

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Straight Talk James 5:12

We are moving on to another section of Scripture which consists of a single verse. Let us read **James 5:12**, “**But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment.**” How does this verse fit into the flow of this epistle? James, beginning in **James 4:1**, had begun to list out various expressions of a worldly mindset. It seems that the strong opening expression of **James 5:12**, “**But above all**,” is best understood as marking the conclusion of this section.

Selfish strife, which we saw in **James 4:1-12**, is certainly an expression of the mindset of the world. Presumptuous planning, which we saw in **James 4:13-17**, is certainly an expression of the mindset of the world, and certainly an impatient spirit, which we saw in **James 5:1-11**, is an expression of the mindset of the world. “**But above all**” of these things there is no greater expression of the mindset of the world than lying.

Fallen men are basically liars. Children lie to their parents and parents lie to their children. Husbands lie to their wives and wives lie to their husbands. People lie to their employers who in turn lie to them and often to the public. Politicians lie to get elected and continue to lie once they are in office. People lie to the government - perhaps most notably on their income tax returns. Educators lie, scientists lie, and members of the media lie. Our society is built on a framework of lies, leading one to wonder whether our social structure would survive if everyone were forced to speak the truth for even one day.

That we live in a world of lies should surprise no one familiar with the Scriptures. **John 8:44** tells us that the unsaved world are the children of Satan, who is the Father of lies. This basic dishonesty, inherent in the unsaved, has led men to impose oaths on other people in an often futile attempt to force them to be truthful and to keep their promises. Both the simple oaths of children, the sophisticated oaths often required by cults and other organizations, and everything from legal contracts to peace treaties are necessitated by the recognition of mankind’s basic dishonesty.

The practice of swearing false, evasive, deceptive oaths was commonplace in Biblical times. Jesus in **Matt. 5:33-36** and **Matt. 23:6-22** felt compelled to rebuke this sinful practice.

Therefore it is not surprising to find that it had become an issue in the church, particularly in the predominantly Jewish congregations to which James wrote. Since swearing oaths was an integral part of Jewish culture, Jewish believers brought that practice into the church. But such oath-taking is unnecessary among Christians, whose speech is to be honest. **Eph. 4:25** says, “**Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.**” For believers, a simple yes or no should suffice, but unfortunately this was not the case.

James issues a simple command in this verse to stop swearing. There are three features of his command that need to be considered, which we will look at this weekend.

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Though oath-taking is not nearly as prevalent as it once was, it is still present and we need to understand what the Scriptures teach us concerning this practice. In doing this, I am confident that if we come to the Scriptures with hungry hearts, we will be challenged to give even greater attention to the truthfulness of our words. Let us begin our study by considering the first feature of the command in **V. 12**.

THE RESTRICTION

Let us look at **James 5:12**, “**But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath;**” The specific speech-related issue James focused his attention on is that of swearing. In this context "to swear" does not mean (as it often does in English) to use illicit speech, dirty talk, filthy jokes, or four-letter words - the type of unwholesome, non-edifying speech the apostle Paul forbids in Ephesians 4:29.

Instead "swear" refers to the taking of oaths. The Jews of James's day had developed a complex system of swearing oaths, the influences of which Jewish Christians brought with them into the church. It is against the abuses of that system that James wrote.

The Jewish system of swearing oaths had its roots in the Old Testament. In a time when written contracts did not exist, oaths served to bind agreements between people. To take an oath was to attest that what one said was true, to call God to witness to that, and to invoke His punishment if one's word was violated. To call God to witness to the truth of one's promise and to invoke His judgment if one defaulted on that promise was a very serious matter.

The Bible does not forbid taking oaths, acknowledging that in a world filled with liars there are times when they are necessary. Certainly it is not wrong to take an oath when testifying in court or getting married. Oaths are wrong when they are misused with the intent to deceive others, or when taken rashly or flippantly. The acceptability of oaths under certain conditions can be seen in the following ways:

Examples of godly men who took oaths (Gen. 21:24-31,24:2-4; Josh. 2:12-30; 2 Cor. 11:31).

Gen. 21:25-31 “(25) **But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. (26) And Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, nor did I hear of it until today.” (27) And Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. (28) Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. (29) And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?” (30) And He said, “You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand in order that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.” (31) Therefore he called the place Beersheba, because the two of them took an oath.”**

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Again we see Abraham taking another oath in **Gen. 24:2-4** “**(2) And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Please place your hand under my thigh, (3) and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, (4) but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.”**”

Joshua 2:12-30 records the oath given Rahab by the two Israelite spies:

(Rahab said) “(12) Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father’s household, and give me a pledge of truth, (13) and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.” (14) So the men said to her, “Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the Lord gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.” (15) Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. (16) And she said to them, “Go to the hill country, lest the pursuers happen upon you, and hide yourselves there for three days until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way.” (17) And the men said to her, “We shall be free from this oath to you which you have made us swear, (18) unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather to yourself into the house your father and your mother, and your brothers and all your father’s household. (19) And it shall come about that anyone who goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we shall be free; but anyone who is with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head, if a hand is laid on him. (20) ”But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be free from the oath which you have made us swear.”

David swore oaths with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12-17; 2 Sam. 21:7), Saul (1 Sam. 24:21-22), Shimei (2 Sam. 19:23), and God (2 Sam. 3:35). The people of Israel under Joshua swore an oath (Josh. 6:26), as did the people of Judah during King Asa’s reign (2 Chron. 15:14), and the returned exiles (Ezra 10:5; Neh. 10:28-30). The apostle Paul took a vow to God (Acts 18:18), and took an oath of truthfulness by writing to the Corinthians: **“The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying” (2 Cor. 11:31; cf. 1:23; Rom. 9:1)**. Even an angel swore an oath (Rev. 10:5-6). In what ways in the Scriptures do we see the acceptability of oaths under certain conditions? First all we see the acceptability of oaths under certain conditions because of the examples of righteous oath-taking by godly men. What else?

There are occasions in the Old Testament when God required people to take an oath (Ex. 22:10,11; Num. 5:19-22, 6:2-21). Those who lost an animal entrusted to their keeping were required to swear an oath that they had not stolen it.

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In **Exod. 22:10-11** it says **“(10)If a man gives his neighbor a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep for him, and it dies or is hurt or is driven away while no one is looking,**

(11) an oath before the Lord shall be made by the two of them, that he has not laid hands on his neighbor's property; and its owner shall accept it, and he shall not make restitution.”

Numbers 5:19-22 records the oath required of a woman suspected of marital infidelity: **(19) And the priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman, “If no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, being under the authority of your husband, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse (20) if you, however, have gone stray, being under the authority of your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you” (21) (then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), “the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the Lord’s making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; (22) and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away.” And the woman shall say, “Amen, Amen.”**

You also may be familiar with the instructions concerning the Nazarite vow in **Numbers 6:2-21**. The Lord obviously saw the importance of vows in the life of the nation of Israel, and God expects vows to be kept. Because oaths invoke God’s holy name, they are not to be taken lightly. Num. 30:2 says that “If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” To fail to do so was to take God’s name in vain.

How do we know that certain vows are okay? Because of the examples of godly men who in fact used vows, and because the Lord Himself actually required the nation of Israel to make vows under certain conditions. But the most impressive reason of all to see that oaths are alright under certain conditions is that God Himself has sworn oaths.

God Himself has sworn oaths (Heb. 6:13-17). Further evidence that wisely swearing oaths is not wrong under the proper circumstances comes from the fact that God Himself has sworn oaths. He did not do so because there is any question about His truthfulness, but in gracious condescension, to set an example of integrity for men to follow.

Listen to the words of Heb. 6:13-17 “(13) For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, (14) saying, “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.” (15) And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. (16) For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. (17) In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath.”

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The often repeated Old Testament phrase “As I live” offers further evidence of God’s swearing by Himself (Num. 14:21,28; Deut. 32:40; Isa. 49:18; Jer. 22:24; 46:18; Ezek. 5:11; 14:16,18,20; 16:48; 17:16,19; 18:3; 20:3,31,33; 33:11,27; 34:8; 35:6,11; Eph. 2:9; Rom. 14:11).

James’s command “do not swear” must not be viewed as a blanket prohibition of all oath-taking . Oaths were permitted on serious occasions, but only in the name of God.

James, therefore, does not forbid swearing truthfully in the name of the Lord, but “by heaven or by earth or with any other oath” which simply became a cover for deception. The source of James’s prohibition is our Lord’s teaching regarding oaths in **Matthew 5:33-37 which says, “(33) Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.” (34) "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. (36) "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. (37) "But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “no, no”; anything beyond these is of evil.”**

What is the first feature of the command that we find in James 5:12? The restriction: Swearing by anything in God’s dominion, Jesus declared, brings God into the transaction and therefore renders their oaths as binding. Therefore, people should not think that they are off the hook in terms of their truthfulness just simply because they do not employ the name of God.

THE INSTRUCTION

Look again at V. 12: , “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no..” People of integrity have no need to swear elaborate oaths to convince others of their truthfulness, nor would they swear falsely to deceive people.

It must be remembered that neither Jesus nor James prohibited swearing oaths under special circumstances, but under normal circumstances they are superfluous for the believer, who is marked by honesty.

Jesus lifted all conversation in His church to the level of sacredness. Believers are to be known as people who keep their word. When they have such integrity, their simple yes and no will suffice.

But this is not always the case. There are professing Christians that I have encountered that when they say they will be someplace at 7:00 PM, you or I might be tempted to say to them, "Will you take an oath that you will be there at 7:00 PM?" Why might I respond that way? Because their “yes has not proven to be yes and their no has not proven to be no.” Why might I respond that way? I might respond that way because their word has proven not to be trustworthy..... There are professing Christians that I have encountered that when they ask me for money and say that they will pay me back, I am tempted to say to them, "Will you take an oath that you will pay me back?"

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Why might I respond that way? Because their yes has not proven to be yes and their no has not proven to be no in that particular area. How are you doing? Is your word your bond?

Speaking the truth in every situation will cause believers to shine forth in the darkness of a world of lies. Are you shining brightly? Is every word that you speak, to your knowledge, true? Is every promise that you make fulfilled to the best of your ability? Hopefully this is where you are. Unfortunately, there apparently were certain professing believers amongst the readers of this epistle who were on the opposite side of the spectrum, who knowingly chose to lie and tried to get away with it by attempting to cleverly phrase a non-binding oath. But in doing so James is saying that they are in big trouble.

THE MOTIVATION

Let us again look at V. 12 “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment.”

As a motivation against swearing false oaths, James points out the consequences of violating them. Those who do so, he warns, will “fall under judgment.”

The judgment (*KRISIS*) James has in mind here is not God’s chastening of believers. “Judgment” (*KRISIS*) is never used in the New Testament to refer to believers’ chastening. It is speaking of eternal judgment.

We see this word used in this way in James 2:13 to describe God’s merciless sentencing to hell of those whose lack of mercy reveals their unregenerate heart.

CONCLUSION

James certainly does not teach that believers will never err with their speech (3:2). Christians may lapse into falsehood on occasion, but lying will not be the unbroken pattern of their lives.

But that is not James’ point here. The sobering warning he gives in verse 12 is that those who continue to blaspheme God’s holy name through lying oaths face eternal damnation. Thus, this is another test of living faith. Those whose lives are characterized by a pattern of lying give evidence of having an unregenerate heart. Those whose lives are characterized by a pattern of truth give evidence of having a regenerate heart.