

Introduction

The more you feel you have to swear you are telling the truth, the clearer it is that your word is being doubted. The more you feel you have to promise someone with an oath, the greater the likelihood that you often do not keep your word. The more you swear the less meaningful it is. Swearing and oath-taking had become commonplace among the Jewish culture during the days of Jesus and the early church. Clearly this was a problem even within the church. It was especially concerning to James as he addressed the conditions in those earliest congregations. Today root problems have not gone away and we need to listen in to what James said all the way back then.

[Read Text and Pray]

When you read through the book of James it is striking how many times there is a clear connection to something Jesus taught. James 5:12 is another instance of such a connection. Back in the sermon on the mount recorded in Matthew 5-7, Jesus basically said the same thing as James does here. The making of vows and oaths was obviously a problem with the Jews and it had filtered down into the early church. It is related to one of the striking distinctions between the one true God and his great imposter the devil. Truthfulness is one of the central attributes of God while deceit is one of the central characteristics of Satan. Jesus is "the Truth;" the devil is "the father of lies." God is a revealer of truth while Satan by nature is a deceiver. God's great displeasure with lying is quite clear in the Scripture. Proverbs 6:16-19 says "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him." Two of them have to do with deceit: "a lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies." In Revelation 21:8 the Alpha and Omega says, "As for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, AND ALL LIARS, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

As was Jesus, James is particularly concerned with the tongue—what it reveals about the heart and the great damage it can do. Thus, as he begins to close his epistle, he turns attention squarely on the matter of the dependability and trustworthiness of the believers' speech. He exhorts Christ's followers not to swear but simply to be honest and dependable in their speech. I want you to observe five aspects of his exhortation.

First, I want you to see . . .

I. The Significance of the Exhortation

It does not seem James means for us to actually think that this command is the most important of all the commands and exhortations he has given. Nevertheless, his choice of words does seem to indicate this matter is of great importance. After all he urges this exhortation so that we will not fall under condemnation. So we should avoid brushing the exhortation aside because it doesn't really seem to relate to us. No, we need to give all the more attention to what James has to say here.

It is also significant to notice that James is returning to the matter of speech. The tongue has enormous potential for good or for evil. And it really does matter what we say. Our speech reveals our hearts, our character. And what we say can build up or tear down. It can encourage or discourage. It can bring pain or comfort. What we say can instruct or deceive. It definitely expresses something of our view of God. Flippant language suggests we don't really take God seriously, whereas reverent words indicate we seek to honor God from our hearts with our speech. So let's give attention to the exhortation James brings to our attention in this text this morning.

II. The Communal Sense of the Exhortation

This is now like the eighth time James directly addresses his audience as “brothers” or “my brothers.” There is a clear sense of camaraderie, a genuine sense of family that he shares with his fellow believers in Jesus. And he addresses them with this in mind. It provides weight to his exhortation but in a caring way. It brings the flavor of gentleness to a very serious concern. This is the way we need to be with each other. It is what we were saved to be. We are not meant to be on our own as Christians. We are each part of the body and part of the family. The body effectively increases in spiritual strength and spiritual health only as each member is working properly. We are brothers and sisters in the family, and what brings down one of us brings all of us down. We have to look out for one another.

And there are two aspects of our brotherly relations that emerge in James’ exhortation. First, to appeal to the brothers as brothers here is an admission that we all struggle. We all sin. Sanctification is progressive for all of us. And one of the greatest challenges for all of us in putting sin to death has to do with the tongue. James is admitting to his audience that he too knows the challenge of getting his tongue under control. He is not speaking to his audience as though he is perfect and can’t understand why others struggle. Rather, he is a fellow struggler appealing to his family to work together to preserve what we should be known for as a family—to pursue godliness together for the glory of our Father. It is a together thing. It reminds me of Paul’s words to Timothy to “flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, **ALONG WITH** those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.”

The second aspect of James’s appeal to “my brothers” reflects the longing we all ought to have to build each other up. In the family, sin with the tongue hurts brothers. Those we love and to whom we belong are injured by our wrongful words. The well-being of our family depends in part on the godly employment of our words to edify and exemplify godliness. We must refuse to allow corrupting talk to come out of our mouths. But we do need to speak what is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

III. The Prohibition of the Exhortation

The prohibition reads, “do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath.” James is prohibiting swearing. And we do well to ask, “what does he have in mind here?” because there are a couple of ideas that are not James’s intention. First, it should be noted that he is not talking about what we commonly call “swear words.” The use of profanity, of coarse and vulgar words, is certainly prohibited by the Lord. We are not to use corrupt speech. The root of such speech within the heart is sinful and the act of such speech is to express ungodly sentiments. It is rude and unloving. Followers of Christ must not talk in that way. But this is not what James is concerned with in this prohibition.

He rather is concerned with oath-taking that would be employed to assert the truthfulness of a statement or to bind oneself to a promised action. One might swear that what he is saying is true in order to persuade the listener to believe him. Or one might swear that he would surely fulfill a promise he made. Again, I might swear to assert that my testimony is indeed true, or I might swear in order to assure you that I will indeed do what I said I will do. Either way I would be swearing.

But is James in fact speaking of all oaths and promises to tell the truth? I think not. James is surely not speaking of certain kinds of vows and oaths in exceptional types of situations like a vow to tell the truth in a courtroom. Neither is he condemning the making of a marital vow before God, or signing a covenant. In such circumstances, the Bible not only does not forbid but approves of oaths.

The first oath in the Bible is made in fact by God as he covenanted with Abraham to give him the land of promise. Hebrews states that God desired to demonstrate the unchangeable character of his purpose, and for this reason he guaranteed his word with an oath. There is a common phrase from the Lord in the Old Testament: "As I live, declares the Lord." These words mark the Lord taking an oath, swearing by himself. Abraham also took an oath to validate his claim on a well. Isaac did the same. Abraham required the servant whom he sent to find a wife for Isaac to take an oath. Two Israelite spies swore an oath to Rahab that they would deal kindly with her family. David swore several oaths. They were made with Jonathan, Shimei, and with God. Under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites vowed to serve the Lord. The Mosaic law called for oaths to be made in particular situations (Exodus 22:10-11; Numbers 5:19-22). Deuteronomy commands the people to "swear" by the name of the Lord. The law also instructed people to keep their vows. Remember Jephthah? He took his vow seriously though it was very foolish. It cost the life of his only child. But it was a serious thing to make a vow to the Lord. In sum, it appears that what James is speaking of is evil and so he must not be making an all-inclusive ban on oath taking of every kind.

In the course of the everyday and unofficial, when you can simply give your word, then, you shall not use an oath to prove your truthfulness or your faithfulness, and especially should you not use oath taking to somehow excuse yourself from the obligation to be truthful and faithful. The Jews were notorious for their taking of oaths and for not keeping them or not being true to them. They developed a system of swearing by things other than the name of God—heaven, earth, Jerusalem, a hair on their head. And if they swore by certain of these things, they could weasel out of it by dishonesty or unfaithfulness. It would be like making a promise or giving a testimony with your fingers crossed. It was in effect a telling a lie with the rationale that it was okay to do so.

Jesus addressed this issue quite pointedly in Matthew 23:16-22. He said,

"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.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 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.' 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."

Jesus was articulating that you cannot get away from accountability to God for what you say. An oath is an oath; you are bound by it and will be judged for not keeping it. And it should not be used in ordinary everyday circumstances to deceive or to provide wiggle-room for your commitments.

That's what James is telling believers as well. Do not go around swearing.

IV. The Prescription of the Exhortation.

The prohibition tells what they are NOT to do. The prescription replaces it with what they must do instead. What James does direct his readers to do is exactly what Jesus directed: "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no." In other words, simply tell the truth. You should not be about fooling people or deceiving people. You should love God such that you love truth. And your love of truth drives you to be truthful and to be faithful to what you commit yourself to do.

Paul said it like this in Ephesians 4:25—"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." We belong together. We are one family. We must not be divided against one another through deception. The people of God are a people who cherish that while the devil is a great and eternal deceiver, God is true and can be trusted. God never lies and he has promised. We should not need to verify to one another by vows and oaths that we are telling the truth. No question. No deceit. Rather let there be integrity, truthfulness, honesty, clarity. This is the way our every day speech ought to be. Anything less than this comes from evil.

We do live in a world that lies. It lies all the time. It swears it is telling the truth while telling bald faced lies. Part of what it means to be fallen is to be a liar, one who by nature bears false witness. There is no relationship and no position in which human beings are found where there are not lies. Parents and children lie to one another. So do husbands and wives. Employees lie to their employers and vice-versa. And my, how lies permeate politics. Politicians say whatever it takes to get into office and they say whatever it takes to stay there. Scientists lie. Teachers lie. Students lie. Citizens lie. The media lies. But the pervasive presence of lying does not excuse it.

From before we could know what it means to lie, we were lying. We were deceivers and seeking to deceive. The sinful nature of human beings is to be dishonest whenever it suits us. Often it has been to avoid the admission of guilt or to deny wrong-doing or to keep from being found out. But humans lie to get ahead. We lie to impress. We lie so as not to be seen for who we actually are. We lie to keep from paying more than we want to pay. And we fail to keep our word. We break promises. We swear our lies are true. We pretend to be better than we are. This is sin against God. It comes from evil. It demands punishment. It condemns to hell. Jesus said we will be judged for every idle word, and James "let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' so that you will not fall under condemnation."

Our lies reveal our need for help before the judgment seat of God. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Lying is evidence of our inner corruption, our UNgodliness. And the wages of our lying is death, and as James says, "condemnation"—the judgment of God. Lies show a person how just is God's eternal punishment. And liars are among those who will be thrown into the eternally burning lake of fire. Lies show a person how desperately they need God's forgiveness in order to be spared from eternal judgment.

And God has met sinners right at the point of our need. He sacrificed his Son for liars. His forgiveness of those who lie and swear falsely is gloriously clear in the case of one Simon Peter. Jesus had told Peter he would deny him, but Peter refused to believe it could be true. However, when Jesus was on trial and Peter found his way into the courtyard of the high priest, some there said he was certainly one of Jesus' disciples. Peter lied. He denied it to a servant girl. To another servant girl he spoke with an oath, "I do not know the man." Later bystanders came up and said, "you too are one of them." Matthew 26:74 reports that Peter "began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'" Well, the cock crowed and Jesus looked over at Peter. He was cut to the heart. He went out and wept bitterly over his sin. He was distraught. But Christ forgave him by the blood he shed to pay for the penalty our sins rightly deserve. Because of the blood of Jesus, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Have you called on him? Do not delay. Do not wait. See your sin and do not deny it. Admit it and repent of it and trust in Christ, and you will be forgiven. You will be saved. I assure you, you WILL be saved. And there is no other way for you to be saved.

V. The God Who Inspired the Exhortation

A. As a whole, James is telling us much more than simply that swearing dishonestly is wrong. He is reminding us of what pleases God and of who God is. It is incredibly important for us this morning not only to note that compromising the truth is a bad thing and a thing which dishonors God, but this standard of righteousness reflects that God loves truth. As surely as the devil has no truth and is the father of lies, the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the Father of truth. He is not a deceiver but one who reveals. He does not turn the lights off but turns them on to expose the way things really are.

B. The standard of truthfulness which God requires from his creatures is a standard that arises out of who he is. Isaiah 65:16 calls him the God of truth. Titus 1:2 declares that God never lies. Romans 3:4 says, "Let God be true though every one were a liar." Psalm 51 says he delights in truth in the inward being. God is blameless when he judges and justified in what he says because he is always completely truthful.

Jesus Christ praying to the Father in John 17 calls him "the only true God." He prays to the Father for his people, "sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Jesus, He who is the word of God, says of himself, "I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life." All through the New Testament God's gospel is also called the TRUTH or the word of truth. To be saved is to come to the knowledge of the truth.

God is just. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne, says Psalm 89:14. And justice is founded upon truth. Lamentations 3:23 says, "Great is his faithfulness." His word cannot be broken (John 10:35). The word of God abides forever (1 Peter 1:25). Psalm 93:5 says to the Lord, "Your decrees are very trustworthy." Psalm 19 extols God's word this way. It is perfect. It is sure. It is right. It is pure, clean, true, and righteous altogether.

C. It is the glory of God that he is true. Just think what this means about him. He is not manipulative. He is who he says he is. He is not trying to get us with one picture of himself and he turns out to be something else. He is not promising us one thing and he is going to give us anything less. He is not making promises on which he is going to renege.

He wants his people to be at complete rest by trusting in him. You can be sure of what he says. His instruction is accurate. Of His promises, not one will fail. And his warnings are not to be dismissed.

Conclusion

In Psalm 62, David describes the methods of his enemies. He says that they take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths but inwardly they curse.

Not so our great God! He is truthful. He is trustworthy. He is faithful. And that is why David can confidently declare, "For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock; my refuge is God. Trust in him at all times O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us."

God is mighty indeed. But what would the might of God be without faithfulness? It would be reason for uncertainty, for fear, for distrust. But the one God, the true God, the mighty God who does awesome deeds, this God is 100% true, 100% faithful, 100% trustworthy. He will never fail in the smallest particle of his word. Everyone besides him will fail you sooner and later, but he never will. So speak truthfully for the honor of God, and trust Him who never speaks any way but truthfully.

