

# Giving Your Word

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

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We are all familiar with sayings such as "A man's word is his bond," or "A handshake is as good as a contract." These sayings belong to another age. We live in a world where contracts are worth only the paper they are written on, and promises are broken with impunity. Today, a man's word means little, and a handshake is merely a handshake.

The keeping of one's word seems so unimportant in this society. Like the world around us, we could view the honoring of what we pledge as being insignificant, but those called by God should never do so. Indeed, keeping our word is of the highest importance to Him, and in fact, it is a criterion for entering into His Kingdom.

Psalm 15:1 asks the question, "Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" The psalm then answers this question with a list of qualifications of those God will accept into His Family: those who walk uprightly, work righteousness, speak the truth, do not backbite, do no evil to their neighbor, and so forth. One quality near the end of the list is most appropriate to keeping our word: "He who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (verse 4).

We all have compromised. I wished that I had always kept my word, but I, like many of us, did not. We have our justifications for going back on what we have said. Sometimes we just compromise with what we promised by only fulfilling it partially. At other times, we explain that circumstances have changed, whether in our own lives or in the larger society, so it is no longer binding. We may shrug it off as a foolish pledge made "in the heat of battle." Many times, we simply forget what we agreed to do because its importance fades over time. The human mind can reach genius levels when it comes to making up excuses.

God cuts through all of our justifications with this easily understood qualification: If we want to be in His Kingdom, we must keep our word—even if it hurts!

## God Notices

Jeremiah 35 records the story of a family who faithfully kept its word to its founder, Jonadab the son of Rechab, for over two centuries. God uses their fine example of faithfulness to their forefather's wishes to confront the Jews for their lack of faithfulness to their spiritual Father.

God tells Jeremiah to bring the Rechabites into one of the chambers of the Temple, and there he was to offer them wine to drink. When he did so, the Rechabites responded: "We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, 'You shall drink no wine, you nor your sons, forever'" (verse 6).

God contrasts their example to His own people's falseness:

Thus says the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: "Go and tell the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, 'Will you not receive instruction to obey My words?' says the LORD. 'The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons, not to

drink wine, are performed; for to this day they drink none, and obey their father's commandment. But although I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, you did not obey Me." (verses 13, 14)

God listened to the sons of Jonadab when they made their promise, and He took note of their obedience to it, not for one or two generations, but for more than two hundred years! For their faithfulness, God promises, "Because you have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, . . . Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me forever" (verses 18-19). He guarantees the perpetuity of their family—all because they kept their word!

In Joshua 9:3-27, the princes of Israel promise not to harm the Gibeonites. One could reason that, because the Gibeonites used subterfuge to extract this promise from Israel, God would not hold Israel accountable to keep its word. However, II Samuel 21:1-2 demonstrates that God even remembers promises made under fraudulent circumstances:

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, "It is because of Saul and for his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites." So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.

David asks what it would take to correct the situation, offering silver and gold, but the Gibeonites demand the deaths of seven members of Saul's family line. "'[We] will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, who the LORD chose.' And the king said, 'I will give them'" (verse 6). Because Saul, as the leader of Israel, broke this 400-year-old promise, seven members of his family died. God takes promises seriously!

## **Two Solemn Vows**

Most of us experience two wonderful occasions where we make long-term vows: marriage and baptism.

The marriage vow is the most important promise we will ever make to another human being. Nevertheless, as the years roll by, we tend either to forget our vows, or as the old saying goes, to allow familiarity with our spouse to breed contempt. From time to time, it is good to review what we promised before God in our marriage covenant.

- » As the groom, a man agrees in covenant with his bride and God to take her as his lawfully wedded wife until his or her death. His responsibilities include loving her, cherishing her, honoring her, and providing for her.
- » Similarly, a woman promises to be bound to the groom as her lawfully wedded husband until death parts them. Like her husband, she has additional, God-ordained responsibilities: to submit herself to him and respect him.

Christian marriage is a laboratory for learning how to live in harmony with another person. From how we treat our mates, God can see how we will do in our relationship with His Son, our Bridegroom (see Luke 16:10). Likewise, how we keep our vows to our mates will show Him how faithful we will be to Him.

Overall, life's most serious promise is the one we make at baptism, when we solemnly promise to give our lives unconditionally to God. We give our word to work to change from what we are and become what God is, to take on His very nature. We vow to give ourselves wholeheartedly to keeping His laws and doing good, which express our love toward Him and our fellow man.

He expects us to keep this promise in spite of all the problems in society, in the church, or within ourselves. He will help, motivate, and strengthen us in doing all these things, but He expects us to do our best at keeping our word. The apostle Paul puts this in very stark terms: When we gave our lives to Christ, we became bondslaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18), and our vow at baptism binds us to see God's work in us to the finish.

### **An Unkept Promise**

Matthew 21:28-32 contains the story of two sons, one who said he would not do the work his father asked of him, yet did, and another who promised to work, but did not.

Jesus may have taken the theme of this parable from Isaiah 5:1-7, which some commentators call "The Song of the Vineyard." God pictures Israel and Judah as a vineyard. He does all He can for them, planting, protecting, and feeding them, but instead of the vineyard producing wonderful grapes, it produces wild grapes that are good for nothing. The reason: His people will not listen to Him. They promise to obey and give the appearance of belonging to Him, but they will not really work at it. Thus, they do not produce what God expected.

Who are the characters in the Parable of the Two Sons? The father is God. The first son, who flatly refuses to work in the vineyard, represents the weak, foolish and base of this world (see I Corinthians 1:26-27). The second son, who promises to work yet never shows up, represents hypocrites, those who appear or profess one way but act another. The work the father asks them to do corresponds to living God's way of life.

The first son, who answers, "I will not," gives a carnal answer from a carnal mind. This is the mind all of us had before God called us out of the world. His answer displays no hypocrisy because he sincerely did not want to come under God's authority. He is guilty of bold rebellion.

The second son, who says, "I go," makes a promise that he never fulfills—and possibly never intends to fulfill. His word contradicts his performance. While his father is present, he conceals his determination to disobey; he is a liar. As Jesus says in Luke 6:46, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" This son's guilt combines deception with disobedience.

In the parable both sons hear and respond verbally to their father's command, one negatively, one positively. The one who promises to obey but never follows through is just as guilty as if he had refused from the first. Though his promise to work may make him look good on the surface, his father will never accept his act of disobedience.

At this point, we have no reason to prefer one above the other; both are guilty of sin. However, their ultimate actions prove them different. After his blunt refusal, the first son repents of his sin and goes to work for his father. He sets his heart to do what his father wants. Though he promptly promises, the second son fails to perform. The first changes from bad to good, but the second does not change at all—if he makes any change, he goes from bad to worse!

## **Time to Perform**

Toward the end of the parable, Jesus poses the question: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The obvious answer is he who repented and went to work. Then Jesus tells the Pharisees that the tax collectors and harlots would go in to His Kingdom before them because these blatant sinners believed and repented, while the "religious" people did not.

The warning to us is not to be a son who promises to work, then neglects to keep his word. God has called us, and we have accepted that calling, promising we would work. Now we must perform what we have promised.

We are living in the Laodicean era of God's church, and the effect of this is that many are letting down. Many are not faithfully keeping God's commandments and neglecting His Sabbath and holy days. Church attendance is sporadic. Tithing is erratic. Too many have lost their zeal for God and His way of life, and they are veering away from the path to the Kingdom.

For many, things are going well, as they are indeed "rich and increased with goods" by this world's standards. Somehow, we equate this as God's approval, but God may well be patiently letting out rope so that we will either hang on to what God has given us or hang ourselves.

Many in society fail to keep their promises. Our leaders in government do not keep their word. In this world of distrust, nothing is sure. In such a morally lax environment, we can easily let down and give in.

The only true stability we have is God! He has promised He will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5), and He is faithful in all He has promised to us. Our job, then, is to be faithful in all we promised Him. It is not too late to rededicate ourselves to fulfilling our commitment to God and seeking His Kingdom!