

JAMES 5:12

“YES” MEANS YES; “NO” MEANS NO!

“Above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”¹

“**H**is word is his bond” was a common saying about people of integrity when I was a boy. When an individual so designated spoke, their word was not questioned. The bank loaned money to my dad so he could purchase his blacksmith shop solely on the strength of his word. That would not happen today. It is assumed that all mankind lies given opportunity. However, that should never be true for Christians.

An ad that is currently seen on television has a family questioning the price of entrees at a restaurant chain. The waitress cheerfully assures first the father, then the mother, daughter and son that the price of entrees is precisely as printed. However, the baby, seated in a high chair clears his throat and asks, “Can we get something in writing?”

Like children crossing their fingers and shouting “King’s ‘X’” at the critical moment, society today seems always to be looking for wiggle room on every promise. We are not surprised when warranties are not be honoured. We assume that a primary reason for lawyers is to find escape clauses for their clients to avoid responsibility, whether their clients have been haled before the courts on criminal matters or civil issues. Just because the representatives of a corporation has been placed under oath does not mean that the truth will be revealed. Even United States senators and congressmen—to say nothing of Canadian parliamentarians, addressing their colleagues, are known to distort their testimony and cast their actions in a favourable light to avoid embarrassing questions.

When a congregation of the Lord has given its word on an issue—whether to deny that it will act in a given manner or whether to promise certain action—those hearing that word should be able to rely on the congregation fulfilling its word. The promise of a congregation is nothing less than the collective word of the membership—and Christians should be people who keep their word. This is the heart of James’ admonition in the verse we are considering this day.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE INSTRUCTION — It is not merely a device to fill time when we reach back into the Old Covenant to discover the foundation for the instruction James has given. After all, as was true for all pious Jews, the Old Covenant defined the Scriptures that James had available as one who sought God. This was the repository for moral instruction, and it is undoubtedly true that James was thinking of some of those passages that address such matters when he wrote. I have no doubt that he was thinking of the words of the Master, to which I shall appeal momentarily, but behind all that is written here is the teaching of the Old Testament.

Review some of the underpinnings for James’ position by looking at several passages in the Old Testament that were undoubtedly in his mind as he wrote this portion of the letter. Moses, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, had written a strong admonition that touches on this very subject when He delivered the Ten Commandments. The third commandment warns, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” [EXODUS 20:7].

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It is easy to imagine that this fourth commandment is proscribing cursing or the use of impious language. To be certain, there are numerous passages that condemn coarse language and/or irreverent speech; but really, the commandment speaks of a common tendency, both in Moses' day and in this day. The commandment warns against treating God in a casual manner; it cautions against attempting to use Him through appeal to His Name as the means of verifying what is said. To misuse the Name of God is to call Him to witness.

Think of some of the ways in which the Name of God is vainly used in this day. Not only the ubiquitous “Oh, God,” but such oaths as “I swear to God,” “As God is my witness,” “I swear on a stack of Bibles,” or “May God strike me dead if I am lying” are all misuse of God's Name. If not directly misappropriating the Name of the Lord, oaths may attempt to circumvent the direct appeal to God by appealing to that which is sacred and reserved for His purpose. To use an oath to attest to the veracity of a falsehood, or to take an oath as though you have a relationship to God when in fact you have nothing to do with Him, is profaning God's Name, lowering His holy Name for personal reasons.

Indulge me to refer you to a rather extended passage that may have been in James' mind when he was writing his letter to persecuted believers. Hosea addresses what had become a common tendency at the time he wrote, despite the Mosaic prohibition of years previous against misusing the Lord's Name. Before he actually points to the misuse of God's Name, the prophet pointedly exposes the condition of Israelite society. Listen to the Word of God through Hosea.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
“There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish,
and also the beasts of the field
and the birds of the heavens,
and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

“Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.
You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.
My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

“The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;

I will change their glory into shame.
They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.
And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.
They shall eat, but not be satisfied;
they shall play the whore, but not multiply,
because they have forsaken the LORD
to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine,
which take away the understanding.
My people inquire of a piece of wood,
and their walking staff gives them oracles.
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,
and they have left their God to play the whore.
They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains
and burn offerings on the hills,
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.
Therefore your daughters play the whore,
and your brides commit adultery.
I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore,
nor your brides when they commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,
and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.

“Though you play the whore, O Israel,
let not Judah become guilty.
Enter not into Gilgal,
nor go up to Beth-aven,
and swear not, “As the LORD lives.”
Like a stubborn heifer,
Israel is stubborn;
can the LORD now feed them
like a lamb in a broad pasture?

“Ephraim is joined to idols;
leave him alone.
When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring;
their rulers dearly love shame.
A wind has wrapped them in its wings,
and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.”

Following this excoriation of multiple cases of unrighteous attitudes and actions which had clearly permeated Israel, the Lord warned Judah against profane swearing as Israel was prone to do when they said, “As the LORD lives.” In other words, simply mouthing the words of a righteous person would not make them righteous; in fact, it would serve to condemn them, exacerbating the wickedness of which they were obviously guilty.

Solomon also cautioned against casually vowing in the Lord’s Name. His warning is found in Ecclesiastes. “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands” [ECCLESIASTES 5:4-6]?

Unquestionably, the Scriptures to which James could have appealed were consistent and clear in cautioning against a casual use of an oath. Worshipers of the Living God were advised to exercise care in how they used the Name of the Lord.

James is cautioning readers, and that includes us, against misappropriating God’s Name. It should be obvious that God values His Name, and that He does not readily accept our failure to show reverence for His Name and/or Person. Moreover, it is a common subterfuge to attempt to pronounce a minced oath by appealing to that which is set apart for God’s purpose. So James warns against swearing either by heaven or by earth, or “by any other oath.”

CULTURAL CONDITIONS NECESSITATING THE INSTRUCTION — Religious people in James’ day were masters at coming close to swearing by God’s Name, but they employed a variety of techniques to avoid responsibility when they so swore. The Rabbis taught that swearing in God’s Name, or any substitute for God’s Name, was binding. However, oaths by heaven or earth were not binding since there was no direct mention of God. James is quite specific when he admonishes that those who are followers of the Messiah must not attempt to confirm their word “by any other oath.” The word used means another of the same kind.

Religious leaders in James’ day had created a system whereby oaths were either binding or non-binding. The distinction revolved around whether God’s Name was invoked or not. As you can imagine, it became a matter of skill and precise language to create an oath that was not binding. This made a mockery of the practise of confirming anything by an oath.

Have you listened to the statements issued by Osama Bin Laden and his minions during the past number of years? Note how often these statements, and fatwa’s pronounced by the various mullahs, are prefaced by an oath. Then scrutinise the oaths that are pronounced. What was common in the days of the Master and the Apostles is common to this day in Muslim countries. They swear by heaven, by the prophet’s beard, by God, and so forth.

Jesus clearly spoke to the same issue James is addressing here. Not discounting the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in what James has written, it is important to remember that he was the half-brother of our Lord. He had undoubtedly heard what Jesus said, and perhaps he was present on that day when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. If so, he heard Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil”

[MATTHEW 5:33-37]

Immediately prior to His Passion, the Master excoriated the Pharisees and the Lawyers. “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it” [MATTHEW 23:16-22].

Behind His vehement denunciations was the fact that the religious leaders of the nation employed oaths in order to give the appearance of veracity when in fact they were anything but truthful. They were condoning a culture of corruption even while claiming to follow the Lord. Perhaps you imagine that the problem of religious people living indistinguishably from the world is a phenomenon unique to our contemporary world. This is not a new problem—it has plagued the professed people of God from the beginning of time. It was no worse in Jesus’ day, but He did expose the veneer of lies that sheathed the lives of religious leaders at that time.

At once, the oath that the Pharisees and lawyers pronounced was an assertion of truth and a falsehood. Moreover, such oaths as an appeal to truthfulness had become a common feature of daily life in Palestine at that time. This should not be surprising since the people took their clue for morality from those who instructed them. The culture of lies that had risen was not only tolerated, but actually admired as artful; it was thought to be a desirable facet of the culture of the day. The religious leaders esteemed white lies and intentionally misleading words.

The culture of deceit was so pervasive that even Peter, who had walked with the Master for three and one-half years, felt obligated to take an oath to prove his truthfulness when he lied. You will no doubt recall Peter’s confident assertion that he would never deny the Master [MATTHEW 26:33, 35]. Then, as Peter attempted to warm Himself by the fire outside the judgement hall, he denied the Saviour, not once, but three times. Quailing before servant girls and bystanders who recognised him, he finally denied knowing Jesus with an oath, according to the Word of God. “I do not know the man,” he lied [MATTHEW 26:72]. I’m not condemning Peter; each of us have at one time or another denied Him as well, both through our actions and perhaps even with our mouths.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful were we able to say that no Christian would ever act thusly? Undoubtedly, it would be more wonderful still if we could honestly say that we ourselves had never appealed to white lies or deliberate misrepresentations of the truth to avoid unpleasantness, to evade the consequences of our actions, or to get our own way in a matter. However that is not the case for any of us. Isaiah spoke for each of us when he cried out, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” [ISAIAH 6:5].

Whenever this subject is addressed, there are some within the Christian community who will say, “Then, no one should take an oath.” Actually, neither James nor Jesus proscribed taking an oath. Under the Law, it was not only permissible to take an oath, but provision was made for one who might take an oath rashly. One provision of the Law was the presentation of a “sin offering,” and one of the reasons for presenting a “sin offering” was when one has uttered an oath rashly. Moses wrote, “If anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it” [LEVITICUS 5:4], he must bring a sin offering.

Likewise, should a wife thoughtlessly utter a vow, there was provision to avoid creating family tension through insisting that she must fulfil the vow if her husband objected. The Word of God teaches that should “her husband hear[] of it and [say] nothing to her and [fail to] oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand” [NUMBERS 30:11]. It would certainly appear that God approved of a woman’s oath, provided the vow did not create disharmony in the home.

When Zechariah, relating the Word of the Lord, warns, “Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD” [ZECHARIAH 8:17], it stands to reason that God is giving tacit approval of true oaths.

Throughout the New Testament are statements that appear to approve of oaths wisely employed. Earlier, I referred to Jesus’ words given in the Sermon on the Mount. Look again at the introductory statement He made before addressing the issue of oaths. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn’” [MATTHEW 5:33].

Those who were conversant with the Old Covenant and with the culture of the day spoke with approval of God taking oaths. Praising God for giving him a child, Zechariah referred to “The oath that [God] swore to our father Abraham” [LUKE 1:73]. In his sermon on Pentecost, Peter spoke of God’s oath made to David, who was a prophet who knew “that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne” [ACTS 2:30]. On the whole, then, it appears that God does approve of oaths. This is especially true when they appeal to Him. After all, as the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians has sagely observed, “People swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation” [HEBREWS 6:16].

The Apostle to the Gentiles used oaths to emphasise a point that might otherwise be missed. Notice just a few instances when this is the case. In the Letter to Roman Christians, he writes, “God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you” [ROMANS 1:9]. The Apostle is plainly telling these Roman saints, “I’m praying for you constantly and God is witness to this.”

Again, in the Second Letter to Corinthian Christians, the Apostle appeals to God, saying, “I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:23]. God Himself could tell you that I did not want to grieve you, though I was prepared to do so if necessary.

Similarly, when writing the Philippian congregation, Paul appealed to God to verify his affection. “God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” [PHILIPPIANS 1:8]. His heart yearned for the saints in Philippi, and the motivating force of that love was the presence of Christ the Lord.

The problem with oaths as seen in our text does not lie in the oaths themselves, but in the pervasive culture of lies surrounding the oaths and the dishonouring attitude in which such oaths may be taken. The basis for James’ proscription, then, was the observation that oaths were being taken in a casual manner and that oaths were frequently misused in an effort to avoid truthfulness, candour and/or accuracy. James’ instruction is consistent with what has been taught to this point in the letter. For instance, earlier, James cautioned, “We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” [JAMES 3:2]. He noted that “The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” Then, he exclaimed, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire” [JAMES 3:5]!

Let me clarify the issue by pointing out that throughout the Word of God, we see that swearing is an act of worship. The Word of God insists, “It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by His Name you shall swear” [DEUTERONOMY 6:13]. Whenever we take an oath, we are appealing to God, and this should never be done in a casual or lackadaisical manner. Taking an oath is not terribly different from offering a prayer; and that should never be done casually or for purely selfish reasons.

Ultimately, James is confident that God will judge the guilty. This has been a theme that he has repeated throughout the letter to this point. Early in the letter, James questioned readers, “Have you not . . . made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts” [JAMES 2:4]? When we discriminate against those pursuing God according to social or economic or racial standards, we are attempting to assume the place of God and inviting His displeasure.

Soon after that warning, James warned, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour” [JAMES 4:11, 12]? A censorious attitude invites divine censure.

Then, the brother of our Lord quickly followed up that admonition with the observation, “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” [JAMES 4:17]. This, in turn, led to the warning, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door” [JAMES 5:9]. What is in view is not the judgement, but the fact of judging. James is warning us that we must give an accounting of our actions and our attitudes, just as Paul would later write, “We must all appear before the Judgement Seat of Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. As followers of the Risen Christ, we live in the knowledge of imminent judgement—not a judgement to determine whether we are saved or lost, but a judgement to determine rewards and to reveal the Master’s work in our lives.

THE APPLICATION OF JAMES’ INSTRUCTION — James begins this verse by saying “Above all.” This could introduce an error into our approach to the instructions he provides. James is not simply introducing a new idea in the letter. Rather, he is drawing all that has been written to this point under one umbrella. He is saying that integrity and honesty are expected of all who follow the Master. Perhaps I make the point stronger in your mind if I remind you that your habit will not excuse you. If it is your custom to sin, remember that it is God’s custom to destroy sinners.

When James says “Above all,” we should not imagine that he is doing anything other than providing emphasis to his admonition. The particular wording is a frequent device to emphasize the earnestness of the appeal throughout the New Testament. For instance, the Apostle writes, “Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” [COLOSSIANS 3:14].

In his final letter to Timothy, Paul appeals for him to bring the copies of the Scriptures, the Old Testament scrolls, which he would have found unwieldy to carry on his journeys. Thus, he requests of Timothy, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” [2 TIMOTHY 4:13].

A final example of the use of “Above all” is provided in Peter’s first letter. Reminding readers that the Lord is at hand and that judgement is ready to be pronounced, Christians must be self-controlled and sober-minded. However, overarching his instruction is one further admonition which is mandatory for believers, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” [1 PETER 4:8].

Therefore, when James begins this warning which serves as our text today, he is emphasising that guarding our speech to maintain integrity is vital to our life as believers. He is saying that in light of our testimony in the world and our relationship to the Master, honesty is of utmost importance. Tragically, there are Christians, just as there are churches, that are not honest. When one hears the name of such Christians or churches, integrity does not readily come to mind. In fact, should you shake hands with such people, you are well advised to count your fingers afterward. The promise of such churches cannot be depended upon.

When James warns, “Do not swear,” he uses the present imperative tense in the original language. The thought communicated, and what the first readers would have understood, is that the habit of swearing an oath was to be avoided. If the reader was already doing this, he or she must quite immediately. If this is not now a habit, it must not be allowed to become a habit. Instead, because of who we are, we must cultivate a culture of truthfulness.

The value of an oath depends to a large extent on the fact that it is seldom necessary to take one! When oaths become commonplace, they cease to be respected. People that frequently take an oath to affirm what they are saying are seldom the most truthful individuals. In fact, it is fair to say that the prevalence of taking an oath in James’ day was evidence of a culture rife with lying and cheating. In an honest society, no oath is necessary. It is only when individuals can no longer be trusted to tell the truth that they must be placed under oath. If the individual taking an oath is given to practise subterfuge or is in the habit of prevaricating, the oath will not likely change anything. They can readily justify lying in their mind. Such character traits must not mark the life of Christians. Instead, we must be people who speak the truth as our Master speaks the truth.

Christians, especially Christians committed to holding the Bible as the Word of God and sufficient for faith and practise, would agree that every word is spoken in the presence of God. Therefore, every word spoken must be true. Moreover, the biblical view of those who follow the Lord would be that a Christian should be of such character and honour that it is unnecessary to place him or her under oath. Christians must be marked by integrity.

The first readers of this letter were being tested through various trials [see JAMES 1:3]. When enduring trials, Christians are to ask God for wisdom, asking in faith [see JAMES 1:6]. Because Christians have faith in Christ, they are not to show favouritism [see JAMES 2:1]. The faith of believers constitutes true riches [see JAMES 2:5]. James spent considerable time emphasising that genuine faith manifests itself in deeds [see JAMES 2:14-26]. The entire letter is an extended plea for Christians to be not merely religious people, but people of faith.

Casually swearing an oath reveals a lack of faith. It could only be unbelief that would move the persecuted Christians to whom James wrote to try to save themselves by a manipulative use of oaths. They were appealing to the very devices detested among the religious leadership of the culture. They thought that they could manipulate the Lord through bargaining with Him, and thus lessen their suffering or improve their situation. The same efforts often mark the lives of Christians in this day.

It is through lack of faith that we disbelieve God’s “compassion and mercy,” and attempt to bargain. Perhaps it is to obtain what we imagine we must have or perhaps it is to avoid unpleasantness. However, attempting to bargain with God cuts at the very heart of the Gospel; it is an attempt to rely on the worth of one’s own offering instead of relying on God’s grace in the offering of Christ on the cross. Bargaining is a reliance on works; James is insisting that Christians must rely on grace. Ultimately, James is addressing not just a simple matter of dishonesty but a fundamental lack of faith and denial of grace in Christians.

“YES” MEANS YES; “NO” MEANS NO!

This, then, is the proper application of James’ instruction. We have been sidetracked should we focus on secondary issues, such as whether Christians should take an oath in a court of law. We miss the meat of James’ teaching if we see this verse merely as an injunction against “frivolous and indiscriminate oaths and the thoughtless mention of the divine name” because such speech would violate God’s law and hinder one’s witness to unbelievers. Those are important matters, to be sure; but James is pointing up an essential difference between genuine and false religion. He is still writing Christians who are paying a price for their faith, and thus he is urging them not to allow suffering to pressure them into unbelief—tacit or implicit. Christians must not try to impress each other or to manipulate God as if their works were what counted instead of God’s grace.

If you are trusting in God’s grace, you have no need to impress God or people, and you can be at peace with speaking honestly. Integrity should characterise Christians, and integrity will flow from wholehearted reliance on grace. God is unchanging and honest, and those who walk with Him will likewise be dependable and honest.

On the other hand, unbelief manifests itself in bargaining, manipulating and trying to impress. Flowing from a life of faith, will be prayer. And that will be the focus of studies during the coming weeks.

Are you a woman of faith? Are you a man of faith? Is the evidence seen through a life of integrity for you? The question is a challenge to each of us to ensure that we know the Master and to ensure that we walk with Him, beginning with faith in His sacrifice because of our sin. God’s Word declares, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. It is with the heart that one believes, and is made right with God, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The promise concludes with the prophet’s promise that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 author’s translation].