

Calvin Speaks



Vol. 2, No. 12

01981, Geneva Divinity School

December 1981

THE THIRD SERMON ON THE HISTORY OF MELCHIZEDEK

(Part 2)

Summary of the First Half of the Sermon

The text is Genesis 14:20-24. The payment of tithes is a token of submission before a priesthood. We actually owe a tithe to Jesus Christ our true priest, but no earthly church can claim exclusive identification with Christ, so the Papacy errs in claiming the tithe. Before Moses, faithful men tithed as they were moved by the Spirit. Under Moses, the tithe went to Levi. Under the Gospel, the general principle of giving some percentage of one's income for the support of the church is still valid, though it maybe that the state assesses a tax and salaries the preachers, and we may not necessarily be bound to a strict ten percent. Only fanatics want to abolish tithing altogether.

Abram refused to be enriched by the goods of the king of Sodom, because it would have resulted in the circulation of an evil report about him and his God: that Abram was envious and an opportunist, and that Abram's God was no better than any other.

Lawfulness and Evil Opportunity

Now, concerning Abram's action, we see here what a good conscience he had. For once war is taken in hand, men think they may do as they please. The ancient proverb says that when wars are afoot, then laws cease. In fact, of course, there is some policy and law, because it is then more requisite than in peacetime. And there must be also a kind of superiority, so that every captain might be obeyed, that all soldiers might attend upon their ensign or colors, that men might not hazard themselves at just any opportunity, and also that they be very vigilant to beware of the enemy. And therefore these things, which concern the facts of arms, ought to have rules, laws, and statutes. All the same, it is impossible to have war without the committing of many outrages. And this is why all those who think to draw their swords ought to fear and tremble as often as they think of the consequences of it. For it is impossible but that in such a mixture there must be a great number of innocents slain; many houses, fatherless children, and widows sacked and spoiled; and the goods of such as are most important taken from them according as the soldier

desires; and over and besides all this, if they need nutrition and fear famine, they will spare nothing. Thus we see how war itself always brings confusion with it.

Moreover, they that go to war, even if they have very lawful titles, and can show great reason and causes that induce them to it, and argue that they are forced to it, yet notwithstanding they will not hesitate to take liberty enough and dispense with themselves in whatsoever they do. For they say this: "If my enemy had vanquished me, what would he have done? Do you think that he would have spared either me or mine? No doubt if he had conquered me, he would have put to sack all that I had. All would have gone to havoc. And since this is so, why should I not do the like?" Thus we see how they which make war dispense with themselves and take such liberty, that they think they do not hurt when they spoil and scrape together whatsoever comes to hand.

It is true that when the children of Israel entered the land of Canaan, they sacked the whole country before them. Why? because the Lord had so commanded them, and therefore they could not do otherwise: indeed, they were also most rigorously plagued because they spared the inhabitants of the land. And besides, God threatened them that if they left any one of them alive, they should be as goads in their sides, and as thorns and pricks in their eyes.

But in this case there was a particular reason. After all, Abram was not appointed by God to take up arms and purge the city of Sodom and the neighbor cities or their inhabitants, or to take charge over them. For he went only to recover his nephew Lot,⁶ although by that means God had compassion on the Sodomites and their neighbors, because He wanted for a little while to defer the vengeance which He had prepared for them. Abram therefore, knowing the reason why he had taken up arms, did not take liberty, nor fight cunningly to excuse himself as such as are seeking after gain do, but said that he would take nothing.

6. Stocker has "he went not only to recover his nephew Lot." This makes no sense in context, so I have removed the negative. This may be another case where the typesetter put in "not" when he should have put "now"—J.B.J.

And yet for all that, he would not abridge Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre of any portion that was due to them, because they were men over whom he had no government. For they came thither with him of good will, and being his friends and allies aided him to help bring back his nephew Lot. So, he would in no wise take any of their rights from them. Here on the one side we see what a temperate man Abram was, and on the other side we see that, although he took not the worth of a penny, yet it might not have fared so well with him. Those in his company might have been spoiled [had Abram lost the battle—J.B.J.]. This shows us that no matter who begins a war, even if he is an angel of heaven as it were, who cares nothing for either gold or silver and would rather die than gain the worth of a halfpenny under pretence that he had ventured his life; yet notwithstanding war of itself brings always with it many sins and iniquities, and horrible excess. And although the war might be said to be lawful, yet it cannot be ventured without great outrages being committed, and many men coming home by weeping cross as we say: for one man will find his house set on fire, and another shall have been robbed, another rifled even to his very bedstraw, and another shall be so spoiled of all his goods that he shall be left stark naked. So then, whenever there are open wars, there must also be weeping and wailing, and wringing of hands. For this reason we ought continually to be admonished to be as it were close fisted. Men should take heed how they enter into such confusions, for there might be no remedy against them even if they carried such a mind with them in their government as the very angels do, as I have already said.

To be short, they who justly defend themselves, being forced to do so, ought yet so wisely and warily to behave themselves that they follow at least the steps of our father Abram. And if it cannot otherwise be avoided but that there must be great excess, great loss and spoil committed, yet let them at the very least resolve thus with themselves, not to take war in hand rashly, or of self will, nor for spoil. War should only be undertaken for the just defence of a country, when it is invaded by some wicked and malicious violence. For men surely may defend themselves against any king or prince, if he attacks those who desire to live in peace and crave his friendship. Let men, then, always keep this in mind, not to be ambitious and high minded, not to desire another man's wealth; or else if any man must take up arms, let him look well to that which is here spoken of Abram, and conform himself after his example.

For the Holy Spirit did not mean only to commend him because he was not covetous and cared not for gold and silver, but has set him before us as a mirror, so that we might learn to do the like. For we may find neat excuses to cover our careless spoiling and robbing, but that will not serve our best interests. We should conform to the example of our father Abram. This is what we are to learn from this place.

The Sobriety of Oaths

Now, Abram did not content himself with simply and plainly saying this to the king of Sodom; he also swore, and said that he had bound himself with an oath, so as to stop all mouths and cut off all further discussion. For Sodom

might have *gone* on to say, "Welt; it were better for you to take the spoil." But Abram says, "No, I stand on what I have said. And besides, I have lifted up my hand to the Lord, the most high God."

Now this manner of speaking, of "lifting up the hand," is because men who are dense and carnal can be made to understand when one swears, by some sign and token, that he calls God to witness and judge, as it were. Indeed, the very words themselves say as much, quite apart from the gesture, when we say, for instance, "I protest before God," or "as God is my witness," or "God plague me otherwise." Now, when we use this manner of speech, the hairs of our heads should stand upright if we lie, or use any kind of deceit; for God will not forsake Himself to agree with our lies, for were He to do so, He would have to annihilate His own majesty. He is true to Himself, for His essence is unchangeable. The words, then, are sufficient enough of themselves; howbeit, we are so dense and dull that we need greatly to have some aids to rivet it to our minds, and to make us tremble before His majesty when we swear, and therefore we see why in all ages men were wont to lift up their hands, and that by God's own leading. So, men lifted up their hands in a solemn oath, even as we do when we pray.

For when we lift up our hands, it is as though we sought God to come down from heaven to help us; not that He changes His place, but He so spreads forth His power that we may feel Him to be present in granting our petitions. Thus we see how by ceremony and outward gesture we show that our prayers conjoin us to God,⁷ and that by them we enter heaven through faith, and that God for His part descends to us to show Himself to be at hand. Even so concerning oaths: when we lift up our hands, it is as if we were saying, "I call God to witness, and I am here before Him as I speak, that if I deal deceitfully it is as much as if I stained and violated His majesty." Now we see the meaning of these words.

And let us here note that the oath of the faithful ought to be rightly weighed twice or thrice the normal weight. Those who use God's name, taking it up frequently in light occasions of speech, show themselves to despise it. For, if we reversed the name of God as it deserves, without doubt we would not so vainly toss it up and down, as men toss tennis balls. For when we hear oaths tossed up and down in the mouths of men, by that we perceive them to be wicked, Godless, and profane men, and such as do not know God at all. Of course, they will not admit that they do not know God; for when a man hears them both in the marketplace and in the street continually swearing, and reproves them, this is their answer: "O good sir, it seems you are lying

7. Calvin's defense of the usefulness of ceremony has a slightly Stoic or Platonic cast: The words should be good enough; it is only because men are so dense and dull that external reinforcement is warranted. Taking off from this line of reasoning, some later Calvinistic groups decided that truly spiritual people would not use external ceremony at all. The extremes of the Baptist and Independent wings of Puritanism were the result. It is far better to start with the Biblical doctrine of creation, and say that the external ceremonial actions of men are every bit as proper and needful as their internal and verbal motions, for man is a whole, and it is as a whole that he acts.

about me." But without doubt, if we really fear Him, it would be seen by our sober and wise taking of His name in our mouths, and not by profaning of the same. And definitely, when we consider thoroughly what is the cause of an oath, we shall certainly and continually provoke God against us if we abuse and corrupt the same. For, as St. Paul says, in Hebrews 6:16& 13, mortal men swear by one greater than themselves, and God swears by Himself because there is none greater than Himself. So therefore, in all oaths the name of God must be put in.

It is very true that when a man says, "By God," it is not expressly said word by word that God will execute vengeance. Men may not say so, but it is enough that His name is put in as judge. No matter how we speak, God is not fooled thereby; and besides, we shall gain nothing at His hands by trying to be sophisticated with Him, for without a doubt the shame will still light upon our heads. Moreover, if a man at any time would rightly deliver an oath, it is most certain that God should there be named ~~and called to witness. Now, He cannot be a witness~~ without also being a judge. And besides, now and then men engage in cursing and banning; that is to say, a man will beseech God to plague him as he deserves if he abuses His holy name. We see thus why it is so often said in holy scripture, "God do thus and such to me;" that is to say, God plague me both in body and soul.

In other places this is not expressed, but there is only an "if." This is an interrupted kind of speech, as in this place: "I have lifted up my hands unto the Lord most high, if so be I take anything thereof." Now what is the meaning of this? We must thus understand it: Let God be judge, and plague me if I lie and speak not the truth. This broken and interrupted kind of speech shows that when we swear, we must be held back as it were by a bit, so that we do not lightly and unadvisedly provoke the wrath of God. For without all doubt, those who swear often and at random are forsworn every time, because they are things that go together hand in hand. So that whenever we hear a man swear at table or in the streets, we may boldly say to him, "My friend, you do not only abuse the name of God, but you are also forsworn when the name of God is thus profaned in our mouth." We are therefore to keep ourselves within the bounds of sobriety, when we need to take the name of God in our mouths.

But here we may raise a question, whether it was lawful for Abram to swear in connection with so small a matter. For it is said, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. And therefore, why could not Abram have been contented to have said plainly, "No, I will not have one jot of anything that has been taken from you. I will deliver it to you again with my own hand; for I will not be the richer by one penny from what is yours." A man would think that if he had said this, it would have been enough. All the same, we see what the hypocrisy of men is: a man will offer a great deal in order to put on a show of honesty, and yet have a completely contrary meaning in his heart. Men think that they are not really bound when they make such an offer in words, for they say it is a kind of superfluous speech; for they think that most men are like them in this respect, and lack faith and honesty as they do. So, it stood Abram well to swear.

And besides, it was well for him to free himself from all kinds of temptation, and so hold himself within the compass of duty; so that although he might lawfully enrich himself with another man's goods, yet he would then abstain from giving himself any such liberty, and withdraw himself from doing any such thing by the power of the oath he had sworn. So, it was not without cause that Abram said that he had sworn, so that the king of Sodom should have nothing to reply, and also so that there was a law which enforced him to abstain from doing anything that might breed offense, and by which God might come to be held in contempt among the heathen.

True Oaths before the True God

Moreover, we have also another thing to consider from these words, "the Lord the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth," because Melchizedek used the same form of words when he gave the blessing. For Abram was not content to call on the name of God as witness, but he also expressed what manner of God it was that he worshipped. We know well enough that the world was at that time full of idolatry and superstition, and yet every man had the name of God in his mouth, even as at this day the heathen will greatly brag that they honor God.

For the Turks, Jews, and Papists will not forbear to abuse this holy name. It is, however, a polluting thereof, forasmuch as the Turks worship that which they have devised out of their own brains, and so blaspheme the living God. For as St. John says (1 John 2:23), he that has not the Son, has not the Father; for when the Son is not honored, the Father takes that as humiliation done to Himself. For His lively Image must not be despised, neither must there be any despite done to His majesty. And therefore the Turks worship nothing else but the devil under the name of God.

And as for the Papists, when we tell them that Jesus Christ is our Advocate, they can in no wise abide that, and yet they dare not altogether deny the holy scripture. For that is an heretical and offensive proposition [that is, the notion that Christ is our only Advocate is offensive to the Papists, —J.B.J.], because men take occasion from it to say that the saints do not make intercession for us. Also, when we speak of the free remission of our sins, and that we ought not to amuse ourselves with that idolatrous and most abominable hellish Mass of theirs, they are so mad about it that it becomes obvious that it is a far greater offence to swear once by that idol the Mass than to blaspheme the name of God a hundred times as far as they are concerned. Thus, then, we see that the religion of the Papists is most hellish.

And as for the Jews, they utterly renounce our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have now already shown that the Son cannot be separated from the Father, and having rejected Him, they have shut themselves completely out of doors, and have forsaken the principal covenant which God made with them, because they will not be partakers of the salvation which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ brings with Him. Thus we see how they abuse the name of God in every condition.

And so has it ever been, even from Abram's time. We see

here, then, why he called Him the eternal, and most high God; because he would distance Him from the idols of the heathen. For the heathen knew right well that there was a most high and excellent heavenly God, but yet they always had a desire to have a warren of petty gods after their own will and pleasure. Abram was far from that, and says that there is none but the eternal, most high God.

Possessor of Heaven and Earth

He adds, "Possessor of heaven and earth," to show that God is not in heaven ascertain fanatics imagine, in such a way that He sits up there merely beholding what is done on earth, contenting Himself with having created all things, and now leaving us alone skipping and leaping here below up and down like frogs. But Abram shows that he did not have so blockish an opinion of His majesty, but attributed to Him an infinite power that spreads itself all over both heaven and earth. And this is done to make us walk in His fear, and to advertise to us that we are always before His eyes, and that both our wits and very thoughts shall come to reckoning before Him. For God is not possessor of heaven and earth in order to eat and feed and do nothing else. He is not possessed of them in order to make dumb shows of them, for He does not need their entertainment, being content with His singular and infinite majesty, having in Himself all blessedness. And even if He had never created anything, yet He had been thereby neither lessened nor increased.

And therefore, when He is thus called it is to show that He has all things in subjection, and that we must all answer before Him, and that He so rules the world that nothing is hid from Him, and that His office is to probe the thoughts and to examine all the words and deeds of men; for being possessor of both heaven and earth, He is also our Lord and Judge. Thus, we see why this title is placed on Him, so that we might here walk as before His majesty. We should have a difficult time seeking after secret hiding places, seeing that all things shall come to light; and even if we thought that we had deceived Him now with our cunning, yet in the end all will comedown on our heads.

Again, when God is named possessor of heaven and earth, we are served notice to love Him as our nursing Father, and to fear Him as our Judge. For He is possessor of heaven and earth. He is the chief ruler over us, and we must appear before His judgment seat to receive our due for whatever we have done in our bodies, whether good or ill. This is the possession which He has of heaven and earth. Now, He possesses this not for Himself only, but of

His bountiful goodness bestows on us whatever we want, because He has created all things for our use. And therefore we cannot be anything but villainous ingrates when we hear the infinite power and goodness of our God thus spoken of, and do experience the same, and yet do not also endeavor to love Him and to yield to Him obedience.

And under the word 'heaven' also, not only the benefits which we receive by the sun and the stars are set before us, but the angels likewise are here put in, that we might learn to conform ourselves to them. If such noble creatures as they are, regard nothing else than to apply themselves to His service, what shall become of us poor worms of the earth, or rather what shall become of us straying wild beasts, when we do nothing else than rebel against His majesty, giving ourselves over to filthy lusts and appetites? Is it not too great a shame for us, to see the angels so humble, as I have already said, and ourselves so proud and rebellious?

Here we see, then, in sum what we are to remember: that whenever we speak of God, we must always join His power with His essence, and not allow this word, 'God,' so lightly to pass through our lips, as many men do, but realize that He is eternal and has made all things, and that He has also reserved to Himself the dominion and rule over our persons, our goods, and over all the rest of the creatures. We must know that we are to render an account to Him, and so we are to love Him in deed and in truth, and submit ourselves to His obedience. For He will not only win us by force and violence under the name of His majesty, but also win us by the graces and benefits which He bestows on us, to the end that we might be persuaded to come to Him, and so that in all our words, thoughts, and deeds, we always have regard to glorify His name.

Prayer

Let us now prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our offenses, beseeching Him so to touch us with them that we may be humble before Him, and be grieved with ourselves and ashamed, to the end we may put our whole trust in His mercy which He has shown to us in His only Son, and have all our refuge in Him. And besides, that He so dearly redeemed us, so that we endeavor to dedicate ourselves wholly to Him in purity both in body and soul, and do Him such homage as that we may show that indeed we desire not to live to ourselves, but yield ourselves wholly to serve Him, since it has pleased Him to receive us to Himself. That he will not only, etc.

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