

**Sermon on Lord's Day 37**  
**By Rev. Stephen t'Hart**

Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Psalm 99:1,2,3

Psalm 15:1,2,3

Psalm 119:17,22,40

Hymn 43:1,3

Psalm 139:13

Read: Deuteronomy 10; 2 Corinthians 1:12-24; Hebrews 6:9-20

Text: Lord's Day 37

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Lord's Day 37 we have a continuation on the explanation of the third commandment:

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

While Lord's day 36 teaches us that we may not take the LORD's name in vain by blaspheming or abusing His name but rather we may only use His name with fear and reverence, Lord's Day 37 focuses on one aspect of the third commandment, on the matter of swearing an oath.

We may have reason to wonder why the writers of the catechism devoted an entire Lord's Day to the matter of swearing an oath. Oath Taking is not a controversial subject for us today, and many of us give the matter very little thought. In the time of the Reformation, however, things were different.

On the one hand there were the Anabaptists, who taught that you may never swear an oath at all. They pointed to Matthew 5:33-37, where the Lord Jesus said, "Do not swear at all, but let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

On the other hand there were the Roman Catholics who swore many oaths and did not just call upon the name of God but also swore by saints or other things.

But the matter of making and keeping an oath was also of great concern to the people of the Reformation. The Roman Catholics accused many Reformed believers with breaking the vows they had previously made in the name of the LORD. Many people, such as Martin Luther, had vowed in God's Name to be a monk, not to get married, or made similar vows, but now that they were no longer a part of the Roman Catholic Church they had discarded those vows – and the Roman Catholics charged them with dishonoring the name of God.

And so Lord's Day 37 was largely written to give a biblical response to the challenges raised by both the Anabaptists and the Roman Catholics in the time of the Reformation.

Today the question of what is a lawful oath and when and how such an oath may be made is no longer cause for much discussion or dispute among us. And yet the biblical teachings that we find concerning the oath in Lord's Day 37 are good for us to learn today. For today the oath has by-and-large lost its sacredness, and a godly fear for the name of the LORD is often lacking. Our "Yes" is no longer "Yes" and our "No" no longer "No". Our nation no longer links honesty and truth speaking to the honor of God's

name. But the Bible tells us that we should. And so this [morning] I wish to preach to you the Word of God concerning the oath under the following theme:

Protect the honour of God's name through the right use of the oath.

1. The need for the oath.
2. The significance of the oath.

1. The need for the oath.

To take an oath is a solemn and serious undertaking. It is, as answer 102 of the Catechism explains, "a calling upon God, who alone knows the heart, to bear witness to the truth, and to punish me if I swear falsely." We make such oaths in the form of a vow in church: when we profess our faith, when we make our wedding vows, when we say "I Do" at the baptismal font and should we be ordained for the special office of minister, elder or deacon. At such times we make our promises before God and the congregation and so these promises have the character of an oath.

But it is especially in the sphere of the government of the land that we are called upon to make oaths in which we explicitly call upon the name of the LORD. When we go to Court, we are given the opportunity to hold a Bible in our right hand and to say,

'I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

It is understood by the courts that such a vow has religious significance. By taking such a vow, we are calling God to be our witness and to punish us severely if we fail to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That makes oath-taking a very serious matter, and because oaths are of such a serious character, it is appropriate that we do not make them lightly, nor do we make them often. For an oath that is unnecessary is an abuse of the name of the LORD, since such oaths are no longer made to His glory, nor do they assist in promoting the truth.

In the days that our Lord Jesus Christ walked on earth, it was common for the Jews to make oaths that were unnecessary and unlawful. The oaths that they made did not use the name of the LORD, for they refused to speak the LORD's name in fear of dishonouring it, but they swore by heaven, earth, Jerusalem or the temple. According to Matthew 5:36, they even swore by their own head! But these oaths were not made to maintain and promote the truth, nor to honour God's name. Through swearing by things other than God Himself, the Jews thought that their oaths were not so strong and they were no longer bound to keep their word. It was in that context that Christ pointed out that such reasoning is hypocrisy and so He told them that since such oaths promoted the lie and not the truth, they ought to drop the oath all together and simply let their "Yes" be "Yes" and their "No" "No".

But when our Lord Jesus told the Jews not to swear at all, He was not forbidding the right use of the oath. In fact, the rest of Scripture commands the right use of the oath and we read of many instances when oaths were made. In Deuteronomy 10:20 Moses commanded the people of Israel,

"You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name."

To take a lawful oath was commanded by Scripture, and such oaths were made by the saints in both the Old and the New Testaments. And to get an understanding of how those oaths functioned, it would be helpful for us to read some of them.

In the book of Genesis, Abraham made a vow in chapter 21. It says in verse 22-24,

And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. 23 Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt." 24 And Abraham said, "I will swear."

Further in Genesis, in chapter 31:51-53, Jacob swore an oath to his father-in-law Laban:

51 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this heap and here is this pillar, which I have placed between you and me. 52 This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. 53 The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.

(From the context, particularly Genesis 31:42, "the Fear of his father Isaac" is clearly a reference to swearing an oath in the name of the LORD.)

And so by means of an oath, Abraham and Jacob made a solemn promise that the word they spoke could be trusted.

A similar vow was made in Joshua 9, when the Gibeonites came to Joshua and the people of Israel and tricked them. Joshua and the leaders of Israel then swore an oath, promising not to harm the Gibeonites. This vow was made hastily and to their hurt, but even after they discovered they had been tricked, they upheld their vow rather than dishonour the name of the LORD. Joshua 9:19 says,

Then all the rulers said to all the congregation, "We have sworn to them by the Lord God of Israel; now therefore, we may not touch them.

Another hasty vow was made by Jephthah in Judges 11:30,31.

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, 31 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."

But after he won the battle and returned home and his daughter came out to meet him, Jephthah said in verse 35,

"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."

But in this case Jephthah should have gone back on his vow. His vow was sinful and was not based on God's Word. The LORD would not have been pleased with Jephthah's sin, and by carrying out his vow, he actually added to his sins. So this is an example of an oath that should not have been made and should not have been kept.

Another vow that was made in the time of the Judges, this time a right vow, is recorded in the book of Ruth, chapter 3:13, where Boaz promised Ruth saying "As the LORD lives" he would perform the duty of a kinsman redeemer to her if her other relative refused to do so.

A number of oaths are also recorded in the book of Samuel. In 1 Samuel 24:21,22 Saul said to David,

"Therefore swear now to me by the Lord that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name from my father's house." 22 So David swore to Saul.

And there are more oaths in the Old Testament, such as the one David made to Bathsheba, promising her that Solomon would be the next king (1 Kings 1:29,30), or the oath the prophet Elijah made to Obadiah in 1 Kings 18:15.

Oaths were made in the New Testament also. In 2 Corinthians 1:23 the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians,

"I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth."

It was necessary for Paul to speak under oath in this situation because his credibility had been challenged. People were saying that although Paul said "Yes, Yes," he did not do the "Yes" and so his word could not be trusted. But Paul insisted that just as God is faithful, so his word also could be trusted. Verse 18,

"But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No."

Because Paul's honesty was being challenged, it was therefore necessary for the honor of God's name that he swear an oath by calling God to be his witness.

Another oath in the New Testament can be found in Romans 1:9,10

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, 10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.

And in the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Christ also swore an oath. Every time He began to speak by saying "Truly, truly I say to you", we can understand this to be Him underlining the truth of His words in the form of an oath. In this way He impresses on us that He who is the Truth vouches for the truth of His words. And the Lord Jesus also spoke under oath at the time of His crucifixion, when he stood before the high priest. Matthew 26:63,64 says,

And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said."

Jesus Christ Himself spoke under oath by the living God and declared to the high priest and to the world that he is the Christ, the Son of God. For that He was charged with blasphemy and declared deserving of death. But He was right to speak under oath for in this way He maintained and promoted faithfulness and truth to the glory of God. Under oath Jesus declared who He really is and so we can be absolutely certain that it was because He was the Son of God that He was crucified for our sins and that salvation can be found in His name.

And there we have the need for the oath. In a sense we always speak under oath, for every word we speak is spoken before God. But the oath is still needed so that we might declare with certainty the things that are true. In this sin-filled life where man asks “what is truth?” and concludes that “the truth is relative”, the oath must be used to proclaim that truth is to be found in the God of truth. And the God of truth, who alone knows the heart, is called upon to bear witness to the truth so that by it His name might be glorified and we can be assured of the truth of a person’s word – not because he is always truthful, but because God bears witness to the truth.

It is therefore a blessed privilege that we may swear an oath. Mindful of our sins and weakness and our need to be sure of what is true, the LORD has given us His name to confirm that which is true.

And in His mercy, the LORD does not only command us to use His name when making a lawful oath to maintain and promote the truth, but He has done the same. He gives to us the promises of the covenant under oath. Hebrews 6:13-18 says,

“For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. 16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability [that is the unchangeable nature] of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

The oath is needed so that we might be convinced of what is true, for the glory of God and the good of man.

## 2. The significance of the oath.

The significance of the oath is, as the catechism says, that through it fidelity and truth can be maintained and promoted to God’s glory and our neighbour’s good.

How the truth benefits our neighbour’s good, that is his honour and reputation, will be explained further in Lord’s Day 43 when we will consider the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” But how does the oath give glory to God?

We read together from Deuteronomy 10. Verse 20 states,

“You shall fear the LORD your God: you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.”

The same command to serve the Lord and take oaths in His name can be found in Deuteronomy 6:13. Taking the name of the LORD on our lips in the form of an oath, therefore, is an expression of our worship and our relationship with Him. It is because the LORD has redeemed us to be His people that we are to fear the LORD, to walk in His ways, and to love Him, to serve Him with all their heart and soul. (Verse 12) And it is in that context we are called to make our oaths in the name of the LORD.

This also explains why it is a grievous sin to swear by any name other than the name of the One True God. For in swearing an oath and calling the LORD as witness to the truth of what we say, we declare Him to be the One who both owns us and knows us. He alone knows our hearts and He alone is the judge of our souls. Only God has the right to be called upon when we make an oath; calling upon

another person or saint or thing – even in jest – is a denial of the Great God, the One who is mighty and awesome. (Deuteronomy 10:17)

In addition to this, taking the name of the LORD on our lips in the form of an oath is not just a testimony to the truthfulness of what we say, but it is a testimony to the truth of the Word of God. And for that reason it is most appropriate to hold a Bible in our hand should we be called to swear an oath in court or for any other lawful reason.

But this also demonstrates the seriousness of the sin of lying while under oath. Because we invoke the name of the LORD when we swear an oath, the sin of perjury is not sin against man in the first place, but sin against God. For when we call upon the name of the LORD to declare that what we speak is the truth, then should we lie, we attempt to rob God of His honour and His truth. The sin of lying under oath defiles the most holy name of God, for it calls the God of truth to bear witness to the lie.

But when we speak the truth in the name of the LORD, then His name is glorified. For then our truthfulness bears witness to the truthfulness of God in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:18-20,

But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me, Silvanus, and Timothy—was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

The trustworthiness of the words of Paul were a testimony to the trustworthiness of the words of God. And all of God's promises came to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Christ the LORD has given us the ultimate proof that His Word is true.

And so the oath bears witness to the truth of God in Jesus Christ. We are called to swear an oath by the name of God for in doing so we call people not to the truth of our words in the first place, but to the truth of the Word of God that has been fulfilled in Christ. By swearing an oath by the name of God we declare that our Father is not the father of lies, but the Father of truth. And it is in Him that we speak the words of truth.

And there we find comfort in the oath. The lawful oath is a testimony that the sure promises of God are firm and steadfast. The sure promises of God, that He Himself has confirmed to us in an oath, is the hope that we have as an anchor for our soul. And just as an anchor holds a ship firm and steadfast, so the unchangeable, oath-bound promise of God holds our hearts fast to Jesus Christ and the salvation that is ours in Him. Our use of the oath is a declaration of the hope we have in the unchanging nature and Word of God and the oath He has sworn. His Word is firm and steadfast. His oath is sure. And now Jesus is in heaven for us, as an oath-bound guarantee that we too will be there with Him. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes. His Word is true, because God is true. Amen.