

Introduction

Last time we began to look at the words spoken by James here and by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:33-37. We were showing what they each said **goes beyond the taking of oaths or vows and deals with the matter of being truthful in our speech.**

We talked about how **there is a crisis of truth in our culture!** As believers, **we must be careful that we aren't drawn into being a part of that crisis of truth ourselves by drifting from being truthful in our communication!**

In our everyday communication, we as believers, should be people of truth who speak the truth without shading it by deception to hide the truth! All of these things are implicit in *James 5:12*, which is saying: **As believers we must be truthful in our communication to others or with others so that we do not fall under judgment.**

Remember we talked about how the Jews of that day were using oaths. Oaths ought to foster truthful communication, but in reality they had become a facade for lying. The Jews said that if you swore using God's name in your oath, you had to keep your word, but if you swore by some lesser thing—Jerusalem, the temple, or whatever—you were not bound. Jesus confronted the Pharisees for just that in *Matthew 23:16-22*.

The bottom line here is **we are to speak the truth at all times.**

We only got to look at one of the four things that James is teaching here:

I. AS BELIEVERS, WE MUST WORK AT BEING TRUTHFUL IN OUR COMMUNICATION!

Truthful speech undergirds everything else while untruthful speech undermines everything else!

By saying "above all" James is emphasizing the ultimate issue of personal integrity. Our personal integrity matters now because of Whose we are—Who we belong to!

John 8:44-45 (Lying is associated with whose we were!)

Ephesians 4:20-25 (Truth is associated with Whose we are!)

Now, from a human standpoint, oaths are necessary because bending the truth for personal advantage comes naturally to us as sinners.

James is not speaking here to those outside of the Church, but rather to believers ("my brethren"). Unfortunately, becoming a Christian does not automatically produce truthful communication!

The Bible is filled with exhortations to God's people to be truthful in word and deed.

The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:10—"For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:"

So don't assume that because you're a Christian, you won't struggle with the sin of being deceptive. We all need to work at this matter of truthful communication.

But, what does the Bible say about taking oaths or making vows? That brings us to our second point...

II. THE BIBLE DOES NOT PROHIBIT ALL OATHS, BUT IT DOES RESTRICT THEM!

When James says, "**Swear not**" he is **not** referring to taking the Lord's name in vain, although we know that Scripture clearly forbids that.

The third commandment states in *Exodus 20:7*—"Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."

Our Lord affirmed that commandment when He taught His disciples to pray in *Matthew 6:9*—"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, **Hallowed be thy name.**"

We are to reverence God. **It is always wrong to use the name of God or of our Lord Jesus Christ as swear words or exclamatory words!**

But James is not dealing with that subject here. Rather, **he is talking about not invoking God's name in everyday speech to assure the truthfulness of what we say.**

If someone often says, *"I swear to God that's true,"* you begin to wonder whether anything else they say is true. **Our words should be true without us needing to make a big deal about it.**

But the Bible does teach that **there are certain occasions when it is proper to take an oath or make a vow before God.** Because of this, I disagree with those who prohibit taking an oath in a court of law.

For example, *Deuteronomy 10:20* commands God's people to swear by His name. *"Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name."*

In the New Testament, the only time that Jesus spoke in His trial before the Council was when the high priest said to Him in *Matthew 26:63*—*"...I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God."*

So Jesus answered under oath.

The apostle Paul often swore by the Lord when he said,
"God is my witness" (Romans 1:9)
"Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul..." (2 Cor. 1:23)
"For God is my record..." (Philippians 1:8)
"...God is witness" (1 Thessalonians 2:5)
"Ye are witnesses, and God also..." (1 Thessalonians 2:10)
Galatians 1:20 "Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not."

Even more significantly, God sometimes swears by Himself, either by His words or by enacting His covenant.

Peter states that God swore to David with an oath in, *Acts 2:30*—*"Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;*

God swore to Abraham that He would bless him and multiply him *Hebrews 6:13-14*—*"For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, 14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee."*

The author of Hebrews goes on to say in Hebrews 6:17-18 regarding our salvation, *"Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: 18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:"*

So the Bible does not prohibit all oaths. Rather, it forbids both FRIVOLOUS oaths and FALSE oaths. FRIVOLOUS oaths are those that are so commonplace that they lose all significance or meaning. This would include taking an oath when it is not necessary or proper.

When the drunken King Herod swore to the daughter of Herodias that he would give her up to half his kingdom because of her dancing (*Mark 6:23*), it was a **frivolous oath**. When she asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter, Herod felt bad, but **because of his oath**, he was unwilling to refuse her (*Mark 6:26*).

In Joshua 9, Joshua and the children of Israel made a **foolish covenant** with the Gibeonites! And God held them to it as we've seen in our Wednesday night Bible studies recently!

In Judges 11:31-35, Jephthah **foolishly vowed** to sacrifice the first thing that walked out of his door when he returned from battle if the LORD would let him win the battle against the children of Ammon.

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He won the battle and then when he got home, the first one out of his house to greet him was his daughter! It was a **foolish vow!**

Often such frivolous oaths stem from pride. Herod wanted to look good in front of his dinner guests, so **he couldn't go back on his oath**, even though he felt bad about killing John the Baptist.

Sometimes we want to impress others with our spiritual commitment, and so we make a **boastful vow**. But **vows should be reserved for the most solemn and important occasions, so that they really mean something when we make them.**

To take an oath in court is not a frivolous thing!—It is solemn...it is serious business! (Someone's life or freedom or money is at stake!)

To take an oath to carry out your public duties is not a frivolous thing either!—It is solemn...it is serious business!

Our vows to be faithful to our mate at our wedding is an example of a vow that is to be entered into solemnly, it is not frivolous!

Some preachers encourage their audiences to make vows to do certain things like read their Bibles at least five minutes per day. There's a difference in encouraging you to read your Bible every day and asking you to make a vow to God to do it!

Daily Bible reading is important, but vows are serious! It is better not to make a vow than to make it and not keep it! (Ecclesiastes 5:5)
In my opinion, I don't think it wise to do such things!

It fosters a legalistic approach to the Lord, and it does nothing but heap guilt on the person who fails. Such guilt isn't helpful in promoting a close relationship with the Lord.

You should read your Bible as often as you can! But you ought to do it because you want to get to know the Lord better!

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But if you miss a day, just come back to it the next day and move on. I think that such spiritual vows tend to prop up the flesh, rather than promote love for God from the heart.

The other kind of oath that the Bible forbids is the FALSE OATH! A FALSE OATH is one that the person making it does not intend to keep, but he makes it either to impress or deceive others.

Jesus and James were directing these commands toward these kinds of oaths. The Jews had elaborate rules, such that if you swore by the temple, you weren't bound by your oath, but if you swore by the gold of the temple, you were bound. It was like children on the playground, ***"I had my fingers crossed, so I really didn't mean what I said."***

If people just said what they meant and meant what they said, there wouldn't be a need for any such oaths at all! The Jews of that day were just playing games with each other, but more importantly, **they were not displaying integrity of the heart before God.**

You may be able to fool someone with a deceptive or misleading contract, where they don't understand the fine print. But you can't fool God. He knows the thoughts and intents of your heart, and if you are practicing deception, the fact that you did it ***"legally"*** doesn't matter to God!

So, when we do take an oath, we need to consider it carefully and prayerfully, and then we need to be conscientious to follow through. If we don't, we should confess it to God and to the person we have wronged. And, we should seek to make restitution in ways that reflect genuine repentance. So,

AS BELIEVERS, WE MUST WORK AT BEING TRUTHFUL IN OUR COMMUNICATION!

THE BIBLE DOES NOT PROHIBIT ALL OATHS, BUT IT DOES RESTRICT THEM!

III. **SO THE REAL ISSUE AT STAKE HERE IS BEING TRUTHFUL IN OUR COMMUNICATION!**

Jesus and James weren't addressing whether or not we should take an oath. They were talking about whether or not we are truthful!

We aren't to tell the truth because we have taken an oath; we are to tell the truth because WE ARE TRUTHFUL! It is about having INTEGRITY!

Truthful communication is essential for good relationships because TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL FOR TRUST! If someone is not truthful with us, we have a hard time trusting them, don't we! If you catch someone in an outright lie it cast a dark shadow over anything else they might say from that point forward!

The root of truthful communication is walking truthfully before God, Who sees our heart! If we are not truthful with God, Who knows when we are AND when we are not being truthful, how can we ever be truthful with others?

Let me share with you some traps of deception and falsehood we need to be careful about falling into:

- (1) **The "half-truth":** you tell the truth, but not all the truth. Abraham did this when he claimed that Sarah was his sister. She was his half-sister, but he didn't mention that she also happened to be his wife! (Genesis 12:11-20)

This is a favorite that politicians and their opponents use to manipulate voters!
- (2) **The "white lie":** these are believed to be "innocent" lies that "don't hurt anyone." e.g. You call in sick to work when you're really well.
- (3) **The lie to cover for someone else: "He's not in."**

- (4) **Exaggeration:** stretching the truth to either make yourself look better or to evoke sympathy for your cause.
- (5) **The silent lie:** the other person assumes something flattering about you that is clearly false, but you don't speak up to correct it.
- (6) **The cover-up lie:** You hide your own wrongdoing with the rationalization that it would hurt the other person too much to find out the real truth.
- (7) **The evasive lie:** you change the subject or conveniently dodge the truth by not answering directly. This is another favorite of politicians!

A boy was on the witness stand in an important lawsuit. The prosecuting attorney cross-examined him, then delivered, he thought, a crushing blow to the boy's testimony.

"Your father has been telling you how to testify, hasn't he?"

"Yes." The boy didn't hesitate with the answer.

"Now, said the lawyer triumphantly, "just tell us how your father told you to testify."

"Well," the boy said modestly, "Father told me that the lawyers would try to tangle me in my testimony, but if I would just be careful to tell the truth, I could repeat the same thing every time."

If Abraham lied about Sarah...and David lied about Bathsheba...and Peter lied about knowing Jesus Christ..., then none of us are exempt from temptation to this sin. Work at becoming a person of truthful communication!

James ends with a warning:

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IV. DON'T ENGAGE IN BOASTFUL, DECEPTIVE SPEECH OR FALSE OATHS, LEST YE FALL INTO CONDEMNATION!

How will Christians fall under condemnation?

John 5:24 "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

So with regard to eternal judgment, those who have truly trusted in Christ do not need to fear.

But Paul warned the Corinthians that we will be judged for our works:
1 Corinthians 3:15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Later Paul explained to the same Church that they needed to judge themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper so that they would not be judged: *1 Corinthians 11:32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.*

Now we know that discipline can sometimes be very severe, including physical illness and even death!

Conclusion

So, what should we do? Be a person of integrity! Be a person of truth! And if we should happen to slip from that integrity, we need to get back there as quickly as possible!

Call it what it is don't cover it up! (Proverbs 28:13) Confess and forsake the sins of lying and deceit to God!

And then for those we've hurt because of our lack of truth or integrity, we should seek to reconcile and/or make things right with them!