He had not always been so outwardly upstanding. He had done some things during his youth of which he was now most ashamed. One portion of his history in particular had been eating away at him. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to stop thinking about it. So one day, he did what you might expect: he made an appointment to see his minister.

Pastor John was already waiting when he arrived at the coffee shop. After ordering a mocha, Robert joined him at a small, nicely-private table near the back corner of the shop.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Pastor."

"No problem, Bob. What's going on?"

"Well, I have a problem. It's hard for me to talk about."

"That's okay, Bob. Take your time."

"It's kinda embarrassing..."

"We're all sinners, son. Tell me what's on your mind." Fully expecting that Bob's trouble had to do with some of the more conventional struggles of young single men, the Reverend John was unprepared for what came next.

"Well, it's right here in front of me." Bob pointed to his coffee.

"You have a problem with coffee?"

"No, not coffee, Pastor. This is a mocha; my problem is with chocolate."

"Oh?" John was not sure what to make of this revelation. Bob was not an overweight guy. Did he have some sort of secret addiction that he covered up with exercise or anorexia?

"Yes. You see, I love chocolate. But every time I eat it, I fear I might be living in unrepentant sin."

Pastor John was now genuinely puzzled. "Go on, son."

"Ok. Quite a few years ago – when I was a teenager – I got caught trying to shoplift a chocolate bar from a grocery store."

"You got caught? I don't remember hearing about this from your parents." Bob's parents had been members of John's church since Bob had been a boy.

²⁸³ Jeremiah Montgomery, published in *Rustling Leaves* (BookSurge, 2008).

“Well, Dad and Mom never found out. You see, I got caught in the act by the store clerk – but managed to get away before he could grab me.”

“I see. Did you ask God to forgive you for stealing?”

“Yes, but that’s not the issue.”

“Oh. Go on, then.”

Bob frowned. “Even after I had escaped that day, I was terrified that I was going to get caught. Even after I had made it back to my house, I squirmed every time I saw a police car – sure that they were going to come and arrest me. And so I made a vow.”

“A vow?”

“Yes. I prayed to God and vowed that if he would keep me from getting caught, I would never eat chocolate again.”

“Um.”

“For awhile, I was faithful. For a few months, at least. But some time later, I disregarded the vow under the reasoning (or perhaps the rationalization) that God doesn’t make deals like the one I asked him to make. But I could never really be sure, see? I asked a good friend what I should do about a broken vow – without giving him all the details, obviously. He said that I should simply repent of making the vow and ask forgiveness.”

John nodded. “And did you?”

“Yes, right away. But the problem is, I can’t find anywhere in the Bible where this happens – where a person can repent of a vow to God and not be bound anymore.”

“Ok.”

“What should I do, Pastor? This has been eating at me for a long time.” Bob’s tone was obviously pained, and his voice picked up speed as the words tumbled out of him. “I realize it’s pretty stupid to think that something which happened so many years back could still matter. But every time I read in the Bible about ‘paying vows’ to God, I wince. I hope my friend was right – because I really don’t want to have to live the rest of my life without chocolate. But I also don’t want to go to Hell. I’ll give up chocolate if I have to. But do I? Something just doesn’t smell right about the whole thing.”

Pastor John leaned back in his chair, his expression unreadable. His eyes fell to peer down at his coffee mug, squinting. Bob felt himself growing anxious. What was he thinking? After what must have only been a few moments – but which seemed like an hour to Bob – Pastor John glanced up.

“So,” he began grimly, focusing from beneath his eyebrows, “you asked God to become an accessory after the fact to a crime.”

Bob’s jaw dropped open. John could see in his eyes that the wheels were spinning, but sensed the boy needed a bit more to gain traction.

“You asked God to drive the getaway car. That’s asking God to commit sin, son. Read Psalm 50. You thought God was like you, and would go along with your scheme to avoid capture.”

“What?”

“You asked him to help you avoid lawful authority – lawful authority which Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 tell us he ordains.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“The vow you made was not to the God of Scripture, son – but to a god of your own making.”

“I don’t understand.”

John took a deep breath. “A vow is an act of worship, Bob.”

“Yes, I’ve read that. I’ve read a lot about vows recently.”

“Good, then perhaps you’ve also read what the Catechism has to say about worship. Specifically, think of the second commandment. What does it forbid?”

Bob’s answer was instant. “The worship of idols.”

“Yes,” said John, “but that’s not all. The Catechism not only forbids the making or worshipping of idols of false deities; it also forbids the worship of God by images.”

“I don’t see where you’re going, Pastor. I wasn’t thinking of any picture when I made my vow. I was just praying to God.”

“No you weren’t,” John replied, then went on before Bob could respond. “Think of what the Israelites did at Sinai while Moses was on the mountain. What happened when Moses took longer to return than they expected?”

Again, Bob’s response came too quick. “They made a golden calf, and worshipped it.”

“That’s not all. You’re missing something critical.”

“You mean the-“ Bob hesitated, clearly puzzled, “-the orgy?”

“No, Bob,” John said firmly. “Focus your mind. They were not worshipping just a calf. They were idolaters, to be sure – but it’s not as simple as that. They were worshipping God through the image of the calf – or so they thought.”

“You mean that when they were sacrificing to the idol, they thought they were sacrificing to God?”

“Exactly. If you look at Exodus 32, you’ll see it in the text. When Aaron sees the calf, he builds an altar and proclaims a feast – ‘to the LORD.’”

“Wow,” Bob said quietly, “I never thought of that passage like that.”

John had to smother his annoyance. Hadn’t he given all the graduates a copy of Packer’s *Knowing God*? Recovering himself quickly, he went on. “You should think about it, son. Think about it hard – because you are in the same boat as they.”

Bob looked bewildered. “I’m not arguing, Pastor, but I don’t see how.”

“When you made your vow, did you have in mind the God of Scripture, or somebody else?”

“I thought it was the God of Scripture.”

“What you thought is immaterial, son. The Israelites thought they were worshipping God, too. But God condemned them for idolatry for attempting to worship him via a false image.”

“But I didn’t mean anything like that, Pastor. I just knew that God was merciful, and was asking for mercy.”

“Yes, but an incomplete image is also false. And your image was incomplete, Bob, because it left off God’s holiness – a holiness which would never allow him to be an accessory to your criminal behavior.”

“Oh.” Bob looked genuinely shocked. “Even though I didn’t think so at the time, I suppose I made my vow not to God,” – he looked up – “but to an image of him I had constructed.”

“A false image,” John corrected, “A god you made in your own image.”

For a minute, Bob didn’t say a word. When he spoke again, his voice carried an appropriately sober inflection. “That means I was – am – an idolater.”

“Yes.”

“And so it is the vow itself that must be repented of?” he ventured tentatively.

“Yes.”

“Because it was false?”

“It is a false vow because you made it to someone who isn’t God, and you asked for something that was against the revealed nature and will of the true and living God.”

“Oh.” Bob bowed his head for a minute, praying silently. John took a long drink of his coffee, smiling kindly. Idolatry was no laughing matter; but repentance was always a cause for rejoicing. When Bob raised his head again, his expression was still troubled.

“Well, I asked the Lord to forgive me. And I believe he has.”

“But?”

“But Pastor, I have to be frank with you. I don’t feel better. In fact, I feel horrible and ashamed – because I’m more relieved that I can go on eating chocolate than I am grieved over my sin. Can I even call myself a Christian, being this wretched?”

Pastor John’s smile was sympathetic. “Wretched?” he said, “Welcome to Pauline religion.”

“But why don’t I feel worse about what I’ve done?”

“Is it your feelings that make you forgiven, or the work of Christ alone?”

“The latter,” Bob said embarrassedly. “But maybe if I gave up chocolate now – to show God how sorry I am – I’d feel better?”

The smile faded, and the brows closed. “Are you asking me if you should do penance, son?”

Bob’s face fell. “Am I?”

“Penance may be psychologically satisfying, but it’s theologically worthless.”