

The Epistle of James
November 12, 2017
Don't Swear – Speak Truth

Sermon #20
Reading: Matthew 23:13-22
James 5:12

But Above All

James shifts from telling believers that there is a purpose to their suffering to being bearers of truth. As Christians we are to speak truth above all else and giving an oath is a serious business. We must take seriously that we represent Christ to the world. Let's explore what it means to be people who are trusted because they speak truth verses the world of untruth.

The epidemic that has plagued mankind from the fall in the garden is that lying liars lie about lying. The plague of lying has continued since the garden to this day. In our own country lying is an accepted practice. In the book, *The Day America Told The Truth*, by James Patterson and Peter Kim, their research found the following: 91 percent of those surveyed lie routinely about matters they consider trivial and 36 percent lie about important matters; 86 percent lie regularly to parents, 75 percent to friends, 73 percent to siblings and 69 percent to spouses. For many it is difficult to believe or publicly accept these results so some lie about the research concerning lying. Once it would have been considered wrong and unacceptable for one to openly admit they lie, so most people concealed the fact that they lied. Today, people see no problem in lying if it gains them what they want and it has become part of our modern culture. A noted pediatric physician from Rutgers University, Dr. Michael Lewis appeared on NBC Today's Show and stated from his research that, "Lying is an important part of social life and children who are unable to do it are children who may have developmental problems." (1/23/1990) The world, America, the State of New Mexico and our communities are unsaved and do not understand why it is wrong to lie. Jesus said,
⁴³ "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear

my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:43-44) Jesus speaks of the state of the world and its state today.

I pray to our God our Father that we work at speaking the truth and our children are taught truth from false and learn to speak truth for it is right and honoring before God. When they lie, when we lie, it is hoped we see it for what it is – sin and repent and work through the power of the Holy Spirit to lie less and be more honest. I was raised in a household that it was acceptable to tell “white lies” – the problem is lying is not white but colorblind and the boundary between a small “white lie” and one that is not “white” blurs. All lies are sin and all lies as sin can compound and cascade leading to separation from God.

This is the very reason men swear oaths to each other in an attempt to show they are not lying. This is the reason lawyers exist and contracts are made to ensure people do not lie and live up to their agreement. This is why treaties are signed between countries in the hopes that both sides will live up to their word, but the sad truth is many are broken. Winston Churchill was the right man for the right time when he took over as the Prime Minister of England from Chamberlain.

Chamberlain did not have the strength to deal with the Nazis. Churchill had the fortitude, but of his job was also cloaked in deception. After the war the struggle was to end deception and tell the truth. Churchill said, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.” Such is the nature of those leading countries in politics and their dealings with their counterparts in other countries.

This is nothing new, at the time of James the tradition of oaths designed to be broken was well established. Swearing oaths that were intended to be broken had become part and parcel in the Jewish society. James is instructing Christians are to be different. The Jewish converts brought the tradition of oath giving and its deceptions into the church because they continued in the customs of their society. Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus with the same concerns as James, saying, ¹⁷ “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ! — ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:17-25) A Christian’s speech is to be honest and part of the way they live with integrity. It is the witness of one’s words being true and sincere, as well as, how one lives their life that shows the world Christians are different. For Christians a simple “yes” or “no” should be enough because they are known as truth bearers.

James, as he often is - is plain and to the point with the people of the Jerusalem church. He commands them to stop swearing oaths.

Do Not Swear

James begins with “above all, my brethren.” He immediately separates what he is

about to write from the nonbelieving people and those who belong to Christ, the brethren. All through his letter he makes distinctions between believers and nonbelievers. James dealt with one's speech, words and the use of the tongue throughout his letter because it is the outpouring of what is in the inner person. Go back a few pages in James' letter to chapter 1. In verse 26 he writes, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." James writes clear and to the point and he continues dealing with judgment of one's speech and the tongue in chapter 2, verse 12, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." God saved us by grace – should we not show grace, mercy and kindness to others in our speech and conduct? Then in chapter 3, James spends 10 verses concerned with the power of the tongue. James writes in verses 9 and 10, "With ~~it~~ *the tongue* we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." Controlling one's tongue takes great effort and one's hope is in the power of the Holy Spirit and not just their own. James says in chapter 4 that even though taming our speech and the tongue is difficult this is exactly what believers in Christ are to do, verse 11 reads, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." Obviously how and what believers speak is of great concern to James since it exhibits to others what is in their hearts. Our speech is a test and testimony of one's faith. Jesus had strong words concerning speech that is evidence of what is in one's heart for the Pharisees, ³⁴"You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matthew 12:34) Right after the blessings of the beatitudes in Luke chapter 6, Jesus again speaks about the power of the tongue to reveal the heart, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces

evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45) The question I think James is asking, is where is the treasure of our hearts? Not just, where are the hearts of the converted Jews to Christianity, but where are our hearts, your hearts?

As the current generation of Christians testifying how Christ changes ones life what testimony do we have? George Barna who is known for his market research on religious beliefs did a survey over 20 years ago with the following results: 74% of Americans strongly agree that “there is one true God, who is holy and perfect and who created the world and rules it today.” This result is encouraging. However, the same survey also showed 65% either strongly agree or somewhat agree “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” (1991) Today the number who believe in one true God has gone down, especially among millennials and the number who believe there is no such thing as absolute truth has gone up. Saying there is no absolute truth is just like the Jews in the new church being double minded and therefore struggling with making oaths out of tradition and feeling it was acceptable to break oaths if they were worded carefully. Religious Americans are not sure what they believe as truth either. True Christians know what they believe because they study and know God’s eternal truths found in the Bible. Propositional truth in America is invading every aspect of our society and that includes the church. We, my beloved, must hold firm to God’s eternal truth.

It reminds me of the two men who came into conflict over a contract. They went to court to settle the matter. The plaintiff began with his story and was very persuasive. When he finished, the judge nodded in approval and said, “That’s right.” On hearing this the defendant objected saying, “Wait a minute, Judge, you have not heard my side yet.” So the judge told the defendant to state his case. He too, was persuasive and convincing. When he finished the judge said, “That’s right.” At hearing this the court clerk stood and said, “Judge, they both can’t be

right.” The judge looked at the clerk and said, “That’s right.” This sounds more and more like our society’s struggle, as people do not believe there is absolute right and wrong. This is another reason as Christians we are to separate ourselves from the world systems whenever possible.

James understanding this divided mind and heart results in speaking in ways to avoid absolute truth and he clarifies the need to be separated from the practices of the world. James continues in verse 12 writing, “**brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath.**” James is not addressing “swearing” that is dirty speech, filthy language or 4 letter words. Paul addressed this type of speech in chapter 4 of his letter to the Ephesians, “**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) James is addressing the practice among Jews who had developed a complex system of swearing oaths. This system had grown out of the Old Testament when written contracts did not exist. So oaths were developed as binding agreements between people. The Bible does not prohibit oaths for the Old Testament records oaths, in Genesis 24 for example, Abraham had his servant place his hand under his thigh and “**... swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son, Isaac, from the daughters of the Canaanites...**” (Genesis 24:3) Oaths then were necessary and good when they were for the right reason. God even required people to swear oaths – he required certain behavior from people as seen in Exodus 22 concerning ownership of animals. Numbers chapter 5 required an oath of a wife suspected of infidelity. The Nazirite vow or oath in Numbers chapter 6 set men apart for service to God.

God also swore oaths by His own self. One of the most clear is found in Genesis 22 where God says to Abraham, “**By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,** ¹⁷ I will

surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Genesis 22:16-18) So, considering the right use of oaths and God himself giving oaths in the Old Testament James is not giving a broad blanket prohibition of oaths. Oaths were to be serious and in the name of God. James source for his statement, “brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath” comes from Jesus’ teaching recorded in Matthew chapter 5,³³ “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.’³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, **either by heaven**, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ **or by the earth**, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (Matthew 5:33-37) When Jesus said, “you have heard that it was said to those of old” he is not referring to the teaching found in the Old Testament but to the rabbinic traditions developed over centuries. The problem was the traditions had developed with “bale out” clauses for oaths. Only if God’s name was invoked was an oath binding. So they would swear oaths by “heaven” or “Jerusalem” or on the “alter” or by the “temple” and by not using the name of God they had wiggle room to break the oath. People were then going into oaths with deception in mind. Jesus condemned the Jewish religious leaders who practiced this very deception. Jesus condemned them saying,¹⁶ “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.” (Matthew 23:16-22)

Jesus said there is no wiggle room, for if one swears an oath to anyone or concerning anything within God’s creation then by default they include God and they will be judged for not keeping their oath.

Let Your “Yes” Be Yes and Your “No” Be No

Again echoing Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew, James is telling Christians we are to live simple and straightforward lives and this includes our speech. James says, “let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no!” As God’s people we are called to live with integrity and truth as a witness of Christ, and we have little need of swearing oaths, especially those made with the intention of having wiggle room in order to break the oath. Both Jesus and James are saying anything beyond the simple straightforward truth is evil. Abraham Lincoln said, “No man has a good enough memory to make a successful liar.” Always telling the truth is easier.

We are to live both receiving and giving truth. This does not mean there are not times that oaths are appropriate. We vow or give an oath to our spouse at our wedding. If their word is truth and their oath sincerely given by a bride and groom there would be no divorces among believers. Unfortunately, the divorce rate among Christians is as high as unbelievers. So one has to consider the wedding vow and the sin against God and their spouse if it is broken. In addition, breaking the wedding vow shows the world that there is no difference between Christians and the fallen world. Speaking truth in all things shines Christ into the dark world of lies.

Do Not Fall Under Condemnation

Why does James give this strong warning and separate it out in one sentence that is its own paragraph? It is because the consequence of violating oaths is judgment. James concludes with “so that you may not fall under condemnation.” In the Ten Commandments God gave Moses, number 3 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) As Christians when we make oaths and violate them or when we lie, we are taking God’s name in vain and this is sin. In the New Testament the Greek word *krisin*’ translated as judgment or condemnation is never used to show correction needed for believers but is used to judge or condemn those knowingly violating God’s commands. James is not saying as believers we will never sin or never be guilty of lying. Back in chapter 3 James wrote the obvious, “For we *believers* all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” (James 3:2) However, lying is not to be common in the life of Christians. James’ warning here is for those whose life is marked with lying for this is another test of one’s faith. If in one’s life they commonly lie then they are taking God’s name in vain for God never lies and he commands his children to not lie either. A pattern of lying exposes one’s un-regenerated heart.

Here is the problem we face as believers living in an unbelieving world. The world says lying is not a problem, getting caught is a problem, but lying is expected and is normal. As we live and work in this world then there is the temptation to lie and if we give into the temptation to lie it can become easier and easier until it is who we are. As A. W. Tozer wrote, “The unattended garden will soon be overrun with weeds; the heart that fails to cultivate truth and root out error will shortly be a theological wilderness.” Therefore, my beloved, let us cultivate

the garden of our hearts and minds by living the words written by the Psalmist,
turn in your Bible to Psalm 119 – beginning in verse 25.

- 25 “My soul clings to the dust;
 give me life according to your word!
- 26 When I told of my ways, you answered me;
 teach me your statutes!
- 27 Make me understand the way of your precepts,
 and I will meditate on your wondrous works.
- 28 My soul melts away for sorrow;
 strengthen me according to your word!
- 29 Put false ways far from me
 and graciously teach me your law!
- 30 I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
 I set your rules before me.
- 31 I cling to your testimonies, O LORD;
 let me not be put to shame!
- 32 I will run in the way of your commandments
 when you enlarge my heart!” (Psalm 119:25-32)

To this is I say, Amen! Let us be God’s bearers of truth, Amen!