

## **Series James**

### **This Message Faith Without the Fear of God is Dead part 2**

“Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’”

#### **Scripture James 5:12**

James recognized that the faith of Jewish background believers, which had burned so intensely within them when they were together in Jerusalem, had grown cold, in the same way that glowing embers, when separated from each other, quickly lose heat. Living as they were in isolated communities without the benefit of wise, mature spiritual leaders like James and the Apostles, these believers had become very worldly minded. James endeavored to stay in contact with the scattered believers in order to encourage and instruct them as he would have done had they still been under his care in Jerusalem.

What a practical letter his letter has proven to be. Almost 2000 years later, his writing is still relevant. Of course, here in America our circumstances are very different than the circumstances of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century believers. We are not the victims of persecution, nor have we lost our material resources, nor have we been uprooted from our familiar surroundings because of our faith. However, we need the encouragement and instruction of this letter in order that our behaviors might remain in alignment with the faith we profess.

As modern day believers we are susceptible to the various kinds of sins condemned by James — sins such as pride, hypocrisy, partiality, criticism, and slander. We find it easy to harbor envy and selfish ambitions in our hearts. All too often we make our plans without seeking guidance from God. Too often we do not apply the word of God to our lives.

And so this letter continues to speak to us today. Modern readers of this letter face the same dilemmas as the first recipients. Are we living in ways that clearly indicate the sincerity of our faith? Are our behaviors pleasing to God? How can we evaluate the quality of our spiritual lives? This letter should be carefully studied by every believer because it addresses so many of the deficiencies of our faith.

Today’s reading is under the topic, “Faith Without the Fear of God is Dead,” just like the topic of last week. The reading is only one verse, but it warrants very careful thought because it concerns the overall integrity of the believer’s life.

## Read James 5:12

James has previously addressed numerous behaviors which were inappropriate for believers. Last week we thought about his exhortations to not be impatient and to not give in to difficulties, and before that we thought about the lack of submission to the will of God. The next issue that James considered important enough to include in his letter was the bad habit of the Jews to include casual oaths in their informal conversations.

In last week's passage James specifically instructed his readers to "Not grumble against each other" because this would subject them to God's judgment. The command in verse 12 is "Do not swear," or "Do not utter an oath." These two prohibitions are closely linked.

Americans use some unique expressions in affirming the truth. I remember people saying, "I swear on a stack of Bibles," and "God knows I am telling the truth." As children we learned to say, "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye." And did you ever hear someone say, "I had my fingers crossed, so I really didn't mean what I said." When being sworn into political office, the oath usually begins with "I promise to uphold ... and concludes with, "so help me God."

In western countries we don't often use these expressions to bolster the validity of what we say. However, in Middle Eastern cultures the use of oaths was and is a very common practice. In the Middle Eastern country in which I lived, oaths were spoken in almost every conversation. Jesus condemned this practice in His teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, He taught, "'Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No.' Anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (*Matthew 5:34-37*).

Speakers typically employ oaths in their conversations in order to convince their listeners that the words spoken are acceptable and true. The ancient Jews used oaths in a more extreme way — as a façade for lying. For example, the Pharisees said that if you swore using God's name in your oath, it was absolutely necessary for you to keep your word, but if you swore by some lesser thing you could be a little more flexible about your honesty.

Jesus confronted this behavior with some strong language: “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold on the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater, the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it” (*Matthew 23:16-22*).

The kind of oath affirmations used by the Pharisees represented crass hypocrisy. There was the appearance of a solemn promise when, in fact, the oath speaker may have had no intention of keeping the promise. The Pharisees used their pious sounding oaths in order to portray themselves as deeply religious while in reality they were being completely dishonest. Both Jesus and James declared this kind of technical oath uttering to be inappropriate for believers. They insisted that the word of the believer should be their bond of truthfulness. “Yes” should always mean “yes,” and “No,” “No.” In other words, the integrity of believers was to be so absolute and consistent that further affirmations of truthfulness would be unnecessary.

The uttering of oaths became a spiritual problem in the early Church. It was such a common part of the historic Jewish culture that believers carried their habits into their church relationships. There were at least two reasons James insisted that this worldly habit should end. The first reason related to the sad problem of dysfunctional relationships between believers. Throughout this letter James called attention to the worldly attitudes of favoritism, lack of love, lack of compassion, and selfishness which led to disorder, fights and quarrels, slanderous accusations, and what he referred to as “every evil practice.” The lack of honesty contributed to the relational problems.

Secondly, folded into all the instructions about these attitudes and behaviors was the topic of the mis-use of the tongue. James’ first statement about this connection was in chapter 1, “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (*James 1:26*). The role of the tongue for good or bad was described in other ways in throughout the letter. In verse 9 there was the command, “Don’t grumble against each other.”

These two themes were brought to a climax here in verse 12. Notice the words, "Above all." James wanted his readers to recognize the most important thing to be said about the use of the tongue in interpersonal relationships: it must speak the truth, so much so that oath-uttering should never be necessary.

The Bible is filled with exhortations to God's people to be truthful in word and deed. For example, the Apostle Paul instructed us to "speak the truth in love" (*Ephesians 4:15*). He also wrote, "Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (*Ephesians 4:25*). The Apostle Peter instructed his readers, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech" (*1 Peter 3:10; from Psalm 34:12*).

Integrity should be a recognizable characteristic of believers. It is the double-minded, spiritually unstable believer who resorts to bargaining, manipulating, and trying to impress others. Truthful communication is essential for good relationships. Truth is essential for trust. If you don't trust someone, you're not going to allow that person to get close to you. Believers who have their faith and confidence firmly anchored in God's grace have no need to impress others. As one philosopher stated, "Genuine believers don't tell the truth because they have taken an oath; they tell the truth because they are truthful."

Notice that James concluded his command against swearing with a warning. The words at the end of verse 12 are literally, "that you may not fall under judgment." This means that there will be serious consequences for the person who uses the name of God improperly. By bringing God's name into conversations as backup affirmation, the speaker is essentially "taking God's name in vain" which was a prohibition of the Ten Commandments. God said to Moses, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who uses his name" (*Exodus 20:7*).

The statement of James in chapter 2 is very similar: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law ... because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (*James 2:12-13*). As Jesus said, "Heaven is God's throne. The earth is His footstool. Jerusalem is His city" (*Matthew 5:34-35*). Since everything in existence is God's domain, there is nothing we can invoke as backup affirmation for our words that will not be a mis-use of the Lord's name.

God is truth. He cannot lie. We who are His children are expected to reflect His nature. When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, it is His desire that we become “conformed to the likeness of Jesus,” which means that we must adopt new patterns in our lives, including new patterns of truthful speaking.

There is one more important point to be made before we let go of this subject. I think it is obvious that James and Jesus are referring to the casual use of oaths in informal conversation. There is a more formal use of oaths in our lives. For example, it is certainly appropriate to pledge our love and faithfulness when we stand before witnesses and God in a marriage ceremony. It is appropriate to pledge to “speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” when we are called to testify in judicial courts.

We need to remember that God, on numerous occasions, swore oaths concerning His promises and future actions. For example, “When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants’” (*Hebrews 6:13-14*). Another example: Jesus “became a priest with an oath when God said to him, ... ‘You are a priest forever’” (*Hebrews 7:20-21; from Psalm 110:4*). The oath was God’s guarantee. God swore to David that one of his descendants would always sit on his throne (*Acts 2:30; from II Samuel 7:11b-12*).

On several occasions, the Apostle Paul called God as his witness. “God ... is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers” (*Romans 1:9*), and “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 1:8*). (See also *II Corinthians 1:21; Galatians 1:20; I Thessalonians 2:5* for other examples.)

And so we conclude that the Bible does not prohibit all oath utterings. Specifically, it forbids both frivolous oaths and false oaths. Frivolous oaths are those that are so commonplace that they lose all significance or meaning. False oaths are those that a person makes without any intention of keeping. Both kinds are made to either impress or deceive others.

The Jewish believers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were not living with integrity on the heart level before God, and James, “above all,” wanted their attitudes and behaviors to change. Likewise, “above all,” may we as modern day believers let our “‘Yes’ be ‘yes,’” and our “‘No,’ be ‘no.’” May we have a reputation of honesty in everything we say so that people will know that our words are unquestionably the truth.