

People of Truth

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James 5:12

But 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.

- James 5:12

Introduction

We all know that telling the truth is important and keeping your promises is important. But what do we do when telling the truth or keeping your word cost you something?

Blayne Barber is a good friend of mine. All his life he has longed to be a professional golfer. He made it through college as a three-time All-American golfer and was set to make his dream come true. In 2012, we all graduated from school and Blayne went off to fulfill his dream of being a professional golfer. So, off the qualifying school, which is known as Q-school (or qualifying school) he went. To make it to the PGA tour, you have to advance through several stages of qualifying before you make it. Blayne had a great first stage and made it on to the next stage to pursue his dream. But he could not enjoy his accomplishment as something was nagging at him.

Golf has some interesting rules and, if you are familiar with the game, you know that. One of those rules is that you are not allowed to have your club touch anything in the bunker, if you hit it in there. There was one shot that Blayne played over and over again in his mind. He thought that his club might have hit a leaf when he was hitting one of his shots out of the sand. Shoot, his caddie even told him it didn't. Days after the event he had to decide what he would do. But the more he prayed about it, the more he came to the decision that he dreaded. He thought his club hit that leaf, but no one would know. If you called the PGA, he would be disqualified and his dream would not happen this year. What if this was his last chance and it never happened? But as he said, his integrity, being honest, was more important than fulfilling his dream of playing professional golf. So, he called the PGA tour and disqualified himself from Q-School. His dream would have to be fulfilled another year or so he hoped. Being truthful, a man of his word was the most important thing to him.

The past couple of weeks John has walked us through what James had to say to the wealthy and to the oppressed poor. Then we come to verse 12 in chapter 5. On the surface, it honestly looks like this verse came completely out of left field. We got the rich, the poor, Oh and don't swear. Did James just randomly put this verse here? I like what one pastor says when talking about this verse. He says that he knows by the direction of the Holy Spirit these connect, but he is just not sure how. Let's look and see what we can figure out.

The main point of the passage is this: Christians are to speak and live their lives with such integrity that swearing is not needed.

“But above all.” The “But” - “de” in the Greek - in this passage tells us that James is about to address another subject. As John mentioned last week, the body of the book ends with James 5:11. This verse actually begins the conclusion of James’ letter. We will see evidence of this as we keep reading.

“Above all” - does James really mean that what he is about to say is the most important thing in his whole book? Not swearing is more important than being doers of the Word and humility? No, I don’t believe James is saying that. This phrase has a literary function to it. A literary marker to state the conclusion of James’ letter. In the same way that the marker “finally” would or “as to the rest.” I Peter 4:8 does this: “Above all, love one another.” While it probably has a literary element to it, James might also be using this phrase to get our attention of the importance of this matter. He might want us to flippantly pass over it either. Just one verse and move on.

We are again coming back to full circle. It is very clear that James considers speech a true measure of genuine faith in the believer. In fact, if you remember, James mentions speech in every chapter.

* 1:26 – “bridle your tongue”

* 2:12 – “Speak as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty”

* 3:2-11 – James speaks of controlling your tongue

* 4:11 – Not speaking against a fellow Christian

And now 5:12. James understands how our speech tells us about what is going on in our hearts. The heart here is not the physical organ in our bodies, but the core of who we really are.

Out of the heart, the mouth speaks.

- Matthew 12:34

This verse is talking about truthful speech. Are we truthful? If our speech is not true, we need to question whether our faith is true. A heart that is filled with the Spirit will be a mouth that speaks truth and life of integrity.

“My brothers” - This tells us that James is addressing his fellow believers in the faith.

“Do Not Swear” - What does swearing even mean? When talking about not swearing, the first thing that might come to your mind is cussing. This is actually not what the passage is talking about. This is free. It is important to note that as we take our speech as a whole and put it up against scripture cursing is very much prohibited by the people of God. As Paul says:

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

- Ephesians 4:29

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

- Ephesians 5:4

The swearing in this passage is referring to oaths. A definition of oath is: "Statements by which a person promises or guarantees that a vow will be kept or that a statement is, in fact, true." We see this swear term used this way all the time. "I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God." You might be thinking about people being sworn into office. I love history, as my wife can tell you. A couple of weeks ago I was reading a book written by John F. Kennedy's chief of secret service. He was describing that dreadful day that President Kennedy was shot. There is an image from that day that you will probably be familiar with. Within hours of the death of Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn into the office of the President of the United States. Maybe you think of something that applies more to you, and it is the marriage covenant you made.

But James is saying not to swear, right? Every time these examples take place it is wrong. So, is James saying that God's people should completely do away with taking oaths? Clearly, James is not forbidding all oaths, because they are found all over Scripture and even commanded by and taken by God himself. Oaths were actually a very common Jewish practice. In the third commandment that God gives his people, He says:

"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

What does it mean to take the Lord's name in vain? One way this takes place is by taking it in an oath. Notice what is not forbidden is taking the Lord's name or swearing by the Lord's name. It is to swear by the Lord's name in vain. Another way of saying it is to swear falsely by God's name. King David swore oaths with Jonathon, Saul, and God. I Samuel 20:12-17, Jonathon swore by the Lord to protect David from his father Saul, who was trying to kill him. Scripture even commands us to take oaths:

* Psalm 50:14 - God himself made took oaths.

* Gen. 22:16 - God swears to Abraham by his own name to bless him and make his descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore. The author of Hebrews speaks of this oath and again does not condemn it.

So, then what is James talking about if he is not saying that we should never swear. James is talking about the misuse of oaths. There are two ways that we are going to look at where misuse of oaths can occur:

1. Rash/hasty Oaths
2. False oaths

Swearing must be done cautiously

Rash Oaths. Oaths are not to be entered into hastily and flippantly. We must understand our word is big deal and we are to cautiously make oaths. Judges 11:30-36 is an example of the dangers of making a rash vow can lead to. In Judges, God used judges to help lead and deliver his people Israel. One of these was a man by the name of Jephthah. In Judges 11, we find his story. He really wanted to defeat a group of people called the Ammonites in battle. He swore to God that if the Lord gave him victory over the Ammonites he would sacrifice to Him whatever “comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return.” Off he went to fight and the Lord granted him victory. When he returned home it was none other than his daughter, his only child, that came out to greet him after his victory. Jephthah’s foolish vow cost his daughter her life.

Do we make rash vows? Have you ever said: “God, if you get me out of this I will _____?” and then we don’t follow through? The mentality of Lord, if you do this for me, I’ll do this in return.

Marriage is a perfect example of this. Marriage should not be entered into lightly, and we are called by God to commit to our spouses for the rest of our lives. Divorce rate is 50%. As a nation and a church, we do not need to take our marriage vow lightly. I understand things happen and there is grace, but “till death due us part” is God’s intention for marriage.”

Another oath is our church covenant. As a member of this church, you promise to do certain things:

- * Grow in your relationship with Jesus through our spiritual disciplines.
- * Attending worship services and gospel community.
- * Give of our time, talents, and resources.

Swearing must be done cautiously.

All our speech must be truthful

“Either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath”

- James 5:12b

James call for us not to swear closely parallels Jesus’ command on oaths. We can look at the sermon on the mount to help us understand this passage in James, because we know God’s word is all true and consistent.

“Again 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

It is important to remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is often addressing Jewish distortions of the law. The Jews were teaching things like: if you just don’t murder, you are good. But then Jesus comes in and says: “Yes don’t murder, but don’t even hate.” “Yes, don’t commit adultery, but don’t lust.” When speaking about this, Jesus is very much aware of how the rabbinic teaching viewed oaths. Their teaching said that only vows to the Lord were the only ones that were binding. In other words, you can speak falsely, you can lie, but don’t use the Lord’s name when you do:

Do you know what that reminds me of? Crossing your fingers. So to deceive people, Jews would swear by heaven, Jerusalem, the earth, or their own heads. Jesus is saying, no. If you swear by anything, because as we know everything is God’s, you are breaking an oath of God. Jesus and James are saying: if you are using oaths to misuse them and to lie ,then you should not take oaths.

People who do not live by truth will always look for ways to avoid being truthful. All our speech must be truthful. Have you ever made a promise you didn’t keep? Have you ever lied? The answer to that is all of us probably have. But why? Why do we lie? It could be a variety of reasons. But the main reasons are to protect or glorify yourself or to hurt others. For example, we might lie to avoid exposure. If I am truly honest about my sin, it will expose who I truly am. If we don’t admit we have a sin problem, then we can act like it doesn’t exist. Jesus says that “The truth will set you free.” We lie because of fear. If I tell the truth, I don’t know what will happen to me. We lie to bring others down. Gossip falls under this. We speak lies against others to bring them down and maybe to make ourselves look good.

Christians are to live lives of truth

Christians are to live their lives with such integrity that they don't even have to use oaths. When they speak, we know it's true.

But let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no.

- James 5:12

The bottom line is this: James is calling his readers and us to be people of truth. As believers, when we speak, we are speaking truth, always. Our truthfulness should be so consistent and dependable that we do not need oaths to convince others we are telling the truth. We do not need to swear to convince others we are telling the truth. Truthful people will also not swear falsely to deceive people.

Oaths are not forbidden and are often used in special circumstances (court, marriage) but in everyday life, they are pointless for the Christian who is truthful.

How do we truly become men and women of truth?

1. Know Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus says that he is the way, truth, and the life. Jesus is truth! Remember that the way that we speak is a heart issue and only God can change hearts.
2. Know His word. Read it and memorize it.
3. Live by His word. Be doers!

Accountability: "So that you may not fall under condemnation." Other translations say "judgment." Remember all the way back in the ten commandments God said "The Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain." Due to the dishonest hearts of people, God will punish those who do not live a life of truth. This judgment here, *krisis*, is the word for judgment that is always used for unbelievers in Scripture. This leads us to believe that James is referring here to the final eternal judgment of those who are not followers of him. So, what is this saying? If you have ever lied or messed up with your tongue, you are hopeless and can't be saved? Is this saying that if we mess up in the future there is no hope for us? Not at all!

Jesus came to save all sinners, including those of us who speak falsely. There is grace. As those of us who all fall short in the area of our tongues at one time or another, trust Jesus for salvation and become a follower of him will be eternally forgiven.

But James is again reminding us that true faith will be marked by a life of truth. False speech and actions should not be the pattern of our lives. We have and we will fail, but do we see fruits of repentance when we do? Do we strive to be people of truth? We are to remember that where we have sinned in our speech and actions there is much grace! This final judgment is reserved for those who don't know Jesus.

Journey of speech in the Bible. There is good news, brothers and sisters. God never fails to keep His promises. It wasn't but right after Satan brought false speech into the world by lying to Adam

and Eve and then them sinning that God made a promise. He promised to someone from the seed of Eve to crush the head of Satan. That person came in the person of Jesus Christ. He has come and he crushed Satan with all his lies and broken promises. He came and lived a perfect life of integrity - a sinless life - so that he could save those who have fallen short in our speech. To save those who have been hurt by others who have failed in their speech. He died for all false words and actions. By trusting in Him we are forgiven and free. All of our false words and all of our lives that have not been lived in truth have been nailed to the cross and forgiven. These three words are true: "It Is Finished."