***BE TRUE TO YOUR WORD!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 15, 2021

Texts: Psalm 15 (4b) and Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

Are you a man or woman of your word? If you make a promise, do you keep it, if you take an oath do you live up to it, if you shake hands on a deal are you good for it? Or perhaps you are the wrong person to ask. Perhaps I would do better to ask that question of ten of your neighbors or ex-neighbors, your spouse or your children, your colleagues at work or at school, those with whom you do business or some of those who sit in the pew with you on Sunday morning, your friends or perhaps even your ex-friends: Is he a man of his word? Is she a woman whose word you can trust? What might those ten people who know you say in response to that question?

The psalmist seems to suggest that being faithful to your promises is key to being a righteous person who may dwell on God’s holy hill. *Those who stand by their oath even to their hurt* shall never be moved from God’s dwelling place, he says. Or as Eugene Peterson phrases it: *Keep your word even when it costs you*. This is not about making promises; anyone can make a promise even if it is just a pie-shell promise – easily made and easily broken. Righteousness is keeping your promises – for better or worse, for richer or poorer, when it works to your benefit but also, and perhaps more importantly, when it doesn’t. Being true to your word is what we often call integrity; it is honesty, trustworthiness, and honor all wrapped up in one. It is one of those traits we value in our friends and spouses, doubt exists in our enemies and in most politicians, and may claim for ourselves. But as we all know, the proof is in the pudding – it is one thing to claim integrity; it may be quite another to live into it!

Erin Kesterson Bowers draws that distinction well in an article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* entitled, “Who Are We Honestly?” when she writes:

*We think of ourselves as friendly people, because we like people. And we like to think that we would be friendly to people. But we are not, in fact, friendly people if we do not do anything about it. If we do not actually give of our resources, we are not generous people. If we do not actually do anything to feed the hungry, house the homeless or support the refugee, we are not actually serving those people…We cannot simply think these things of ourselves, and think they are true of ourselves. They are only true of ourselves if we are doing them.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

If we are to be righteous people, people of integrity, people who keep our word even when it costs us, then we must actually keep our word even when it costs us! Our actions speak far louder than our words; they testify to the truth of what we say, and perhaps more importantly, the truth of who we are as righteous or unrighteous people of God.

Stephen Carter, Yale law professor and author of the books *Integrity* and *Civility*, suggests there are three steps to integrity:

*…taking the time to be deliberate in figuring out what is right; doing that right thing even when there is a cost; and being willing to say what you have done and why you have done it*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Integrity is not just falling into that right thing or that honorable oath. It is taking the time to discern what is worth swearing to, what is the right thing to do. It is honoring that oath and doing the right thing even when there is a cost, which seems to echo the very words of the psalmist. But it is also owning your actions – being willing to say what you have done and why you have done it, what the psalmist refers to as standing by your oath. That is far easier to do when it is the easy or popular thing to do; it is much more trying when standing by your oath means taking an unpopular stand or a position which may not work to your benefit. Be cautious then of the oaths that you take; do not take them lightly!

Peter did not think that he was taking lightly his oath to Jesus there on the Mount of Olives on the night of Jesus’ arrest. When Jesus suggested that all would desert him, Peter swore that he alone would stand by Jesus even to his death. And maybe he meant it in that moment before Jesus’ arrest. Yet only hours later, after Jesus had been arrested and was being questioned by the high priest, there was Peter in the courtyard, denying that he knew the same Jesus to whom he had given his oath. Three times he was given the opportunity to stand by his word and declare his support for Jesus, and three times he said, “I do not know the man!” For, he knew that were he to admit knowing Jesus, to admit being one of his disciples, then he too might be arrested or beaten or worse. *Keep your word even when it costs you*, says the psalmist. It was a cost that Peter was unwilling to pay, and so he denied knowing Jesus and then did so again and again, and then the cock crowed and he wept bitterly.

I have no doubt that Peter wept because he had denied knowing Jesus just as Jesus said he would. But perhaps some of his tears were also tears of regret that he had made such a bold promise in the first place. Peter thought he could do better – better than the others, better than Jesus said he would do, better than he actually did. But when push came to shove, when standing by his word and standing by his Lord became dangerous, Peter wilted. He didn’t just remain silent in the face of those accusations, he loudly proclaimed: *I do not know the man!* And even then, it was not until the cock crowed and he recalled what Jesus had said that he realized what he had done and began to weep. How those words of his oath to stand by Jesus must have haunted him; how those words of denial must have echoed in his ears across the years, mixed with the taste of those bitter tears that he wept! How long was it before he could look at himself in the mirror and see someone other than the one who had betrayed his Lord?

But would we have been any different? Would you have stood fast by your word and acknowledged yourself to be a disciple of Jesus in that hostile environment? Would you deny being a follower of Jesus, or would you just stay silent, knowing yourself to be a fair-weather-disciple, committed to following Jesus as long as the risk was not too great or the price too high?

Those tests come to us in various forms more often than you might think. They come to us each time we are confronted with a decision about whether to do as Jesus calls us to do or to do the safe thing, the more comfortable thing, the thing we might rather do. *Aren’t you one of his disciples?* is the question that dares us to deny it by the choice we make, dares us to take a different path and act unfaithfully, dares us to forsake the integrity of our faith for the sake of expediency or our own selfish comfort. Integrity demands that we make the effort to learn what is right (rather than what we desire) and then do it, suggests Stephen Carter, that we refuse to accept as the measure of morality our choice to do the things that most attract us.[[3]](#endnote-3) Or as the psalmist says, “*Do what is right and stand by your word even when it costs you!*”

Across our lives there are various times when we take oaths for which we are then accountable. We may not take an oath of office as presidents or judges do, but we take other oaths that commit us to act or serve or speak in particular ways. Couples do so in the front of this sanctuary when they marry – pledging to be a faithful spouse in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, as long as they both shall live. We make such a promise at baptisms to the parents of infants and to those who come professing their faith. We promise to guide and nurture them, to encourage and support them, to share the good news of the gospel with them. Elders take oaths when they are ordained to service in the church, promising among other things to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Those who testify in court promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And each time you sign your name on the dotted line, you give your word. Do you then stand by it? Do you keep your promises – in your marriage, in your work, in your church, in your life, and will you keep your promise when it no longer works to your advantage, when it is hard or trying or uncomfortable or as it was for Peter, even dangerous?

Mark Twain once observed: “*It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare*.” The voice of God through the words of the psalmist calls us to exhibit that kind of rare moral courage, to do the right thing and keep our word even when it costs us. As disciples of the risen Christ, can you do that? Will you do that? Do you promise to do that? Amen

1. Erin Kesterson Bowers, “Who are we honestly?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 16, 2020, p.20 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility*, Basic Books:1998, p.274 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity*, Basic Books:1996, p.242 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)