



Vows: “Clutter” That Can Hinder Emotional Healing

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2025 preface: Much of this essay was written in 1999. So you may notice that some of the material feels subtly different from our more recent teaching. For example, our overall approach to ministry has become much more relational in the twenty-five years since 1999. I have also developed the Immanuel Approach since 1999, and as the reader probably realizes, the Immanuel Approach places much more emphasis on helping the recipient to engage directly with the living, tangible, interactive presence of Jesus at every point in the process and regarding every issue, problem, question, and traumatic memory that comes up.

A very practical, good-news ramification of the Immanuel Approach piece is that a facilitator with only the most basic understanding regarding vows can coach a recipient through dismantling vows if the recipient has a strong connection with Jesus. For example, this scenario might look like the following:¹

Recip: “I think Jesus has led me to the underlying traumatic memory, but I can’t feel anything – I’m not connecting with the emotions.”

Facil: “Well, I’m thinking you should focus on Jesus, ask Him for guidance and help regarding why the emotions aren’t connecting, and then notice and report whatever comes into your awareness.”

Recip: “I don’t hear Jesus saying anything, but these thoughts are just coming into my mind and the sense I have is that Jesus is sending them to me. I feel like He’s showing me that I have a blocking fear, “If I let the emotions connect, I won’t be able to handle them – they will be too painful.” And Jesus is showing me that I made a decision, or a choice, or maybe like a vow, “I won’t ever let myself feel this pain.”

Facil: “I’m thinking we should just keep asking Jesus for help. So focus on Jesus, and ask Him what He wants you to know about the blocking fear and the vow.”

Recip: “It feels like Jesus understands why I have the fear and the vow – He’s not mad at me. But He says that He will be right here with me as I feel the emotions from the memory, so I will be okay. And He says that I don’t need the vow any more – it’s just blocking the healing. He will be with me and make sure I’m okay, so I don’t need to try to protect myself with the vow anymore.”

Facil: “So do you feel like you’re ready to let go of the vow, and feel the emotions, and then go through the memory with Jesus?”

Recip: “Yeah, I do. I’m a little scared, but it feels true that Jesus will be with me and that I’ll be okay. But I don’t know how to get rid of the vow.”

¹A variation on this scenario is that an experienced facilitator can be aware of the intermediate-advanced principles and tools presented in this essay, *but not need to use them*, if the recipient has a strong connection with Jesus. And the session will look just like the quick, smooth, simple session facilitated by the beginner. (This is what it now usually looks like when I help recipients to identify and dismantle vows.)

Facil: “Well, let’s ask Jesus for more help. Focus on Jesus, ask him for courage, and ask Him to help you let go of the vow.”

Recip: “Jesus, more help please. I do ask you for courage and strength, that I would be able to stand straight in the painful emotions from these memories. And I ask You to please help me let go of this vow.”

Quiet pause. “Wow. This is kind of weird. I feel like I’m willing to let the feelings connect, and I’m starting to feel the emotions.”

Even so, the principles presented in this essay and the prayer at the end can be helpful for situations in which the recipient does *not* have a strong connection with Jesus and/or basic coaching is *not* adequate. Also, recipients can go through this essay as part of “homework” between sessions. Reading through these principles and examples will sometimes help them to identify vows that have been subtly hindering their healing work, and will give them a very clear understanding of why it is important to get rid of the vows. Coming in with vows already identified, and with a clear understanding of why it is important to release them, can make it quicker and easier to release the vows during the session.

I. Case studies: The following case studies illustrate the importance of identifying and resolving vows as potential “clutter” that can be hindering emotional healing.

Case study #1: Sara had worked for several hours with me (Karl), and also for a number of hours with several other people in the group of mental health professionals and emotional healing ministers that we were training. She had many memories of being wounded by others, but we all kept getting stuck in the same place – a group of especially shameful and painful memories where she had hurt others in the same way she had been wounded. We had identified several guardian lies, “It’s not safe to feel,” “It’s not safe to remember,” and “It’s not safe to tell,” and these guardian lies seemed to be infected with demonic opposition. We went through our usual trouble shooting tools but we couldn’t get the demonic opposition or the guardian lies to move. Eventually we discovered a series of vows attached to the traumatic memories and guardian lies with which we were working: “I won’t feel,” “I won’t remember,” “I won’t tell,” and “I won’t be like the rest of my family.”

We identified and prayed to resolve these vows at the very end of a session in my office, so that we didn’t have time to go back and work on the traumatic memories and guardian lies again at that time. After Sara left, I remember thinking “It sure makes sense that those vows were in the way – I wonder if the prayers we went through will actually make any difference?”

The next morning we were able to return to this same emotional healing work in the context of a teaching demonstration for the group. Before we even started, Sara commented: “I feel different. I have a part that carries the memories where I hurt others. For the first time in my life I feel compassion, as opposed to judgment and rejection, for this part. I feel connected to this part now.” “Missing” memories and emotions started to connect within minutes of starting the ministry time, and the emotional healing process started to move forward again.

Case study #2: Carol had many traumatic memories. Her father was angry and alcoholic – “when he was really angry he would curse me to hell.” Her older brother abused her sexually, emotionally, and physically through out her childhood. Her mother was overwhelmed, did not nurture or protect her, and in moments of anger would also strike out with words that were

deeply hurtful: “I don’t want you here – I don’t need you, you’re in the way,” and “You’re lazy and you’re not going to amount to anything, just like your father.”

She knew that these memories affected her life in many ways, and had worked with a well trained Christian counselor for several years attempting to heal these wounds. Both Carol and her counselor described the same frustration: she could picture the memories in her mind and could talk about them, but no matter what they tried she couldn’t connect with the painful emotions from these memories. In spite of many hours of therapy and prayer for emotional healing, nothing seemed to change.

Charlotte and I experienced the same thing during the demonstration session that we were facilitating. She would describe traumatic memory after traumatic memory, but couldn’t find the painful emotions. She would shed a couple tears as she described the most poignantly painful details, but within seconds would return to her emotionally blunted baseline. We tried all the tools we usually use to find emotions carried by internal dissociated parts, but with no results. We went through commands to address any demonic interference that might be blocking her emotions, but again with no results. We searched carefully for guardian lies, lead her in prayers to release psychological defenses, and tried to focus intensely on the most painful details of her traumatic memories, all with minimal results.

After an hour of trying everything we could think of, we identified a very significant vow. As Carol was describing the trauma and chaos in her home of origin, she described how her parents would yell at her if she displayed her emotions, and how her older brother would ridicule her for crying. She then commented spontaneously, “I’m not going to let them see that they hurt me. I give up. *I won’t care, I won’t feel, I won’t let them hurt me.*” Charlotte and I described what we had been learning about vows, and our perception that the vows she had just spoken might be the source of her persistent emotional blunting. After a time of internal wrestling, and prayer to address guardian lies, she made a clear choice to re-engage with life – to start caring and feeling again, and agreed to go through prayers to release these vows.

She began crying within seconds of finishing the prayer to release the vows. She reported feeling the confusion, fear, sadness, shame, powerlessness, etc. that had been “missing” during her years of prayer for emotional healing and therapy, and cried almost continuously for the rest of the session. We worked for an hour and a half to identify and remove other forms of clutter, and then the Lord came with powerful and beautiful healing. At the end of the session she could look directly at the most painful memories, and felt “sparkly clean” instead of the emotional blunting and deep-but-distant pain and shame she had felt when talking about her traumatic memories at the beginning of the session. Her therapist was present during our demonstration session, and both Carol and her therapist agreed that prior to releasing the vows our demonstration session had looked like her many prior therapy sessions, but that after releasing the vow something very different had happened.²

II. Why are vows destructive, and how do they block the healing process?

²This case study also demonstrates the importance of identifying when an internal dissociated part carries the problem in question. The client and therapist had identified and prayed through this exact vow, but the internal part that carried the vow had not been connected and participating as they went through the prayers to release the vow. One piece of the healing breakthrough was to identify that an internal part was carrying the vow, and to help this part stay connected and participate in the prayer to release the vow.

A. *Psychological authority to the vow, spiritual authority to the enemy:* In Sara's situation, her vows seemed to strengthen and protect the guardian lies and demonic infection that had been blocking the process. Our understanding is that when we make a self-protective vow, we are using our God-given free will to make a choice to take a certain position. When we make a self-protective vow, we give psychological authority to the choice in the vow, we limit the Lord's authority to work within the jurisdiction of the vow, and we give spiritual authority to the enemy within the jurisdiction of the vow. Sara's choices/vows "I will not feel, I will not remember, I will not tell" provide a good example. These choices/vows provided the psychological foundation for the corresponding behaviors of disconnection, denial, and deception (hiding certain memories from herself and others). These choices/vows limited the Lord's authority to work in her traumatic memories and gave the enemy authority to demonically infect these memories to the extent that the chosen position was outside the Lord's best plan for connection, light, and truth in Sara's life.

B. *"...no matter what it takes," the final clause of every vow:* All vows have this final clause (but it is usually unspoken). The reason all vows have this "...no matter what it takes" clause is that this clause is inherent in the very nature of vows. Nobody makes vows like, "I will be the best, *as long as it isn't too much work*," "I will never tell, *unless I decide it would be appropriate to tell*," "I will get you back some day, *unless I decide to forgive you*," or "I will never cry, *unless this vow gets in the way of my healing*."

"No matter what it takes" is a dangerous clause because it places the object of the vow above all other considerations, and eliminates the option of making judgment calls about priorities in each situation. For example, with the vow "I will make something of myself – I will succeed – I will not be a failure...(no matter what it takes)," the person does not feel the freedom to discern "I would like to succeed, but my church retreat is more important – I guess I will have to pass on this special project." When there is conflict between a promotion and caring for his marriage, this vow will push him to prioritize "success" over his marriage. When there is conflict between spending time with his children and working overtime in order to be the team leader, this vow will push him to prioritize "success" over his children. "No matter what it takes" is inherently sinful (idolatrous) because it places the object of the vow in front of the Lord's will. "I will _____ (fill in the vow), *no matter what it takes*" is sitting on the throne that should rightfully belong to "I will ask the Lord for guidance, and do whatever He leads me to do."

C. *Blocking current adult choices:* An optimally healthy person has a large range of responses available to him or her, each appropriate in its respective situation. Vows pathologically restrict our ability to use the full range of options – they eliminate the freedom to use our discernment and then to make corresponding free will choices in each specific situation. For example, sometimes it is appropriate to say exactly what you really think at the time a conflict is occurring, while at other times it is appropriate to "hold your peace" in the middle of the argument, and wait until a more appropriate time to say certain things. The vow "I won't say what I really think – it's not safe" eliminates the freedom to make this decision in each situation – it declares that I will always "wait until later," that I will never say what I really think. The "no matter what it takes" clause eliminating the option to make judgment calls about priorities in each situation is another example. In both Sara and Carol's situations, their vows "I will not feel, ..." etc., blocked their present, adult freedom to choose to participate fully in the emotional healing process. Each vow functions as a rule, or law, that declares it must always be done one way: "I will *always*...", "I will *never*..." When we confess and renounce vows, we take back the freedom to make present, discerning, adult choices in each situation.

D. Fulfilling vows necessitates sin: While making a vow may seem like a necessity at the time it is made – an unavoidable (or at least a very understandable) choice for surviving a difficult situation – it is striking that fulfilling or keeping vows seems to necessitate sin (we have not yet seen any exceptions). For example, I (Charlotte) frequently experienced ridicule as a child because of my racial identity, and sometimes because I didn't have the same clothes and other expensive accessories as my peers did. One particular person in my life also repeatedly rejected my thoughts and ideas, continually criticizing and scorning me. As a result of these situations, I made the following vow: "I will not go where I'm not wanted, I will not express my thoughts to those who aren't eager to hear them."

As I discovered that there were some things that I could do very well, I also adopted a pattern of perfectionism to bolster my self-image, vowing: "I won't do it unless I can do it excellently and impress people." In order to keep these vows, I had to decide where I would go, what I would say, and what I would do based on what other people would think of me instead of on what God wanted. Would they welcome me and my ideas? Would they be impressed with my performance? If God wanted me to go somewhere that I would not be welcome, I would have to disobey Him to keep my vow. If telling the truth would lead to conflict and make me unpopular, I would have to lie to keep my vow. If God wanted me to learn new tasks that I could not master immediately, I would have to disobey Him to keep my vow. And for whose glory was I taking all these precautions anyway? My own, of course. This association between vows and sin betrays the true nature of vows. Rather than being God-given, they are another version of idolatry/self-sufficiency.

E. Exile of internal parts: Another way in which vows are a problem is that they exile internal parts – they contribute to the process of alienating parts of ourselves. Making a vow "I will never _____ ("cry," "trust," "be angry," etc.)" is like passing an internal law that says "All parts who _____ (cry, trust, get angry – whatever has been cut off by the vow) are bad and must be exiled. I will not acknowledge or own you as part of me." We have found this phenomena to be so common that we now include "I take back all internal parts that have been exiled by this vow" in our prayer to resolve vows. Sara had an internal part carrying memories where she had hurt others, and she felt like this behavior had been "just like the rest of my family." A number of the vows she carried, and especially, "I won't be like the rest of my family," blocked the healing process by exiling and sealing off this internal part that carried important memories and the emotions attached to them. (Note that the "missing" memories and emotions began coming forward the morning after she released these vows.)

F. Polarization of internal parts: Vows can cause and/or exacerbate polarization between internal parts – they can cause and/or reinforce the formation of opposing "enemy" camps. On one team are the part(s) that support the vow, and on the other team are the part(s) that are outlawed/exiled by the vow. The vow is a clear expression of negative judgment *by* the part(s) making the vow *against* the part(s) that are outlawed/exiled by the vow. It is like a line in the sand between the opposing parts/teams. Polarized, adversarial internal systems are always problematic and it is always beneficial to help these polarized internal systems reconcile so that they can work together towards healing instead of fearing and fighting each other.³ Sara's vows

³The outlawed/exiled parts tend to be unhappy, since they have been disowned, cut out of all legitimate participation in the internal system, and their needs are neglected. Occasionally a certain constellation of triggers can put the outlawed/exiled parts in the driver's seat. When this

seemed to contribute to an antagonistic and judgmental attitude towards the part that carried the missing memories and emotions. Note her spontaneous comment the morning after releasing these vows: “For the first time in my life I feel compassion, as opposed to judgment and rejection, for this part.” Our experience is that releasing vows provides dramatic benefit with respect to depolarizing adversarial internal parts systems.

III. Identifying vows:

Occasionally it is easy to spot self-protective vows blocking the emotional healing process. While working through traumatic memories, the person may spontaneously comment “I will never forgive that @#\$%&! I will burn in hell before I forgive him,” or maybe “As he was walking away, I can remember saying to myself ‘I will never trust a man again’.” At other times sinful vows are surprisingly hard to spot. We have found the following observations and insights helpful in identifying vows:

A. Vow anxiety: There is often a certain kind of anxiety one experiences when doing or attempting to do something which violates one’s own vows. Part of the subjective quality of this anxiety is that there will be no apparent reason or source. It’s not that it’s impossible to do a thing one has vowed not to do – it’s just that one will experience a great deal of stress and anxiety, and probably a sense that something’s wrong – like one is breaking some kind of internal law. As Charlotte and I have learned to recognize the particular subjective feel of this “vow anxiety” in ourselves, it has become a helpful indicator of an underlying vow “law” that is being broken.

B. Vow confusion: There is often a certain kind of confusion one experiences when doing or attempting to do something which violates one’s own vows. Again, it’s not impossible to do a thing one has vowed not to do. One will just experience a great deal of mental static – like one is working through some kind of interfering force field. As with vow anxiety, there will be no apparent reason for the unusual difficulty. And just as with vow anxiety, as Charlotte and I have learned to recognize the particular subjective feel of this “vow confusion” in ourselves, it has become a helpful indicator of an underlying vow “force field” that interferes with our thinking as we are crossing its barrier.

C. Outrage when others fail to cooperate with your vow: Charlotte and I have noticed that each of us will experience a sense of outrage when we honor a vow we have made but others fail to respond as “required.” For example, if I have vowed that I will never let anybody be angry with me, and make tremendous sacrifices in my attempts to honor this vow, I will be outraged if you should dare to be angry at me in spite of all my attempts to avoid conflict and give you what you want. If I have vowed to prove that I am not selfish, and again make tremendous sacrifices in my attempts to honor this vow, I will be outraged if anyone accuses me of being selfish. When I am free of these vows, I will be able to make appropriate choices for myself and allow you to respond as your own choices, lies, triggers, etc., determine (and I won’t be outraged).

D: Lies that won’t move, for no apparent reason: Sometimes all the pieces seemed to be in place – the root memory had been exposed, the person receiving ministry was emotionally

happens, they try to maintain control as energetically as the original “drivers” worked to keep them in exile. This internal civil war creates chaos in the person’s life and interferes with healing in many ways.

connected, and a distorted interpretation (lie) had been identified – but the lie did not resolve. Other possible blockages had been carefully identified and resolved, but the lie still did not resolve. Finally, we realized that the core lie was being shielded by a “matching” vow (see below), and the recipient was able to receive truth to resolve the lie immediately after the vow was released.

E. Sleeping in the same bed with a matching distorted belief (lie): As we discovered that vows are often found sleeping in the same bed with certain kinds of matching distorted beliefs (lies), we learned to routinely check for one whenever we found the other. For example, the lie “Men can never be trusted” will often be found with the matching vow “I will never trust a man.” This makes a lot of sense when you think about it: if a child truly believes the distorted belief (lie) “Men can never be trusted,” she will often make a matching decision/choice/vow along the lines of “I will never trust a man;” and if a child believes the lie “Dad will kill me if I tell,” she will usually make a matching decision/choice/vow along the lines of “I won’t tell.” This principle is also helpful for finding lies – if you find the vow first, always check for a matching lie.

F. Sleeping in the same bed with a matching judgment: It is possible for judgments to stand alone, but they are usually accompanied by a matching vow. For example, if a person judges her mother for being lazy, she will often decide/choose/vow “I will never be lazy like my mother;” and if a person judges his father for being unfaithful, he will often decide/choose/vow “I will never be unfaithful like my father.” As with matching lies, when we discovered that judgments are usually accompanied by a matching vow, we learned to routinely check for one whenever we found the other.

G. Other aspects of the emotional healing process are not working, for no apparent reason: In some situations, the only indication (that we perceived) of a vow was that the overall emotional healing process was not working. For example, a vow such as “I won’t care any more” was invisibly blocking emotional connection, or a vow such as “I won’t remember” was invisibly blocking recovery of the root memory. If the emotional healing process is not working, for no apparent reason, one valuable trouble-shooting tool is to go through the Self-protective Vow Worksheet. While the person is connected to the traumatic memory and the associated painful emotions, have them go through the worksheet and check any that feel true. Encourage the person to also speak and/or write down any vows, “gives,” and “gets” that come to him in his own words while he is doing the exercise.

H. Other clues that can indicate and/or clarify vows:

- There is something the person receiving ministry *never* does or *always* does, it’s not normal, and they don’t know why.
- The person receiving ministry says “I will *never*...” or “I will *always*...”
- Any of the vows from the Self-protective Vow Worksheet *feel* true.

IV. Releasing Vows:

A. Give-backs and take-backs: Whenever a sinful vow is identified, help the person ask “What did I get from making this vow?” and “What did I lose, or give away, when I made this vow?”

Give-backs: Our perception is that when we make a self-protective vow we get something from the vow and/or we get something from the enemy through making the vow – that’s why we make vows. For example, when bullies insulted me (Karl), and pushed me around on the

playground, part of the trauma was feeling powerless, helpless, vulnerable, and out of control. The sense of injustice was also painful. (They did whatever they wanted, and there were no apparent consequences). And I can remember the following words just coming spontaneously into my child heart as I tried to cope with the situation day after day: “I will never forget this. I will get you back some day. Some day, when you are in my office asking for a job, then we’ll see who’s in charge. You may be bigger than me now, but when I grow up – then we’ll see who’s boss.”

I don’t think I ever even spoke the words out loud, but these words became vows in my heart. My experience was that these thoughts/vows gave me the illusion of being less powerless and helpless – as if I actually had some control in the situation – as if I wasn’t a totally impotent, defenseless victim. They also provided the illusion that the situation wasn’t as unfair as it looked – that I would eventually receive justice by paying them back some day.

When we pray to break a vow, we must give back everything we got through making the vow. In this example, I had to give back using these vows to protect myself from feeling powerless, vulnerable, and out of control. I had to give back the illusion that the situation wasn’t really as unfair as it looked.

Take backs: There are also very concrete, specific things we lose/give away when we make vows – things we can’t get or experience or do or know as long as we maintain the vow. For example, I was the slowest kid in our group of four guys that hung together as friends. For obvious reasons (you can’t run away from someone who isn’t slower than the others in the group), I was the target of a sadly common childhood game “Let’s run away from somebody.” “Let’s run away from Karl” was an occasional sport for the other three guys in my group of “friends.” It was painful enough to be the target of this “game” of rejection. The conclusion I came to spontaneously and unconsciously as a six year old was that it would be even more painful and humiliating to acknowledge that this was happening and that I couldn’t do anything about it, or to display any emotions about the situation. The next time we would get together, I would not mention, or acknowledge in any way, that our last friendship get-together had ended with a game of “Let’s run away from Karl.” Without thinking about it consciously, or even speaking the words silently in my mind, I quietly made decisions/vows to take a position of self protection: “I don’t care, I won’t care, I won’t feel hurt, I won’t cry. I won’t even notice or comment that the other guys play ‘run away from Karl’ for sport.”

I gave several things to these vows: the freedom to feel and express my emotions with transparency and vulnerability, and the ability to see, connect with, feel, and then heal these wounds of rejection.⁴ It should not surprise anybody to learn that the healing process for these memories was stuck because I could not connect with the emotions. When we pray to break a vow, in addition to giving back everything we got from the vow, we must also take back everything we lost/gave away through making the vow. In this example, I had to take back my emotions, the freedom to cry, and the freedom to heal. I began to cry immediately after finishing this prayer, and was then able to move forward with healing for these memories.

A common misunderstanding is that vows are only found in association with bitterness and/or

⁴I also got several things from these vows: the appearance of being stronger, more secure, and more in control than I actually was, and avoiding the pain and humiliation of publicly acknowledging my social vulnerability and my powerlessness to do anything about it.

vengeful emotions. Our observation is that many vows are simple, spontaneous, quiet decisions to take a position of self protection. Sara's "I won't feel," "I won't remember," and "I won't tell" in response to the trauma and danger in her home of origin are good examples of non-vengeful self protection vows. My "I won't care," "I won't feel hurt" and "I won't cry" would also fit into this category.

When we have used our God-given free will to make a choice/decision/vow, we must make a choice to renounce it in order to be free.⁵ God wants to give us a better solution than the vow seemed to provide, but he will not impose his solution on us if we refuse it by holding on to our vow.

B. Facing pain: Some people are understandably surprised and confused when they realize that we are asking them to release a defense that has directly protected them from pain. Others are understandably surprised and confused when they experience more pain after releasing the vow. "Why would I want to give back protection from pain? Why would I want to 'take back' feeling painful emotions?" Releasing vows will open the way for healing, and we are convinced that this is the better portion, but it is important to honestly acknowledge that this step will inherently include facing any pain that the vows were protecting us from. Understanding this ahead of time will prevent surprise and confusion in the middle of the process, or after the prayer when the person begins to experience his or her honest, undisguised pain.

**2025 Immanuel Approach addendum: Part of the good news with the Immanuel approach is that we will face the pain *with Jesus*. We will experience the living presence of Jesus *abiding with us* as we walk through any pain that we need to feel in the process of working through traumatic memories, and we will experience the living presence of Jesus abiding with us as we encounter any painful situations in the present.

C. Good and "bad" on both lists: Some people seem confused by the fact that there are items that are good and items that are bad/hard/painful on both the give-back and take-back lists. Give-backs can include bad things, like self reliance, pride, withdrawal, isolation, and suspicion; and also good things, like protection from rejection and protection from pain. Take-backs can include good things, like trust, intimacy, connection, truth, honesty, and healing; and also hard/painful things, like vulnerability, remembering painful memories, and feeling painful emotions. Recognizing and acknowledging this reality ahead of time can decrease confusion during the process. As discussed below, it is also important to remember that the give-backs and take-backs are made in the context of acknowledging and validating the legitimate agenda of wanting to avoid pain.

D. Acknowledge legitimate agenda, embrace our suffering: The reason we make vows is to avoid or reduce our suffering in some way. Avoiding suffering is, in many respects, a healthy

⁵Sometimes this renunciation happens effectively at a gut, experiential level without being named. When a person feels a strong internal resistance to remembering or feeling or some other necessary step in the healing process, but then is able to deliberately choose to do it anyway, he or she may be breaking vows. The important thing, after all, is not to utter certain words, but to change the orientation of one's will. The reason we use the form of prayer that we do is that many people find that it helps them truly engage their wills. Understanding why I did what I did in making a vow, having a clear understanding of what I gained, and having a clear understanding of what I lost, helps me to truly repent.

and legitimate goal. A person in a traumatic situation can hardly be faulted for trying to find ways to avoid experiencing similar painful situations in the future. “I will never trust a man again” is trying to address the legitimate desire to avoid being hurt by betrayal. Sara’s “I will not remember” was trying to find some way to cope with trauma that was overwhelming for her as a child. My (Karl’s) “I will not cry” was trying to address the legitimate desire to not be humiliated. Even my bitter, vengeful vows, “I will never forget this” and, “I will get you back some day” came from the legitimate desire to not be a powerless, impotent, defenseless victim of injustice. There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to avoid pain. There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to protect oneself from betrayal, violation, or other injury.

For example, it is possible to come to *accurate* interpretations⁶ and *healthy, sin-free* choices when I experience painful rejection. I can have a legitimate, understandable initial emotional response along the lines of, “Wow, that was horribly painful! I would sure like to avoid feeling that pain again.” But then go on to formulate accurate interpretations and make healthy, sin-free choices. I can make plans to appropriately minimize painful rejection (plans to avoid painful rejection in *some* situations, *while still abiding by God’s values and staying within God’s plan for my life*), but accurately recognize that my walk through life with the Lord will still include other situations in which I *will* experience painful rejection. I accept that it will be painful, but know that I will be okay if I turn to the Lord for protection and help in the situations in which there is no way for me to stay in control and prevent rejection (without abandoning God’s values and plans for my life).

In contrast, when we make self-protective vows the legitimate desire to avoid pain becomes a refusal to accept the reality of suffering in our lives, and an attempt to gain a level of control that is *not* legitimate. For example, if I suffer a traumatic rejection I can have the same legitimate, understandable initial response of “Wow, that was horribly painful! I don’t want to do that again,” but then go on to formulate distorted interpretations/conclusions and make unhealthy, sinful choices (vows). I can conclude that I need to make sure I am *never* rejected again. I can conclude that I have a *right* to never be rejected (an erroneous view of what it means to be following Christ in a broken world, interacting with other free-willed beings). And I can decide that I will do *whatever* it takes to protect myself in *all* situations by making sure that I am never rejected again (*a form of idolatry – avoiding rejection will take priority over obeying Jesus or following His plan for my life*). These distorted interpretations/conclusions (lies) and self-protective choices (vows) will inevitably lead me into sin, such as being dishonest about my feelings, rejecting others before they have a chance to reject me, not letting people really know me, and acting in manipulative ways to ensure that others accept me.

Life includes suffering. Jesus promises to be with us always, but he does not promise us that we will never suffer. In releasing vows that we took on to avoid suffering, we not only clear the way for God to heal, but also to transform and redeem our suffering for His glory and our ultimate good.

Returning to acknowledging and validating legitimate agenda: Even while in the process of challenging and dismantling sinful, self-protective vows, we have found that it is helpful to acknowledge the legitimate agenda that the person is/was trying to address in making the vows.

⁶Remember that the level 5 processing task is to interpret the meaning of any given experience. And in order to *successfully* process a painful experience, so that it does not become a trauma, one must *correctly/accurately* interpret the meaning.

It is important for the give-backs and take-backs to be made *in the context* of acknowledging and validating the legitimate agenda. For example, we acknowledge and validate the legitimate agenda of wanting to avoid painful rejection. And we ask the Lord to protect us from rejection as much as possible, and to give us grace to bear any rejection He does allow into our lives. *In this context*, we give back the illegitimate protection from rejection provided by vows like “I will never trust anyone” and “I will never be vulnerable again.” When I pray, “I give back avoiding rejection, I give back self protection,” the expanded version that I am thinking inside is, “I give back *using this vow* to avoid rejection. I give back self protection *through this vow*. Jesus, I trust that Your presence and Your grace will be sufficient for me to honestly feel and survive any rejection that You allow into my life.”

Discussing this briefly and including the legitimate concerns in the prayer feels very validating for the person/part carrying the vow, and seems to prevent problems with misunderstanding and guardian lies that otherwise frequently hinder the work to release the vows. It can be helpful to pray the “expanded” version of each give-back if a person is having trouble holding onto the wider context.

V. Prayer to break vows:

We like to be thorough when we pray to dismantle self-protective vows, explicitly confessing the vow, asking the Lord’s forgiveness for making and holding the vow, repenting of making and holding the vow, and renouncing the vow. In addition to this, it is important to explicitly take back anything we gave to the enemy through making the vow and to give back/release anything we got from the enemy through making the vow. We find that identifying and naming the specifics regarding what we give to and get from vows can help the recipient understand and participate in the prayer at an intuitive, experiential level instead of going through it as a magical ritual. Identifying and naming the specifics especially helps when internal dissociated parts are carrying the vows, because it is especially important for the internal parts to be present, understand, stay connected, and participate in the prayer (and identifying and naming the specifics helps with this).

We use the sample prayer below. If you wish to pray more spontaneously, we would at least encourage you to include these same basic ingredients.

Go through the prayer with all vows, give-backs, and take-backs that are identified, and then return to the usual emotional healing process for the target memories and emotions. The person receiving emotional healing can also go through the self-protective vows worksheet and the prayer to resolve self-protective vows as homework assignments.

Dismantling Self-Protective Vows: Sample Prayer

Sometimes it is helpful to acknowledge the legitimate agenda associated with the vows being addressed, and to discuss briefly why it is problematic to make vows as a way to pursue this agenda. The sample prayer addressing legitimate agenda can be a part of this. These steps can be omitted to conserve time if the person already understands these principles and is fully ready to release the vows.

Sample prayer addressing legitimate agenda (optional):

“Lord, I acknowledge the legitimate needs and desires that these vows are attempting to care for (you can also briefly describe the situation at this point, for example: “I was scared and was trying to find a way to protect myself and to feel more in control”). I **do** want _____ (describe what is desired. Examples: “to be safe” “to have justice” “to be patient and gentle instead of angry and violent”), but I am ready to release and renounce this vow, this attitude of self sufficiency, and to stop putting this concern above all other considerations. I acknowledge that I cannot accomplish this in my own strength. I ask You for _____ (what you are trying to accomplish with the vow. Examples: “protection” “justice” “patience” “gentleness”) and also for the discernment and grace to participate appropriately in Your plan to accomplish this. I accept that You don’t guarantee that my life will be completely free of _____ (What you are using the vow to avoid. Examples: “injustice”, “pain”, “fear”), and I ask you for the grace and strength to be faithful to You in whatever you choose to allow.”

Sample prayer to confess, renounce, and resolve vows:

“Lord Jesus, I confess making and holding this vow of _____. I ask Your forgiveness for making and holding this vow of _____. I acknowledge that I cannot change my own heart and mind, so I ask you to give me true repentance regarding this vow. I ask you to give me your heart, your mind, and your truth regarding this vow. In the name of Jesus, I now renounce making and holding this vow of _____.

- “In the name of Jesus, I give back anything I have gotten from this vow. I give back anything I have gotten from the enemy through making this vow.

“I specifically give back, release, and renounce _____ (name any specifics, for example, “the feeling of being in control”) that I have gotten from this vow or from the enemy through making this vow.

- “In the name of Jesus, I take back all psychological and spiritual authority I have given to this vow, and I take back all psychological and spiritual authority I have given to the enemy through making this vow.

“I specifically take back from this vow and from the enemy _____ (name any specifics, for example, “the freedom to feel and express my emotions”).

“I take back all internal parts that have been exiled by this vow”

“In the name of Jesus, I sever all ties of darkness connected to this vow in any way.”