

Message #18

James 5:12

When we were in Florida, we went to some spring training baseball games. We saw four teams play—Houston Astros; Minnesota Twins; Washington Nationals; and Detroit Tigers. Now what impressed me was the National Anthem. When the National Anthem was to be played, the announcer asked the crowd to stand and all the players came out and stood on the base lines and most of them had their hands on their hearts. It was impressive. They truly were honoring America.

Although there are some pathetic, disgruntled jerks in this country, it is still wonderful to see something like that. It is good and patriotic.

One of the things that was often done was to say the pledge of allegiance to the flag. We used to do that in school; it used to be done at political rallies and it is still done in some churches, we do it here:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.”

It is a good thing to do to pledge allegiance to our great country and flag, which God has given to us.

In fact, if you go to a court of law, you will often here these words: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

Both the pledge of allegiance and the pledge in a court are oaths. They are solemn declarations that promise that we intend to keep the promise we just publically stated.

Is it wrong to say the pledge of allegiance? Is it wrong to repeat the legal pledge of honesty in a court?

When we come to this verse in James we come to the subject of oaths. This appears to be one of the strangest verses in the book of James. Although I do think there is a connection of thought in the context and flow of the book, it is a verse that does present almost an isolated idea.

Now let's define an oath. **An oath is a promise or pledge that one makes before God that promises or pledges to do something or not do something.** That is what an oath is.

Now in the O.T. there were at least four different types of oaths:

- 1) There was the human to human oath. This was a very serious charge made from one human to another. Gen. 24:8, 41 - Abraham charged Eliezer to get Isaac a wife.
- 2) There was the God to human oath. A sacred promise that God made to man - Gen. 26:2-3- God confirmed the covenant promise He made to Abraham with Isaac.
- 3) There was the human to God oath. This is a very serious promise one makes to God such as a Nazarite vow (Num. 30:2).

- 4) There was the human to human to God oath. This was the oath made between humans but it included direct intervention by God if the oath were violated. Numbers 5:19-24- was an oath that promised that God would immediately bring the death penalty on any wife found cheating on her husband.

Now oaths and vows are Biblical. Jesus Christ swore an oath or agreed to an oath before Caiaphas concerning His identity (Matthew 26:63-64). The Apostle Paul in swore an oath of sorts about his preaching and prayer life (Rom. 1:9) and about his great love for Israel (Rom. 9:1).

But not everyone has the integrity of Abraham or Paul, and no one has the integrity of Jesus Christ, and herein is the problem.

When things got difficult many religious leaders would promise God things. They would do this for some public show. They would make some sort of oath or vow. Alfred Eidersheim says there was a Jewish proverb that said, “In the hour of need a vow...” (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book 3, p. 18).

So what would happen is these religious leaders would stand up publicly in all of their pomp and make oaths and promises, but they had figured out a hypocritical way to get out of them.

According to Matthew 23:16-22, the Pharisees had devised a neat little oath system. They could promise something and swear an oath to do something and swear by the temple or throne or altar and then they could get out of it because in their mind they hadn't sworn an oath before God.

J. Dwight Pentecost said, “By making these distinctions, the Pharisees were able to take an oath, but then absolve themselves of responsibility for fulfilling the oath” (*The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p. 393).

James was watching this. The new Christians who had experienced the grace of God were in that kind of religious world. What James says is don't let those phonies affect you. As a grace age believer be a person of your word. You be the kind of people before God, whose yes means yes and your no means no. If you say you are going to do something, do it. If you say you aren't going to do something, don't do it.

What James said is this:

A GRACE AGE BELIEVER HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO BE A PERSON OF HIS WORD AND IF ONE IS NOT A PERSON OF HIS WORD, HE WILL EXPERIENCE THE JUDGMENT OF GOD.

It is interesting how **verse 12** begins “But above all.” This is obviously one of the worst sins one can commit with his or her mouth. **James 5:9** warns believers not to complain about each other because the judge is right there watching and listening. There is a sin worse than that and that is to promise something before God and not follow through with it.

I think this text is needed more today than ever before. We are living in an age where believers will say things before God and then not follow through with it and think there is nothing wrong with it.

“Yes, God, I’ll teach that SS class”...unless I get too tired and then I’ll quit.

“Yes, God, I’ll serve on that committee or board.” But if things don’t go my way, I’ll resign.

“Yes, God, I will give this percent of my income to you”..but I’ll cut back if things get tight

“Yes, God, I promise I won’t do that again”.. you really don’t expect me to keep my word do you?

Now what do you think God thinks of this? Do you think He looks favorably on Christians who do this kind of thing? Do you think He will shower them with His blessings for going back on their word? James says when you walk away from a promise, God views it as walking into sin. God will never bless that.

What James wanted for these grace age believers was that they be men and women of their word. Our yes should mean something to us. Our no should mean something to us. It certainly means something to God.

Now in order to understand **verse 12**, we need to understand the severity of an oath or a promise that was not kept. To do this we will need to look at some passages of Scripture in the O.T..

James wanted grace age believers to realize that every promise we make before God, either a yes promise or a no promise, is very serious and he connects the yes and no promise to the context of swearing an oath before God.

What was happening is that people were make loose promises, swearing by heaven or by earth and their philosophy was I can always get out of it because I didn’t swear by God. Well, James says God takes your word very seriously.

When you say you are going to do something, you need to do your very best to follow through with it. When we say we are not going to do something, we better not do it.

Now there are four oath observations we want to make concerning oaths:

OATH OBSERVATION #1 – An oath is very serious to God.

As we already mentioned, there were four types of oaths and all of them are very serious to God. Dr. Duane Lindsay said, “Truth, justice, mercy and honesty should always characterize believers.”

Now there are two specific references in the O.T.:

Reference #1 - Josh. 9:18-21

God's people knew that He could pour out His wrath on a broken oath.

Reference #2 - Zechariah 8:16-17

God hated a false oath. God loves truth and honesty and he hates perjury.

OATH OBSERVATION #2 – An oath was very serious to God's people.

There are three references that clearly show this:

Reference #1 - Joshua 2:12-20

This shows how serious an oath was. Rahab knew if God's people made a promise, they were bound to keep it and she bet her life on that. Those two spies took oaths seriously.

Reference #2 - Judges 21:1-7

The Israelites had taken an oath that none of their daughters could marry a Benjaminite at a time when the tribe of Benjamin had been reduced to 600 men. Then they made an oath to kill any Israelite who refused to fight in the civil war at Mizpah, except for 400 virgins (21:14).

Reference #3 - Judges 11:30-40

Jephthah took his vow so seriously that he believed he needed to follow through with it even when it concerned his own daughter.

You must see that the Israelites, at times, had a real reverence for God. They did not just promise things before God and then quit. We are losing that kind of reverence.

OATH OBSERVATION #3 – A broken oath is sin against God.

There are two key references we want to see:

Reference #1 - Leviticus 5:4-6

According to the Levitical Law, to not follow through with a promise was a major sin and it required atonement.

Reference #2 - Ecclesiastes 5:4-6; 9:2

Solomon contrasts one righteous with one wicked and sinful and he clearly says that one who is righteous is a man of his word and one who is wicked says things but doesn't follow through with them.

OATH OBSERVATION #4 – A broken oath is forgivable by God.

It is very probable that every person here at one time or another promised something and didn't follow through with it. It is good to know that God is a God of grace and forgiveness. Two texts make that point clear:

Reference #1 - Leviticus 5:4-6-

Atonement must be made but it obviously can be made.

Reference #2 - Matthew 26:69-75-

Peter swore an oath denying Christ, but he regretted it and repented of it and was forgiven and greatly used. If Peter can be forgiven for this oath, we can be forgiven for our failures.

But James wanted God's people serious about their word.

Wise people live life with their yes meaning yes and their no meaning no.