

“Let Your Yes Be Yes, Part 1”
(James 5:12)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. James begins to wind down his letter now with a few concluding exhortations.
 - a. There are many things that could be said.
 - (i) James certainly hasn't covered everything.
 - (ii) We need to assume that his readers had previous instruction.
 - (iii) He wrote to address their particular problems.
 - b. The areas he concludes with are three:
 - (i) Instruction regarding swearing.
 - (ii) Instruction regarding our responses to God's Providence, especially in the area of prayer.
 - (iii) Instruction regarding the importance of watching over one another and calling each other to repentance when we stray.
2. Today, James is drawing our attention to swearing.
 - a. First we need to understand that James does not use the word “swear” in the way we typically do.
 - (i) To us, swearing often means to use filthy words, to blaspheme God, to call others names, etc.
 - (ii) When we read that Peter began to curse and swear to show that he didn't know Christ, we may think that this is what he did, wanting to show them that he was not a Christian. But that wasn't the case. He was actually doing what James warns us against.
 - b. Now the Bible does tell us we aren't to use “dirty” words or call others demeaning names.
 - (i) Paul writes to the Colossians, “But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth” (Col. 3:8).
 - (ii) “Abusive speech” can also be translated, “obscene, dirty, or filthy language.”
 - (iii) This would include not only filthy words, but also the words we often use to substitute for them, hoping not to break this commandment.
 - (iv) But again, this isn't what James is referring to.
 - c. The Bible also warns us against blasphemy: cursing God.
 - (i) The Jews were not given to this.
 - (a) They knew that to do so was to forfeit their own lives – the penalty was death.

- (b) They always treated His name as holy - When the scribes wrote the name of God, they always bathed first.
- (ii) Today, most people in our society don't think twice about blaspheming His name.
- (iii) But this isn't what James is speaking about.

B. Preview.

1. And so what is he talking about? He is speaking about the matter of taking oaths and making vows.
 - a. We are familiar with these things, but not as familiar as James' audience.
 - b. The Jews very often used oaths and vows, and certainly misused them. James now writes to correct their misuse.
2. Today, our passage will take us into an area of worship that is largely neglected, but is very important – an application (perhaps the main application) of the third commandment:
 - a. This morning:
 - (i) We're going to consider what it means to swear biblically.
 - (ii) We're also going to consider how this kind of swearing continues into the New Covenant.
 - b. This evening:
 - (i) We'll consider how swearing was used in historically Reformed worship.
 - (ii) The circumstances under which we should swear.
 - (iii) Finally, examine ourselves on how seriously we have taken our vows.
 - c. Overall, what I want us to see is that James does not forbid us from swearing righteously, but tells us that we must be faithful to what we say.

II. Sermon.

A. First, what does it mean to swear biblically?

1. To swear means to bind yourself with an oath (TWOT 899). It means to promise that you are going to do what you say you will do.
 - a. It was not a mysterious thing to the Israelites. It was a part of their lives.
 - b. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* defines it in this way, "To swear in the Old Testament was to give one's sacred unbreakable word in testimony that the one swearing would faithfully perform some promised deed, or that he would faithfully refrain from some evil act. . . . Occasionally one swore that he freely acknowledged a truth and would continue to acknowledge it in the future. This was the case when Abraham in Gen. 21:30, 31 caused Abimelech to swear to the truth that he, Abraham, had dug, and hence owned, the well called Beer-sheba" (900).
 - c. Often, it meant calling upon someone who was greater or more worthy than the one swearing to bear witness to the truth of the oath. For the Israelite, this could only be God. And so we read in 1 Kings 2:8 where David,

speaking to Solomon about Shemei, the Benjamite who cursed him on the day he was forced to leave Jerusalem because of his son Absalom, said, “But when he came down to me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord, saying, ‘I will not put you to death with the sword.’”

2. Swearing is an act of worship God commanded of His people.
 - a. The Lord told the Israelites that they must swear by His name, and His name only. The reason is that swearing is an act of worship, and the Lord did not want His people worshipping false gods.
 - (i) There were many false gods in the land of Canaan, and they would be tempted to go after them.
 - (ii) Many times they did, with the result that they called upon the names of false gods, and fell under God’s wrath for it. The Lord rebuked Judah through Jeremiah the prophet, by saying, “‘Why should I pardon you? Your sons have forsaken Me and sworn by those who are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the harlot’s house. They were well-fed lusty horses, each one neighing after his neighbor’s wife. Shall I not punish these people,’ declares the Lord, ‘and on a nation such as this shall I not avenge Myself’” (5:7-9).
 - (iii) To swear by a false god was to give that dignity and worship which is due to God alone to that which is not God. To do this was idolatry. They must “swear by His name.”
 - (a) The Lord said in Leviticus 19:12, “You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.”
 - (b) He said through Moses, in Numbers 30:2, “If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth,” and again in Deuteronomy 23:23, “You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised.”
 - b. Of course, as we’ve just read, once having made an oath, they must be prepared to pay it, whether what they vowed was wise or not.
 - (i) They could only break an oath if what they vowed was sinful. When this happened, they had to break it, for keeping it would be worse. There is never any excuse to sin.
 - (ii) For instance, we read in Judges 11 that Jephthah vowed he would offer as a burnt offering the first thing that came from his house to meet him if he returned in peace.
 - (a) The first thing that greeted him was his daughter.
 - (b) Far from being pleasing to the Lord, it would have been wicked for Jephthah to do that to his daughter.
 - (c) That’s why many believe she was merely dedicated to God’s service and not killed.
 - (iii) Sinful vows could not be kept, but foolish vows could and must be.

- (a) For example, when the Gibeonites, during the Conquest of Canaan, heard what Joshua and the Israelites had done to the cities of Jericho and Ai, some of them came to the leaders of Israel and lied to them, telling them that they had come from far away, from outside of the land, and they wanted Israel to make a covenant with them that they would not destroy them.
- (b) And so Joshua and the leaders of Israel made a covenant with them, without first inquiring of the Lord. When they found out who they really were, they were forced to keep that covenant they had made because they had sworn to them by the Lord, and because they were afraid of God's wrath, if they should break that covenant (Joshua 9).
- (c) Jesus tells us, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord" (Matt. 5:33).

- c. And so to swear is an act of worship, commanded by God, in which you bind yourself to do something or to continue to affirm the truth of something.

B. So then is James here forbidding us to swear at all?

- 1. No, clearly this practice continues into the New Covenant.
 - a. On the surface, it certainly appears as though James is forbidding all swearing, where he writes, "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment" (5:12).
 - b. But can we assume that James would be contradicting Jesus where He says, "until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished (5:18). He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (v. 17).
 - c. James is not contradicting the Law, but like his Lord, he is condemning the practice of swearing by things other than the name of God.
 - (i) Jesus said, "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the LORD.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil" (Matt. 5:33-37).
 - (ii) The Jews were swearing by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by the hairs of their head, but not by the name of God.
 - (iii) They thought that if they made their oaths in this way, they could appear sincere to others, but believed that God would not hold them accountable because they were not using His name.
 - (iv) Jesus reminds them here that whatever they thought they were swearing by, they were actually swearing by God. Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His holy city, the hairs of your head, both as to their number and color, are all sovereignly under His control.
 - (v) To swear an oath, any oath, or to make a vow, without intending to keep

it is to swear falsely; to swear falsely is a great sin; and to commit this sin, is to fall under the curse.

- (a) In Zechariah 5:3-4, we read of a curse which the Lord was bringing upon His people, partly because they were swearing falsely. He writes, ““This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side. I will make it go forth,’ declares the LORD of hosts, ‘and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones.””
- (b) The Lord also said to His people through Malachi the prophet, ““Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,’ says the LORD of hosts” (3:5).
- (c) Notice that the Lord considers the taking of an oath without the intention to fulfill it to be in the same category as sorcery, adultery, and the oppressing of the widow and the orphan, both of whom were very precious in the eyes of the Lord.
- (d) It’s no wonder then that Jesus, and James, warns us against swearing: so that we don’t fail to pay what we have vowed.
 - (i) He does not condemn oaths and vows, but only the abuse of making them without intending to pay them.
 - (ii) This is why He tells us that when we make a vow, we should simply say what the truth is, or what we intend to do: either yes this is true, or no it isn’t; or yes I will do this, or no I won’t.
 - (iii) When we do this, Jesus wants us to realize that we are automatically calling God to bear witness to what we say. He is the One who sees and hears everything we do and say.
 - (iv) When we speak, we must always speak righteously, for God is going to hold us accountable for our words. We are not to cloak our deception under the guise of swearing.

2. This interpretation is further strengthened by the many examples in the New Testament of those who swore oaths and took vows.
 - a. The author to the Hebrews tells us that in his day the taking of oaths was still a common practice. He says, “For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute” (6:16). He said this because God swore to Abraham by His own Name that He would surely bless him, as He had already promised him (vv. 13-14).
 - b. Paul himself took an oath before the Corinthians to show them how seriously he considered his words to be. He writes, “But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth” (2 Cor. 1:23).

- c. One more example is seen in the angel of Revelation 10, who “standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it, that there shall be delay no longer” (vv. 5-6).
- d. Far from forbidding oaths, the Lord actually commends them to us by way of Christ’s teaching and by way of example. This Old Covenant practice was therefore not a ceremonial law which has passed away with the coming of Christ, but a moral law which obligates God’s people throughout all the ages.
- e. Having seen what oaths and vows are and that they are a proper part of the worship of God, tonight we will look at the times when we should take them, and when not, and how they should to be taken.
- f. But for now I want to encourage you to begin examining your hearts to see whether or not you have been faithful to the oaths and vows you have made in the sight of God.
 - (i) Have you lived up to what you said you were going to do? If not, then confess your sin to the Lord and ask for His pardon.
 - (ii) All the Lord requires from us is that we be truly sorry for our sins, turn from them all to His Son, and He will forgive us of all our sin.
 - (iii) But if we stubbornly refuse to turn from them, the Lord will not turn to us in His mercy and forgiveness. It indicates that He is withholding His grace from us.
 - (iv) May the Lord grant each of us here this morning that we might forsake our sins and live in all the ways of God. And may He grant that we would not only make righteous oaths and vows, but also fulfill them to His glory. Amen.