

SERMON XXIV.

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WHETHER WELL-COMPOSED RELIGIOUS VOWS DO NOT EXCEEDINGLY
PROMOTE RELIGION.

What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people.—Psalm cxvi. 12, 14.

DAVID was no Popish votary; nor were the vows [which] he is now about to pay like the vows of Popish and superstitious votaries, either in the matter of them or in the object of them, nor in the manner or end of them; and I hope you who read these lines are, as the greatest part of my auditors were, far enough from liking of such vows in others, and from lying under the ensnaring tie of any such vow yourselves. Since, then, there is such unlikeness hoped from you, justify the unlikeness and disparity between my discourse and theirs, whose business is either to state and maintain monkish vows, or to state and overthrow them; the one the work of Popish, the other the work of Protestant, writers. In the words which I have chosen, we have a fit occasion to state our own case by David's, who was mindful of his debt to the Lord, and the more careful to discharge it, because it was due by vow.

Two things noted will be a key to open the words, so far as we at present are concerned in them:—

1. *That the sum of all our religion is our rendering to the Lord.*—I might so define religion; and, with these qualifications, *that it be done in right and due manner, in right and proper matter*, it would amount to a definition of the true religion. All the religions which men have in the vanity and blindness of their minds superstitiously and idolatrously adhered to, have been nothing else but their rendering to their *supposed* gods, according to their apprehensions and erroneous thoughts; and the rendering to the true God, *in a true and right manner*, is the sum of true religion. This notion is consonant to the scriptures: thus: “Render unto God the things that are God's.” (Matt. xxii. 21.) As true loyalty is a giving to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, so true piety is the giving to God the things that are God's. And so, in that parable of the vineyard let out to husbandmen, all we owe to God is expressed by the *rendering the fruit of the vineyard*; (Matt. xxi. 41;) particular acts of religion are so expressed too in the scriptures. (Psalm lvi. 13; Hosea xiv. 2; 2Chron. xxxiv. 31.) Let this, then, be the import of David's *מה אשיב ליהוה* “What shall I render unto the Lord?” “In what things, and by what means, shall I promote religion in the exercise thereof? How shall I

show myself duly religious toward Him who hath been constantly and abundantly munificent in his benefits towards me?"

2. The second thing to be noted is this, *that David so ordered his vows that he could pay them; and in paying them did so render to the Lord, as that religion was promoted and furthered.*—He had so engaged himself by vow, that he could say, "I will pay;" and his vows were such as were a fit answer to that inquiry, "What shall I render to the Lord?" David had very well composed his vow; it lay within his compass; he *could* perform it; and, in performing, he paid tribute and did homage to the Lord; in keeping his vow, he gave unto the Lord.

Now put these two notes together, and they are resolved into this doctrinal position:—

DOCTRINE.

Vows, so made as we can say, "We will pay them," and so made that in paying them we render to the Lord, do much advance and promote religion. Or, in the words of that case of conscience now to be stated, *Well-composed vows do much promote religion.*

Whoso doth engage himself by a well-ordered vow, doth set his religion in the whole, or in some particular part of it, in very good forwardness. Religion is a gainer by this bargain well-made; the bond is to God, but religion receives the interest at least: well-composed vows are religion's engines, able to move the weightier burdens and loads, and fit to be only employed in them.

In handling farther this case, we must inquire,

I. What a vow is, that we may know of what we speak.

II. Whether a vow may lawfully be made by us.

III. When it is well composed for religion's advantage.

IV. How much it furthereth religion.

V. Whence this influence of a vow upon religious persons.

VI. What proper use to make of the position.

I. A vow is a voluntary and deliberate promise made unto God in an extraordinary case. "It is a religious promise made unto God in a holy manner:" so a modern writer defines it.* It is a "holy and religious promise, advisedly and freely made unto God, either to do or to omit somewhat which appeareth to be grateful and well-pleasing unto him:" so Bucanus.† I forbear Aquinas's definition of a vow. If these [which] I have given satisfy not, then view it in the words of Peter Martyr, a man of repute, and well known to our own nation in the days of Edward VI., of ever-blessed memory: "It is a holy promise, whereby we bind ourselves to offer somewhat unto God."‡ There is one more who defines it, and he is a man whose judgment, learning, and holiness hath perfumed his name: it is learned Perkins, in his "Cases of Conscience." "A vow," saith he, "is a promise made unto God of things lawful and possible."

Of these five descriptions of a vow, you may indifferently choose which you will; for when you have chosen either of them, and looked upon it,

* *Est promissio religiosa sanctè facta Deo.*—SZEGEDINI *Loci Communes.* † *Est sancta et religiosa promissio Deo consultò et sponte facta, ad aliquid faciendum vel omittendum quod illi gratum et acceptum fore constat.*—BUCANI *Loci Communes,* xlv. ‡ *Est sancta promissio quâ nos obstringimus Deo aliquid oblaturus esse.*—PETRI MARTYRIS *Loci Communes, de Votis.*

you will find it lays an obligation upon the person vowing, and binds him strictly and unalterably to perform his vows: for it is, 1. *A promise*; (Deut. xxiii. 23;) it is not a purpose, not a single resolution, much less is it the deliberation of the mind concerning a matter not yet determined, but determinable on either part. A vow is a promise which had its beginning in a serious, due, and thorough deliberation; which from deliberation passed into a rational, strong, and fixed purpose of doing what had been so deliberated and weighed: nay, further yet, a vow passeth into a formal and express promise, and so makes the votary a debtor. This part of a vow Solomon hath long since prepared to our hands: "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error." (Eccles. v. 6.) Note what Solomon forbids, namely, "Offend not by rash vowing;" * nor seek excuse by saying, "It was an error;" that is, "Through mistake and imprudence thou hast vowed, not observing what thou didst when thou vowedst." † It must be a deliberate and advised act of a man, if he will duly vow to God. 2. It is said to be *voluntary*: the thing speaks itself; a vow must be free; it is injurious to extort a promise from a man: free choice should be the spring of every promise, much more of every vow. The old law empowered some persons to *disannul* the vow of another; but no law or reason can empower any one to *enforce* a vow upon another: each one may "forbear to vow." (Deut. xxiii. 22.) 3. As it must be voluntarily and deliberate, so it *must be to God alone*. We read still, "If thou wilt vow, thou shalt vow to the Lord:" not to angels, with such as worship them; not to saints, with superstitious Papists; not to any man: man may *promise* solemnly unto man, but he may *not vow*; man may be *the witness* of thy vow, but man may not be *the object*. For the dependence of man upon man is not great enough to warrant the one in vowing, or the other in expecting, such a vow. Beside that, we must not vow to one [whom] we must not pray to; nor can we expect help from man in cases that are just ground for and which do require a vow from us. 4. Which cases, I say, are *extraordinary*, and more than usual either from *received* mercy, or hoped and *expected* mercy. It is impossible he should well compose his vows, or duly pay them, who makes ordinary and daily cases ground of his vows: we cannot but forget many an ordinary mercy received; but we may not, must not, forget any vow made. We must pray for every mercy we want; but we may not bind ourselves in the bonds of a vow for every mercy we pray for: this would inevitably cast us upon the sin of falsehood and unfaithfulness in our vows.

II. But I proceed to the second thing to be inquired into; that is, *Whether it be lawful, in any case, for us now, under the New Testament, to make a vow.*—That it was lawful for the Jew, none have doubted; but some doubt is made whether a Christian may voluntarily bind himself to God by making a vow. The solution of this doubt is necessary to our clearer determination of this case; for if vows were now unlawful to us, they could neither be well-composed, nor could they advantage religion; and if it may appear they may lawfully be made, then we may go on in

Ne committas temerè vovendo.—MERCERUS *in loc.* † *Neque dixeris te per errorem et imprudentiam vovisse, nec advertisse quid faceres dum voveres.*—Idem, *ibid.*

the consideration of the remaining particulars. To this second, then, very briefly we answer, that a Christian may lawfully make a promise or vow unto God, binding himself more than ordinarily unto God for, and in expectation of, mercy, in some or other more than ordinary case or exigency. For a great mercy received already, a Christian may vow thankfulness; for a mercy not received, but expected, he may vow, upon the receipt, to render to the Lord more than usual duty. "Such vows at this day may be used by us, so often as the Lord hath delivered us from any destruction, or dangerous disease, or from any danger," saith Calvin, speaking of vows for mercy to be received.* And Mr. Perkins, in his "Cases of Conscience," both affirms what we now do, and answers the objections made to the contrary. But leave we men, and come to reason: *why* it is lawful for us to vow.

Vows, well-ordered, not sin in themselves, nor by accident.

1. *What is not evil in itself, nor evil by accident, unless made evil by the undue ordering of it through our fault, may lawfully be done by us.*—I know this, well considered, proves itself; yet I would confirm it with this observation: what is not evil, may lawfully be done by us. Now things are evil either *per se*, ["in themselves,"] or *per accidens*: if vows be either way evil, it is "by accident;" which accidental evil may be prevented, and indeed is, by due composing of vows, and by diligent performing of them when composed. So that, if a Christian may order the making and performing his vow, so as to prevent the evil which attends a vow ill-made; then such a Christian may surely make a vow very lawfully. But I presume no one will doubt, that he who makes vows seldom, consultedly, and sincerely, may duly keep them, and in so doing prevent any consequent evil.

Some vows once lawful on moral grounds, such lawful still.

2. Vows may be lawfully made now by us Christians, because *what was lawful to the Jew on moral considerations, and not on any ceremonial considerations, that is also lawful now unto us Christians.*—Let it be noted, I do not say what was once lawful to them is now lawful unto us; (for it was lawful for them to sacrifice; it is not now lawful unto us;) but I say, what was once, *on moral grounds*, lawful to them, is now lawful to us, because the morality of the thing (which is supposed the ground of this vow) is the same to them and us. It was lawful for Jacob, on moral motives, to engage himself more closely to God, if God would indeed be with him; it is as lawful for any of us, on the same occasion, and for the like motive, to vow unto God. Jacob was moved to it, lest he should be found less than ordinarily thankful, for a more than ordinary providence and mercy to him: so may you or I; "for it is not abhorrent to the duty of a pious man, at such time to consecrate (as a solemn testimony of his acknowledgment) an offering by vow, lest he should seem unthankful for his bounty."† If there were then *vota moralia*, "vows

* *Ejusmodi vota hodie quoque nobis in usu esse possunt, quoties nos Dominus vel a clade aliqua, vel a morbo difficili, vel ab alio quovis discrimine eripuit.*—CALVINI Institut. lib. iv. c. 13. † *Neque enim a pii hominis officio tunc abhorret, votivam oblationem, velut solenne recognitionis symbolum, consecrare, ne ingratus erga benignitatem ejus videatur.*—Idem, ibid.

that were moral in their matter, manner, motives, and ends ;” (and that such there were, Job’s covenant with his eyes, and David’s swearing to keep God’s commandments, prove to us ;) either we must say they did what was unlawful, or else we cannot make such moral vows, (which is not rational to suppose,) or else, yielding such vows so made to be lawful to them, they are so to us. But, thirdly,

Vows by general consent of nations approved.

3. Vows may lawfully be made by us Christians ; for *it is a kind of thankfulness and acknowledgment made to God, with the universal approbation and consent of men.*—It is such a chief rent, that no nation in the world, putting a value on God’s goodness, and putting a difference between great and little dangers, between great and little blessings, but did constantly approve this way of preventing great dangers, by great vows, and re-senting* great blessings, by like vowed praises ; thus addressing themselves in a more than ordinary manner to their gods, on more than ordinary exigences.† And if I must bring my witnesses to depose for the truth, one speaks in English thus : “ Vow was used frequently by all nations and people beset with danger.”‡ Another learned pen at once intimateth the universality of the custom, and censureth the vanity and blind folly of the Heathens, in their vows to their idol-gods. “ Hence the follies and monstrous absurdities of the Heathens in their vows, wherewith they did too insolently abuse their gods.”§ It were endless to attempt what testimonies might be gathered up in this point ; but by these it is apparent, that thankfulness is a debt which all nations apprehended might and ought to be insured to God by vow. So that hence I would collect, that as gratitude is not only lawful, but a duty imprinted on the soul of man ; so this high degree of gratitude is a copy or transcript of that original : it is lawful, doubtless, to us to be thankful in the highest degree. Now, the return of more than ordinary duty, for more than ordinary mercy, is the highest, and is the vow we speak of.

* *To resent*, from the Latin *sentio*, “ to feel,” and the intensive particle *re*, was, in all its forms, almost uniformly used by our old writers, down to the age of James II. in the signification of *feeling intensely* either in the mind, or through any one of the bodily senses. Our modern usage of the word *resentment*, in the bad sense of “ strong anger on account of some affront or injury received,” is but confining what was formerly a general term to a more restricted meaning. The reflex French verb *se ressentir*, from which it is derived, still retains this meaning of a reciprocation of feeling, either of kindness or unkindness, between the agent and patient. This interchange of good or bad *sentiment*, (a perverted word of the same origin,) is determined by the character of the feeling which is communicated by the agent, and which is to be accordingly *well* or *ill* taken and reciprocated by the patient. In this correct acceptation it is employed by an eminent religious poet, about the middle of the last century, in a hymn addressed to our Saviour :—

“ My inmost bowels shall *resent*
The yearnings of thy dying love.”—EDIT.

† *Quid enim nisi vota supersunt?*—OVIDII *Tristium* lib. i. eleg. ii. l.

“ To one of every hope bereft,
What else but vows and prayers are left ?”—EDIT.

‡ *Votum omnibus gentibus et populis in periculo constitutis usitatum.*—SZEGEDINI *Loci Communes*, De Votis.

§ *Hinc illæ votorum ineptiæ, imò prodigiöse absurditates apud Ethnicos, quibus nimis insolenter cum diis suis luserunt.*—CALVINI *Institut.* lib. iv. c. 13.

Vows the only gospel free-will-offering-extraordinary.

4. *Unless such vows may be accounted lawful to us, I cannot see how we have any way of making free, voluntary, and extraordinary acknowledgments unto God.*—For since all duty is commanded, and so determined as to matter and manner ordinarily, that the law prescribes and enjoins them, and we may not superadd any thing to the law; yet sometimes more than ordinary mercy gives us command to be more than ordinary in our acknowledgments; which, since it may not be by doing any thing not commanded, must be done by adding our own promise and word, to have more than our ordinary care was (or otherwise would have been) to do what is commanded; or else it must be left undone as unlawful, which is in the issue to leave us without any way of binding ourselves to acknowledgments, suited to extraordinary providences. In a word, seeing the law of God is the standing rule of our daily obedience, and is the same unchanged rule of our daily duties; but, withal, the mercies and varieties of providences are a law likewise to us Christians, and, when great, require great and suitable deportment in us; we must have some way, and that lawful, to measure out our re-sentments,* which can be no other but the laying bonds and voluntary obligations on ourselves unto God, which is the same with this vow. Either there must be some such lawful way, or else great providential mercies which call for greater returns, and are a real law to us, cannot be duly observed and obeyed. Now, I know, riches of grace in the gospel have not so intrenched on, or done injury to, providences. I know, that as grace is no enemy to the standing law, nor patronizeth licentiousness; so neither is grace an enemy to providence, nor warranteth any one to overlook the greatness and extraordinary mercy in any providences, or to be careless and slight in answering them with unsuitable returns of thankfulness.

Vows best insure duty, and ensnare not us.

5. *But that is lawful to us Christians, which doth most certainly insure our duty to God, yet doth not ensnare us in the insuring of it.*—That you or I may do lawfully [that] which will not ensnare us, but more strongly engage us to our duty, none will doubt this. In dealing with a man, you, or I, or any reasonable man, would be ready to give any security that we might give without ensnaring of ourselves. Now, vows well-composed do more insure the duty; (for we cannot go back, it is a vow;) yet do not ensnare, for we can perform them, they are vows well-composed. Jephthah's vow bound him fast, for it was the bond of a vow; but this bond ensnared him, for it was rash, and ill-composed; such was unlawful to him and is to us. (Judges xi. 35.) David's vow here was an insuring him to God, and his duty; it unalterably bound him: yet it was no snare to him; for he had so vowed, that he could say, "I will pay my vows." Such vows were lawful to him; such are lawful to us. Now, all well-composed vows will be such; they will very firmly bind us to our duty, and they will never ensnare us in their binding us; which thing will be more plainly seen, upon discovery of the next general; namely,

* See the note in the preceding page.—EDIT.

III. *When vows are well-composed, and so consequently for the advantage of religion.*

It must be in extraordinary cases.

1. Then, if you would duly and well compose your vows, *you must wait a fit season; not vow on every occasion.*—[He] who is ready to vow on every occasion, will break his vow on every occasion. It is a necessary rule, that “we be as sparing in making our vows as may be;” there being many great inconveniencies attending frequent and multiplied vows. It is very observable, that the scripture mentioneth very few examples of vows, compared with the many instances of very great and wonderful providences; as if it would give us some instances, that we might know what we have to do, and yet would give us but few, that we might know we are not to do it often. You read Jacob lived seven-score and seven years; (Gen. xlvii. 28;) but you read, I think, but of one vow that he made. Our extraordinary exigences are not many; and, I say, our vows should not be more. Let this, then, be the first necessary ingredient of a well-ordered vow. Let it be no oftener made than the pressing greatness of an evil to be removed, or the alluring excellency of a blessing extraordinary to be obtained, will well warrant. Jephthah’s vow was so far right; he had just occasion; there was a great and pressing danger to be removed; there was an excellent blessing to be obtained: the danger was, lest Israel should be enslaved; the blessing was victory over their enemies. This warranted his vow, though his rashness marred it. It was in David’s troubles that David sware, and vowed a vow to the Most High; (Psalm cxxxii. 1, 2;) and Jacob forbore to vow until his more than ordinary case bade him vow, and warranted him in so doing. (Gen. xxviii. 20.) Let us do as he did,—spare to vow, until such case puts us on it.

It must be deliberate.

2. When the extraordinary case warrants thee to this extraordinary obliging [of] thyself, then *be sure to proceed deliberately, and with advice.*—Consider what thou doest: every one condemns rash vows; and, I am sure, inconsiderate vows are rash ones. Here Jephthah failed; he did not consider, and ponder with himself, what he was about to do when he vowed. Aquinas reckons this among the three things necessary to a vow.* And since this was wanting in Jephthah, “the scripture makes a narration of his fact, but no where giveth commendation to it.”† This is one of the conditions Bucan prescribes, “that we thoroughly weigh.”‡ But we have a greater than Aquinas, or the other two, here: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God:” which rule he doth in the context extend to this case of vows. (Eccles. v. 2, 4—6.) Be not hasty, but deliberate these four things in thy vow:—

* *Ad votum tria de necessitate requiruntur; scilicet, deliberatio, &c.*—AQUINAS, *Secunda Secundæ*, q. 88, art. 1. † *Scriptura hoc ejus factum narrat tantum, sed non laudat.* —PET. MARTYR’S *Loci Com.* cl. 3, c. 6. ‡ *Ut maturè deliberemus.*—BUCANI *Loci Communes*, De Votis.

Whether lawful.

(1.) *Whether that thou vowest to do be lawful.*—Sin can never be the matter of a justifiable and well-composed vow. If that thou vowest be not lawful, it is not so much a vow, as a contriving and designing of wickedness. It was a murderous conspiracy of those “more than forty,” not a vow, to take away Paul’s life. (Acts xxiii. 21.) Whatever God hath forbidden us in our ordinary course of life, (as he hath forbidden every sin,) that cannot be the matter of an extraordinary promise unto God. The Schoolmen tell us it is to be *de meliore bono*, “in an excellent good.” Now, what is not lawful, is not good.* They tell us, *Debet fieri Deo de iis quæ Dei sunt*: “It must be made to God, in the things that are of God:” and we are sure no unlawful thing is of God.

Whether acceptable to God.

(2.) As it must be considered whether the thing be lawful; so next we are to consider, *whether it will be acceptable unto the Lord.*—The vow is made to him, and the performance of it is to him: it is a debt, and payment is to be made to him. If it be a matter which thou findest, upon after-search, to be indeed lawful, yet in reason to be thought not acceptable for so great a mercy as thou hast received, thou wilt be enforced to confess thy mistake and error in vowing: and this is to provoke God. (Eccles. v. 6.) *Sit Deo acceptum*, [“That it be acceptable to God,”] is the second circumstance under deliberation:

Whether proportioned.

(3.) Which will be seen by a third particular, that is, *whether that thing [which] thou vowest bear a proportion to that thou didst expect and pray for when thou vowedst, or to that thou hadst received, for which thou dost now make thy vow.*—Bring it, with the providence which occasioned it; set them together; and hear what thy own reason, what other men’s judgment, what the very things themselves, what thy receipts and returns, say of thy vows, in the matter of them. As in ordinary, so in all extraordinary, mercies, God requires and accepteth only suitable and well-proportioned returns: if it be over proportioned, it will hazard thee; if it be under-proportioned, it will shame thee; and neither will be so well accepted. Though one meal’s meat, when thou art hungry, is more, and a greater mercy, than thou canst equal by thy obedience; yet to vow thyself, and all that is thine, for that one mercy, is more than is expected, and may be called a disproportioned vow. So, on the contrary, to pray for a prosperous voyage, and an ample return of thousands, and to vow thereupon a few pence or shillings, is disproportioned, will not be accepted. Thou must render to the Lord, according to thy receipts from the Lord.

Whether in thy power.

(4.) *In a well-composed vow, thy deliberation must be employed in considering thy power and ability; whether it be in thy power to do what thou vowest.*—No impossible thing can be the matter of a vow. God hath not made an impossibility the matter and primitive object of

* AQUINAS, *Secunda Secundæ*, q. 88, art. 1. c.

our duty; nor doth he expect we should; nor would he accept such a vow: for a vow of an impossible thing is, in effect, to bind ourselves to falsify our vow. Who engageth to do what he cannot do, engageth himself to be worse than his word. You must consider, then, whether the thing be possible in itself; and then, next, whether it be in your power, that you can say you will do it, that you may truly affirm you can absolutely do it; which thing being very uncertain, (for what is to-day in our power, to-morrow may be out of our power,) it is therefore good to limit it so far, as it shall be in your power, and so long as it continues in your power, to perform your vows. These two things are requisite to a well-composed vow; an occasion or exigency more than ordinary; and then a thing lawful, acceptable, proportioned to the mercy, and within our power.

Vows must be cheerfully made.

3. Now, when these concur, a third must be added; that is, *thou must vow cheerfully, and with a ready mind.*—There must be much of the will in it. Some tell us, the Latin word noting “a vow,” comes from the word which signifies “the will.” Indeed, all that is in a vow, so far as it is a vow, is and must be of our will; for it consisteth principally, if not solely, in the manner of our obliging ourselves; and this is voluntary. God hath left it much at our liberty to vow, or not to vow; only he requires us to do it cheerfully, if we vow: it is matter of our choice: “If thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.” (Deut. xxiii. 22.) Yet, if we will vow, it is matter of duty to do it cheerfully; for so the Lord “loveth a cheerful giver;” (2 Cor. ix. 7;) and therefore expects a speedy performance. “Defer not to pay.” (Eccles. v. 4.) Hence the rabbinical proverb, “Speed suits the time of deliverance.”* As a vow suits the time of dangers and straits, so haste from a ready mind fits the time of deliverance and mercy.

Vow sincerely.

4. *But he that will compose his vow well, must vow sincerely and uprightly.*—That is, to the end he may most honour God,

(1.) *By the commemoration of his mercy and goodness.*—Vows are mercy’s monuments, on which are written the praise of the Lord.

(2.) *By the publishing the mercies of God.*—For the engaging others to admire the Lord, and to trust him, and to seek unto him.

(3.) *By the setting grace on work in the heart and soul of him that vows.*—It sets grace on work, both in that part which eyes God, to draw nearer and to keep closer to him; and in that part which keeps eye on sin, to prevent, mortify, and destroy it. So, then, when a Christian (having received, or being in expectation of, some extraordinary mercy from God) doth deliberately promise what is lawful in itself, acceptable to God, proportioned to the mercy, and within his power to perform; whoso doth this cheerfully and sincerely, that God may be honoured in the continued remembrance of it, in the public declaring it, and in the

* בְּשֵׁעִת רְחֵא שֵׁיטָא. *Tempore respirationis festinatio.*

488 SERMON XXIV. WHETHER WELL-COMPOSED RELIGIOUS VOWS exciting of grace, in the person vowing; then hath a Christian well-composed his vow. And such a vow doth very much further religion: which will appear by handling the next thing.

HOW WELL-COMPOSED VOWS PROMOTE RELIGION.

IV. *How much, or in what things, it doth further and promote religion.*—Now there are three grand concerns of religion, than which it hath none greater; and all three are carried on and promoted by such vows as these.

The credit of religion.

1. *Religion hath its concernment in the credit and reputation which it hath in the world.*—Religion hath a name to look after, so well as you or I; and it loseth or gaineth, as it is either honoured or reproached by the professors of it. Now, when times of extraordinary danger drive us to our prayers and vows to the true God, and we resolve to have mercy from him, or to choose to fall into his hand, this sets the credit and honour of religion, that it can have recourse to God, who, we know, can deliver us. This is somewhat; but the making a vow doth not so much honour religion as the performing of it doth, when it is hereby declared to the world,—that religion is the thing [that] makes men the same in their mercies which they were in their distresses; that the God [whom] they worship is the true God, able to require their vows, if they should neglect to pay them. A Heathen who in distress makes a vow, and in his safety performs it carefully, putteth a very high honour upon his false god, upon his idol. What Christian soever makes and keeps his vows duly, doth likewise put an honour on the true God.

(1.) *It honours the power and providence of God, by acknowledging its sovereignty over all in the world, and its particular disposing and over-ruling of us and our concerns.*—When thou prayest and vowest in a strait, thou seemest to tell the world thou believest that thy God rules the world by his power and providence. But when thou payest thy vows, thou really testifiest to the world, that thou believest and ownest this power in thy particular case. So when Jephthah, when David, paid their vows, they did give real testimony that their God delivered them by his power and providence; and this is religion's honour,—that it is the worship of so mighty a God.

(2.) *It honours God in his readiness to hear, and in his faithfulness to answer, the prayers of his suppliants.*—Prayers conceived speak a belief that he is ready; *vows made* speak our confidence that he is faithful; but now *vows performed* speak thus much,—that we have found him so to us. When David said, “I will pay my vows,” it is that he may render to the Lord for the Lord's readiness and faithfulness to hear and deliver him. Now, it is religion's honour, that it is the worship of a God of truth and faithfulness.

(3.) *It honours God in his omniscience and all-seeing eye; it declares to the world that we worship and serve a God who takes notice of us in particular, and who observes whether we keep our word with him, or no.*—When thou hast made a vow, and canst perform it, yea, dost perform it,

because thou knowest and believest thy God remembers when thou didst make it, and observeth how thou wilt perform it; what is this but to give him the honour of his all-seeing and all-observing eye?

(4.) *It honours religion, in that it is a demonstration that religion teacheth men gratitude.*—It is a high charge which is laid on the Romans in their Heathenism, that they were unthankful. (Rom. i. 21.) It is a very great reproach to religion, to have its professors branded with this: it is, though but one single miscarriage, left on Hezekiah's name, like a spot in the moon, to endure while his name shall be in remembrance,—that he remembered not to return to the Lord “according to the benefit done unto him.” (2 Chron. xxxii. 25.) But now thy care to make thy vows well that they may be kept, and thy thankfulness in keeping them when so made, do clearly evidence, that thy religion engageth thee to aim and attempt at the highest gratitude. Now, according to the old rule, “If you say a man is *unthankful*, you say he is all naught;” * so, if you say, “He is *thankful*, and his religion teacheth him to be so,” you speak all good of the man and of his religion. Indeed, David doth often comprise all religion in this, “Be thankful unto him.”

So religion shineth forth in the lustre and brightness of a good name, when they who profess it dare neither be rash in making, nor remiss or false in keeping, their vows.

Next, vows well-composed, and faithfully performed, do much promote religion, and that frequently,

By spreading religion.

2. *By setting forward the growth of religion, in the midst of those who profess it.*—For I will only speak of this now, albeit I might speak of the spreading of religion amongst such, who before were strangers to it, by the faithfulness of some zealous, prudent, and industrious votaries. When Christians on great exigences are brought on their knees to pray, and plead, and confess, and promise, if they may be heard; and when they come to praise, acknowledge, and pay their vows to God in the presence of those [who] are called his people; it is very powerful to,

(By confirming.)

(1.) *Confirm them in the profession, and to establish them.*—For who would not hold fast, where he can observe such goodness, tenderness, and power in [the] God [whom] he worshippeth? Men, religious men, some at least, will praise the Lord, for such wonderful works to the children of men; (Psalm cvii. 8;) when they see such excellent loving-kindness showed to the distressed, the children of men will put their trust in God. (Psalm xxxvi. 7.) None will leave the shadow of that wing which so saveth.

By reforming.

(2.) *It is very like to make them inquire into the ways and doings which have been theirs, but have not been good, and to look forward to*

* *Si ingratum dixeris, omnia dicitis.*

490 SERMON XXIV. WHETHER WELL-COMPOSED RELIGIOUS VOWS *the ways which must be theirs, and must be amended.*—When a stander-by shall observe the distress a good man is in, and how he re-sents* neglect of duty, prevalency of corruption, necessity of reforming, and binds himself to more diligent discharge of duty, to more vigorous opposition of sin, to constant care of reforming,—he is ready to reflect on himself; and, if he be what he professeth, will judge himself one who is as deep in the faults, as much needing to reform, and as near to the like or greater distress: he may, ere long, be put to it, and therefore it will be best to be on the amending hand.

Vows promote religion in the votary's heart and life.

3. But, however, thirdly, *vows well made, and kept well, very much improve and promote religion in the heart and life of him who so voweth and keepeth his vow.*—If none of those who are acquainted with thy religion making and keeping thy vows, should either honour it more, or set to the exercise of it more, yet certainly it will produce such effects in thy life as will very much conduce to the increase of godliness and righteousness: which will appear by some few particulars, which are undeniably the effects of a well-composed vow, and do as undeniably promote and set forward religion: as,

Vows increase circumspection.

(1.) *A well-composed vow will make thee more circumspect and wary in the general course of thy life.*—Such an influence it hath, as doth more directly work on one particular part, yet is not terminated to that particular only. It is here as with a debtor, who doubles his bond and security for his debt, upon some extraordinary favour which his creditor showed him. This double bond directly looks to that particular debt; but it works on the debtor's ingenuity and gratitude, to be the more careful in the discharge of all his debts: so thy vow looks on a particular, but engageth thee to better discharge of all thy debts to God. Thus it was with David: "Thy vows are upon me, O God." (Psalm lvi. 12.) Now these vows were made when he was in danger of his life, as it seemeth from verse 13. For when God heard him, he delivered his soul from death: for this he vowed praises in particular, and he will render them. But, withal, he takes himself to be hereby engaged to a more exact and circumspect walk before God in all duties; so he expresseth himself, in the latter part of verse 13. Vows are too broad and general, which are not fixed more especially to some one thing; and they are too narrow, which are so fixed to one that they exclude all other things which might conveniently be taken in. Jacob mentions tithes as the particular object of his vow; but Jacob withal intended a more exact and circumspect care over himself and family in matters of religion; as appeareth by those passages: "Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you." Here is the reforming of his household. And, observe, this was in consideration of God's answering his prayers, when he vowed unto God, who

* See note, page 483.—EDIT.

answered him in his distress, and was with him in the way which he went. (Gen. xxxv. 2, 3.) So, then, like a stream, it riseth from one spring-head, and runs in one main current; but it disperseth itself through many other smaller branches, and waters every part. But,

Vows discover former defects.

(2.) *Well-composed vows do very much promote grace and holiness in the heart of the vower, in that it doth bring the man to a serious view and survey of his former defects and neglects.*—When he comes to look over his straits, what likely brought them on him, and so put him on this extraordinary way of seeking God, and suing for mercy; when he reads over the bond he hath voluntarily entered into, and observes what put him thus in debt to God; when he views these, and such-like particulars, he comes to knowledge of his former aberrations and defects. Now, as a good and careful tradesman accounts he is in a good forwardness to a thriving way when he hath found out what did hinder and endamage his trade, for removal of which he hath set himself in a hopeful and likely way; so, when a Christian comes to cast up accounts, to make even, he finds an unconstant and starting heart hath in this or that particular endamaged him; and if there be any way of dealing with it to keep it constant and stable, it is by doubling its bonds; and this must be done by vow. This course is like to repair former defects; and reparation, I am sure, is a good and effectual means to keep up the house. Some interpreters tell us, that when Jacob came to reform his house, it was occasioned by his defective observance of his vow; and that God, in Gen. xxxv. 1, puts him in mind of it in such words: “Go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar.” If their conjecture fail not, it is a pertinent instance to our case: Jacob had made a good vow, and well-ordered, and doubtless had performed much of it; yet, thirty years after, he is minded of it by God, and then he comes to consider and perform what was yet wanting to make up his defects. Thus when care to perform vows well-made, discovers things ill-carried to the prejudice of religion, it makes way for future furtherance of religion.

DUBITATION. But, it is like, you will inquire, “May a Christian vow the repairing of such defects? Are they not more than can be discerned? more than can be prevented? Should he vow this, would he not ensnare himself and break his vows?”

SOLUTION. To this I answer briefly, that no man in the world may engage himself by vow, to live for future without any defects: such perfection is only in heaven; here it is not attainable. But a Christian may engage himself by vow to be careful, and to do his best diligence to prevent as many as he can. He may vow, that, so far as grace shall enable him, he will endeavour to live with fewer faults. But a vow of full perfection can never be a well-composed vow, nor ever be performed.

Vows engage against a particular sin.

(3.) *Well-composed vows do promote religion in the heart and life of a Christian, in that it strongly and unalterably engageth the Christian*

against some one or other particular sin, which would more easily prevail, if the reverence or care of so sacred an engagement did not set the Christian against that sin.—Sometimes we should sin by taking too little notice of great providences, or by setting them at too low rates, or by soon forgetting them, or by waxing proud and insolent under them. Now, such sins provoke God, weaken religion's interest in the heart, and diminish its fruit in the life. Now, when vows prevent such sins, they do as much promote religion as preventing physic promotes the health of the body. Of such a nature was Job's covenant with his eyes, which shut the windows of his soul, and kept out sin by preventing its entrance at the out-doors: "I made a covenant with mine eyes." (Job xxxi. 1.) "Away, then, with all alluring beauties; I cannot gaze on them, for I cannot be false to my vow and covenant!" Every vow is for more strict and exact approbation of ourselves, in either universal or particular, either in a perpetual or temporary, observance and serving the Lord. Now, that promotes religion which thus exactly and strictly binds the soul to approve itself to God. Sin and religion have two concernments as contrary to each other as the rebel and the law of his sovereign; and as *he* promotes the interest of his sovereign *who* doth strictly bind himself to oppose any rebel, so *he* promotes religion *who* by vow binds himself strictly to oppose any one sin whatever. If Noah vowed, after his miscarriage, against drinking any considerable quantity of wine, that he might prevent that sin, this vow strengthened the interest of his holy sobriety, and the interest of religion too, so far as sobriety promotes our fitness and greater aptness to religious works.

DUBITATION. But I shall be here asked: "May a man vow against any one particular sin, and bind himself by so a great a bond against the committing of it?" The ground of the doubt is, because none so stands but he may fall, and it is not in our power to keep ourselves from any sin.

SOLUTION. To this, then, I answer, that it would be rash and inconsiderate to vow absolutely and peremptorily, that thou wilt never act such or such a sin. But thus thou mayest justifiably vow,

(i.) *That thou wilt endeavour, and with thy best diligence labour, to prevent this or that sin.*—Thou mayest vow to set a guard upon thy soul; but thou mayest not vow the success of this guard. The endeavour is thy duty, and *that* thou mayest vow; the success is God's gift, and *that* thou must pray for. And let weak Christians take notice of this, lest they ensnare themselves by vowing what is not in their power.

(ii.) *If thou wilt vow so, thou must do it still with dependence on the Lord for power to perform.*—Through grace, thou wilt not sin thus or thus, may be thy vow.

(iii.) *If thou wilt so vow, then take my advice with thee:* First. Let it be only against great sins, and such as are committed with deliberation. These are seen before [they are] committed: and so are more easily resisted. Secondly. Let it reach no farther than sincere endeavour against them: And, Thirdly, Be sure to do your utmost; and then, though the sin may be too strong for you, yet are you not false to your vow. But, next,

Vows increase our care of particular duty.

(4.) *Well-composed vows do much promote religion in the heart and life of a Christian, inasmuch as they engage the Christian to a more intent care of some particular duty and grace to be more than ordinarily attended and exercised.*—A vow binds the votary to a more than ordinary care of duty, and to a more than ordinary diligence in the exercise of grace. Now, where such a vow is so well-composed that the duty may be more than ordinarily well performed, and the grace may be, more than usually hath been, exercised, there such a vow doth as much promote religion as its care doth exceed our ordinary care. Who bestows most on a duty, or on the constant exercise of a grace, doth do most to the promoting of religion; and, I am sure, whoso doth advisedly and duly vow, and doth punctually and duly perform his vow, is the man whose care is greatest in that duty and grace which his vow and the particular occasion of it did commend to his thoughts.

DUBITATION. “But may we vow to perform a duty, or exercise a grace? Can we say, it is in our power?”

SOLUTION. To this in one word: Vow so far as it is and shall be in your power, and you may warrantably and acceptably do it before God. The performance of duty, and exercise of grace, are debts we owe to God: and we may bind ourselves doubly to pay them so far as our stock will reach; and without this limitation every vow is rash and ill-composed.

Vows [promote religion] by observing and improving providences.

(5.) *Well-composed vows do much promote religion, in that they engage us to a more diligent observing of providences, and to a due improving them to the best advantage of grace.*—When thou hast vowed, thou hast sealed on thy part: if God do answer thy hope by his providence, he performs the condition on his part; and now it must be thy care to observe God's providence, and to improve it. So Jacob vowed, then observeth how God will perform with him, and afterwards makes the improvement. Now, [a] providence answering the expectation of one who voweth, hath in it,

(i.) *Remarkable power and faithfulness, to be the ground of faith.*—This was seen in that providence which gave Jephthah that victory which was his hope and expectation when he vowed.

(ii.) *Eminent goodness and tenderness, to be the loadstone and attractive of love.*—So in that providence which brought David to the possession of his hopes; and David thought so when he professed he would love God dearly, because he had delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies. (Psalm xviii. 1.)

(iii.) *Eminent readiness to hear prayer.*—When God doth, as to Jephthah, speedily hear, or, as to Jacob, continue still to hear, for many years together.

(iv.) *More than ordinary obliging considerations to draw forth our obedience too.*—Such providences have tongues to call for our faith, our love, our prayers, our obedience, and our praises: “What shall I render to the Lord?” is the serious, well-advised votary's inquiry.

(v.) *A most undoubted evidence, appropriating this to the Lord.*—That the expecting Christian can truly say, “It was the Lord’s doing, and his only : none bore part in the work, none shall bear away share of his trust, love, prayer, or observant obedience due to him from me.”

Now, if these particulars be considered, it cannot, sure, be doubted longer whether well-composed vows do promote religion, when they do so engage and quicken those who vow to such acts of duty, to such exercise of grace, to such opposition of sin, to such improvement of providence, for the increase of grace. And what is religion, but all these in one word? and what is the promoting of religion, but the facilitating, continuing, and perfecting of all these, which is not a little furthered by such vows?

V. It yet remains to show, *Whence these well-composed vows have such influence on religion, what have they in them more than ordinary thus to promote it.*—To this I will answer as briefly as I may : There is in such vows a most notable awakening and quickening power, which sets all a man’s care, wisdom, truth, and strength on work, to do the things where-by religion is so much promoted.

1. *A deep-rooted, natural reverence and awe of a serious vow, which makes the man who hath so much sense of religion as to make a vow, to have as much care of performing it.*—Man is readier to cast off the reverence he owes to God’s law, than to cast off the regard he hath to his own vow ; so that, many times, it is very expedient to engage by vow to do what is our duty by the law of God. The bond of natural conscience is very strong ; and vows have much of their strength from it, and thereby become great supporters of religion.

2. *To this the Christian hath a superadded strict command and pre-script of the law of God, indispensably requiring the performance of that vow which is lawful and possible.*—“I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back.” (Judges xi. 35.) It is the unalterable law, if you vow, you must pay. (Psalm lxxvi. 11.) God did indulge the Jews so far as to redeem some of their vows ; but he allowed none to break them. Read that : “When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it : for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform.” (Deut. xxiii. 21, 23.) Now, when so much of religion lieth in and dependeth on such vows, and these vows are such inviolable ties that God will wink at none who break them, they cannot but have such influence and strong operation on persons to the advantage of religion.

3. *God’s severe judgments on contemners of their vows add much to their influence.*—I will not mention examples of vengeance on Heathens for breach of their vows, though the idol deserved not better ; yet God, who is the true God, would have men know such sacred bonds as vows should not be profaned by slight performing, or contemned by a total neglect of them. The Jewish rabbies tell us, that God punished Jacob, for neglecting his vow, by Dinah’s miscarriage. However, it is enough [that] God hath threatened the falsifier of his vows with no less than a destruction of the works of his hands, if not with the ruin of his person. God will not let such [an] one go unpunished, “lest his holy name should be scorned, lest the people should be accustomed to an impious contempt of him, if the falsifier of his vow should deny what he had promised to God, and go

unpunished.”* In one word, that which stands thus on the unchangeable law of nature and is written on the conscience, what is confirmed and ratified by the peremptory, positive law of God, what is yet further armed with the terrible threat of the God of heaven, must needs have a mighty binding strength in it, obliging men. But now all these concur in vows well-composed; and hence they have such influence on religious persons. You may add,

4. *The gracious acceptance that God gives to persons so vowing and performing their vows*; with,

5. *The signal blessings crowning religious persons in due performance of their vows.*—All which make them careful to vow, so that they may say they will pay their vows, and, in paying them, render to the Lord for all his benefits.

USES.

VI. I am come now to the last thing I intended, *the practical application of this practical case.*—And here, reader, I shall be briefer than I first purposed, because I was enforced by the undiscerned speed of the time outrunning me in preaching it, to contract much more than I was willing to have done.

USE I. INFORMS. The first use, then: If well-composed vows do indeed much promote religion, *it will teach us how careful we should be in making our vows to the greatest advantage of religion.*—If you look to the necessary requisites of such vows, it will appear to you that you need a great care and diligence in making them; if you look to religion’s loss in the breach of vows, or its gain in a faithful performance of them, the care will appear double; if you look to your obligation under which you are to perform them, it will appear yet further needful that you be very wary and circumspectly careful how you make them: the rash and inconsiderate person who cares not how he makes, will not care whether he perform, his vows. And what a reproach is this to his religion! What a provocation is this to his God, to destroy either him or the works of his hand! And all these bespeak your care, and advise you to circumspection in this case. Do you not find it hard enough to discern what is daily and ordinarily to be done under daily and ordinary occurrences? Are you not in great care to frame yourselves fitly and comely to every day’s business [which] you have to do among men, especially when you come within the tie of a promise to them? How solicitous are you, *what, and when, and on what terms, you promise?* how you shall perform, and so keep your word and credit? Any competent measure of honesty and regard to reputation will make a man consider what he promiseth *to a man.* How much more care should he use in promising *unto God,* where the promise is more than ordinary, where the tie is so indissoluble, where the demand is so punctually and peremptorily made, where the danger [is] so great in making default. Let me commend unto thy more than ordinary care these two things, if thou wilt make a vow so well-framed as to set up religion:—

* *Ne sacrum ejus nomen ludibrio exponeretur, neve populus assuesceret ad impium ejus contemptum, si fraudator impune negaret quod Deo promiserat.*—BUCANUS, *Loci Communes*, 45, De Votis.

1. *Be careful that thy vow of obedience for, and in consideration of, a mercy hoped or received hold weight with that mercy.*—Keep a steady hand, and get an even balance, and weigh the mercy which commands thy obedience, and weigh thy vow which promiseth it. It will be thy reproach and religion's reproach to have thy vow found a *shekel* when thy mercy weighs a *talent*.* When God gives a full harvest, thou must not vow a handful, or one sheaf: this were to expose thy God to contempt, and it would be a practical denial of his bounty to thee. Jacob observed this proportion: God shall be his God, and then the tenth of all he hath shall be His. (Gen. xxviii. 20—22.) David's "for all his benefits," is as much as "according to all his benefits," and that speaks proportion and commensurateness. Take care to this; for others will observe and inquire into it. They will weigh these two, thy mercy, and thy gratitude: do thou do it first, lest thou be ashamed, lest God be provoked, and thou be punished; for as good a man, and as great, as thou, whoever thou art who readeest this, met with all these,—with shame, with the anger of his God, and with a punishment too on him, for want of this. See Hezekiah's fault and punishment, 2 Chron. xxxii. 25. Do not fall short of Heathens, who knew this, and observed it as their rule, and have branded such who deviate from it.† Be careful thou put not off a mercy, that lives *many years* with thee, with a *day's* entertainment, or week's or month's lodging with thee.

2. *Be careful that thou make thy vow so, that they may be thy witnesses whom God makes.*—Be careful thou make *them* witnesses of thy performing *whom* God made witnesses of thy straits, and [whom] thou madest witnesses of thy vows. A man that would have his credit in his truth to his word kept up, would choose *them* witnesses of his performing *who* were witnesses of his promise. I think David took this heed in his rendering and paying his vows: "I will do it," saith he, "now in the presence of all his people." (Psalm cxvi. 14.) The people were witnesses to his straits, prayers, and vows; and he will honour religion by performing in their sight what he sealed, signed, and delivered, what he vowed to the Lord. Seek not more than providence makes conscious to thy vows, lest this be interpreted ostentation, and vain self-glorying: take so many, lest the good example be lost, or thou suspected of falsifying thy vow. Briefly and plainly: Dost thou on a sick bed make thy vow before thy family, before the neighbourhood? Be careful to perform it before them; let them see thou art what thou vowedst to be. This care in thy vow will be a means to make it most to the advantage of religion, whilst all that heard or knew thy vow bear thee testimony that thou art thankful; and more thou seekest not, lest thou be suspected to be proud: thus religion's gratitude and humility are set forth; thus thou givest others occasion to glorify thy Father who is in heaven.

* ככר. *Talentum Hebræorum continet pondere 3000 siclos.*—BREWERWOOD *De Ponderibus Hebr.* "The talent of the Hebrews contains in weight three thousand shekels."—EDIT.
 † Φασελιτων θυμα, &c. *Sordidum et tenuem sumptum hoc adagio significabant.*—ERASMI *Adagiorum* chil. ii. cent. 7. Ad. 33. "The sacrifices of the Phaselitæ, (a nation of Pamphylia,) consisting of salted fish, and being offered without blood, were accounted vile. By this proverb the ancients intended strongly to designate such an oblation as was mean and sordid, having been furnished at a slight expense."—EDIT.

USE II. Do well advised and composed vows so much promote religion, when well and faithfully kept? Are they also such sacred and inviolable bonds? *Then look what vows you are under, look how you have performed them.*—It is time to view what you fairly promised for advancing of religion, and what you have faithfully performed for its real advantage. Christian, consider with thyself, wast thou ever in more than ordinary distress? Didst thou not then vow largely? Tell me, what were thy vows? How hast thou paid them? Wast thou ever in a poor, needy condition? Didst thou not then vow to honour God with thy increase, to enrich the poor, to relieve thine indigent brethren, and God's poor children? Now, what hast thou done? Who are clothed out of thy flock? Who are fed at thy table? Who are lodged at thy charge? Where is thy paying thy vow? Was it ever thy lot to be tossed at sea? to be mounted up to the heavens? to be cast down again into the depths? to be at thy wits' end? Didst thou not then vow, if ever God should command, and make it a calm, and bring thee to thy desired haven, thou wouldest be more circum-spect in all manner of conversation, more vigilant to thy particular duty, more severe against thy particular sin? Didst thou not vow that an anniversary sermon, with an allowance to the poor, or a constant lecture, or an alms-house, or some such great standing monument, should commemorate God's goodness to thee, and persuade others to trust and seek unto that goodness? Or at least, if thy estate would not do so much, hast thou not vowed to do according to thy power? Where now is thy paying these vows? "But I was never poor, never at sea." May be so; yet art thou not under some vows for some other mercies? Wast thou never in danger of losing thy estate, thy relations, thy life? Didst thou never lie dangerously and (men thought) desperately sick? Hast thou no sick-bed vows upon thee? Stay here, whoever thou art that readest these lines; and read not a word more, until thou hast duly considered whether ever thou hast been dangerously sick, and what thou then vowedst, and how thou hast performed.

The proud contemner of religion learns by his dangerous sickness to promise to be religious: wast thou ever such? Didst thou ever so vow? And art thou now what thou didst then promise? The profane swearer and blasphemers is brought by a sickness to fear his oath; and to vow to learn to fear and abstain. O, then, if God will not destroy, and damn, but give life, he will (that he will!) repent, and amend; he will bless, but not blaspheme, his name; he will never more profanely swear and curse. Wast thou ever such an one? so sinful? so engaged? What performance now? The drunkard vows sobriety when he is sick; the adulterer vows chastity; the worldling vows to mind heaven; the tradesman, who hath so often sold his conscience at every price to gain six-pence by an untruth and lie, then if this plunge be out-lived, will keep a good conscience. In a word, a sick-bed makes a sinner sick of his sin, and seldom fails to make him vow against it. Now, reader, what thinkest thou? vows or no vows? Art thou under any, or no? I am persuaded now thou canst not deny it; methinks I could believe I heard thee say, "Such a fever, such an ague, the small-pox, a surfeit, the pestilence, or some such disease, made me vow to be another man, to

destroy sin, to exercise grace, to love God, to hate lust, to be holy and heavenly." Now, thou seest thy bond: where is thy payment of thy debt? O how few do well keep any, how much fewer do well keep their sick-bed, vows! as if these vows were as sickly as their makers, and doomed to as short a life as the sick votary thought he had been doomed to! Reader, thy conscience tells thee what thou canst answer, or what thou must confess in this matter; and, upon thy conscience's answer, I have advice for thee: if thou art conscious,

1. *Of total neglect, go speedily on thy knees, bless infinite patience, humble thyself before infinite grace, get out thy pardon.*—And whilst God saith by me, by these lines, "Defer not to pay," be thou honest to thy word, thankful to thy God, advantageous to religion, and an example of reformation, lest [the] next sickness be thy death, and thy vows be thy sin, which shut out thy hopes of praying and speeding. God delights not to answer such fools: thou mayest find motives enough to hasten thee to this duty, from Eccles. v. 2, 4—6, which I commend to thy thoughts with these queries:—(1.) Is not God in heaven, and thou on earth? (2.) And is not thy vow made to this great God? (3.) And is not this vow thy voluntary debt? And, (4.) Doth God require present payment? Or, indeed, (5.) Wilt thou worse thy condition by vowing? Or, (6.) Wilt thou provoke God's anger and displeasure? (7.) Darest thou venture on threatened destruction? These are Solomon's motives to a punctual and present payment of vows: I offer them, to awake thee from neglect of thy vows.

2. Or, secondly, *Hast thou vowed, and performed in part, but not fully?*—Hast thou done somewhat, but not all, of that thou hast promised and vowed? I advise,

(1.) *See what hindered: wast thou rash in promising more than thou couldest do?*—Is this the reason thou didst not all, because some of it was out of thy power? Thou must be humbled for thy rash vow; and if ever it come within thy power, do it.

(2.) *See whether thy sloth and negligence did not hinder, when thou mightest have performed.*—But now it is out of thy power, and thou canst not. This is a high breach of thy vows; and I know no way for thee, but due and seasonable repentance and confessing, that God may pardon thee; and be thou better in what thou canst, since thou canst not be so good in this* thou shouldst.

(3.) *See whether it continue yet in thy power to do, though as yet thou hast not done it.*—And if so, be affected with the sight of thy unthankfulness, but remove this sin by performing thy vows; for God will not release the promise, nor cancel the bond, until the debt be paid by him who hath power in his hand, and may do it.

DUBITATION. "But what, if it were in my power when I vowed, but since that time Providence hath put it out of my power? I was rich when I vowed to relieve the poor; but when I was recovered, God suffered me to be spoiled, as Job was: what shall I do then?"

SOLUTION 1. *Thy vow, well-composed, engaged thee so far as it was in*

* In all editions, except the first, the particle "as" is found between *this* and *thou*, to the manifest injury of the meaning.—EDIT.

thy power.—Remember, a well-advised vow hath this express condition, or this implied, “So far and so long as it is in my power to do, until I have done all.” “The tenth of all I have, of all that God shall give me,” saith Jacob, “I will give to God.” Now, if the Lord exercise his bounty to Jacob, Jacob is engaged; then he hath power, and can do it: if God make Jacob poor, the limitation [which] his vow implied in it doth quit him.

SOL. 2. *So far as God puts it out of thy power, so far he releaseth thee from the debt.*—When God, by his providence over-ruling all, doth disable thee to the payment, then he dischargeth thee from the bond: this is God’s real discharge and cancelling of the obligation.

USE III. Are well-composed vows such promoters of religion? and are they to be made so warily? and do they bind so strictly? *Then be sure to wait until God give you just and fit seasons for vowing.*—Be not over-hasty to vow: it is an inconsiderate and foolish haste of Christians to make more occasions of vowing than God doth make for them. Make your vows, and spare not, so often as God bids you; but do not do it oftener. You would wonder I should dissuade from vowing often, when you have such constant mercies; and wonder well you might, if God did expect your extraordinary bond and security for every ordinary mercy: but He requires it not; He is content with ordinary security of gratitude for ordinary mercies: when He calls for extraordinary security and acknowledgment, by giving extraordinary mercies, then give it, and do it,

1. *Cheerfully.*—Enter such bonds willingly.
2. *Pay the bond punctually at its time.*
3. *Pay it fully, in the whole of it.*—So do it, that you may say, “I will cheerfully, and of choice.” So do it, that you may call it a paying punctually and fully. And this will be accounted a rendering to the Lord, and a real promoting of religion, by setting forth our debt, and the Lord’s goodness, to which we are indebted. Fear not to give thy God double security when he requires it. Fail not to pay readily and fully, when pay-day comes; for the Lord doth expect and command thee so to do; and if thou do wilfully make default, he will lay folly to thy charge, and take the forfeiture of thy bond, and make thee know it too, some way or other, to thy grief and trouble. Keep out so long, or get out of such debts so soon, as thou canst. Pay the Lord thy vows.