9-22-24

James 5:12

The word that James is using here, “*swear*”, is not referring to course or obscene language (although we shouldn’t use that either). He is talking about the making of an oath. An oath can be used to reenforce the truth of a statement a person is making or perhaps to make a promise sure that one is making about the future. Often times an oath would involve the person making the oath to ask for terrible consequences upon themselves if they didn’t follow through.

In our culture, oaths aren’t used as much in common speech as they were in ancient times, although they do occasionally slip in; mostly without our even realizing what we are doing. Sometimes we might start a statement with “honestly” or “truthfully”. These are oaths because we are using them to reenforce the truthfulness of what we say. We still take oaths in a court setting and most civil positions involve an oath of office. Technically, signing a contract is a form of oath-taking.

But let’s dig in to what James is getting at here. He begins with “*above all*”. That can be a little difficult. Does James really mean that avoiding oath taking is more important than the things he has previously mentioned? Is it more important than caring for those less fortunate and not taking advantage of them? Is it more important than submitting to God and resisting the devil? Is it more important than living out our faith by the doing of works of righteousness? Probably not. So we might consider the phrase “*above all*” as an introduction to the conclusion of James’ letter.

At the same time, we cannot dismiss its importance. Swearing involves the tongue which James has already warned us about in very strong language: *And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.* There is also a danger in taking an oath to do something in the future. We cannot predict the future, and as James also told us: *Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”*

The pitfalls of taking oaths are many and the consequences are dire. Notice that James ends this verse by letting us know that the failure to keep an oath results in falling under judgement or condemnation. His main point is to say yes when we mean yes or no when we mean no; in other words, we are not to lie but to tell the truth.

Perhaps these words in our verse for today sound familiar and they should. James is giving a condensed version of the teaching of his half-brother, Jesus. In Matthew 5, which is the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: *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.*

When Jesus talks of what the ancients were told regarding not making false vows and to fulfill vows made, He is summarizing several Old Testament verses. Oaths were very important in the Mosaic law. And the oaths were so very important because they somehow invoked the name of Yahweh. To break an oath in Yahweh’s name would break the third commandment: *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.*

We often think of using the name of the LORD in vain as using His name in profanity; and it is. But it is much more than that. To make an oath under Yahweh’s name is tying the holiness of God to the oath. If it is a false oath or the oath is not fulfilled, it is using God’s holy name in a lie. God’s name is not to be taken lightly and to do so brings about His wrath. As the commandment says, He *will not leave him unpunished*. See how this matches up with our verse in James where a false oath leads to condemnation or judgement. Or even more severe is Jesus’ statement that these oaths are from the evil one.

We may wonder about all the different things sworn by: heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even one’s own head. This basically comes about due to the deceitfulness of human-beings. We are always looking for some way around the rules or some way to deceive others without getting into trouble ourselves. What came about among the religious leaders was a discussion over which oaths were binding and which were not. I think we can see the problem there; anything we say ought to be binding but as I said, people will look for a way around stuff they don’t want to do.

Entire Jewish writings of the time focused on what one could swear by yet not be bound by it. In other words, lies that we ok. By swearing on certain things, one could make an oath without intending to keep it; or even knowing full well it was a false statement to begin with. The loophole that was looked for was how close the object sworn by was to God. If it was something that was directly tied to Yahweh, it was binding. If the object was considered not directly connected to Him, there was some wiggle room. It got to the point that swearing *by* Jerusalem was not binding; but swearing *toward* Jerusalem was.

Although Jesus was alluding to this in His Sermon on the Mount, we see where He directly confronted the religious leaders with examples of this hypocrisy in Matthew 23: *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”*

Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the scribes and pharisees in their search for loopholes in binding oaths. In so doing, He made it clear that everything has to do with God because He is omnipresent, omnipotent, creator God. There are no loopholes in oath taking and our word should be our bond. As followers of Christ, we Christians are bound to Him in a very real spiritual way. Jesus makes the claim that He is truth; so if we are bound to Him, truth should be a foundation of our character.

Under the Mosaic law, the people of Israel were not to make false oaths and they were to keep the oaths they made. There were even some cases where the law required an oath to be made. In fact, Deuteronomy 6:13 says, *“You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.”* This gives us something to think about because the Law of God specifically tells us to swear by God’s name; here in Matthew, Jesus tells us not to swear at all. Keep in mind that Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, *“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”*

The answer lies in Jesus being the fulfillment of the Law. With the coming of Jesus and His work on the cross, the way in which we relate to God has changed. We no longer relate to God through the Law of Moses, but through the precious only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Notice that does not abolish the Old Testament. It still reveals God’s character. It tells us actions we can take that are pleasing to our Father. It gives us examples of the consequences of certain actions. And most of all, it all points to Jesus. We can look at the Old Testament and see how God had always planned to provide for our salvation through Jesus; how God very much wants to have a relationship with us as His children and that He was willing to go to great lengths to make that possible.

We relate to God through Jesus, so we no longer have to make oaths invoking the name of Yahweh. Because Jesus is truth and we are bound to Him, we live in truth and our yes can mean yes and our no can mean no. If we have to go beyond that with some stronger affirmation of the truth, then we are casting doubt on the precious name by which we are called. And that comes from satan.

Being relieved from making oaths has some other benefits for us. For one thing, we don’t get ourselves tied up by vowing something stupid or even detrimental. Think of the vow one of the judges, Jephthah, made. In Judges 11, he vowed that if his campaign against the Ammonites was successful, he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house upon his return. He was successful, and tragically the first thing to come out of his house was his daughter. While our God will never desire the sacrifice of a child, Jephthah fulfilled his vow because he made it. A very good lesson for us and a good reason to avoid promises based on a future that we can’t know or control.

Secondly, by not taking or making oaths Christians can avoid being involved in pagan vows. It’s scary to think how many have sworn oaths in organizations like the Masons or the Shriners. These are not Christian organizations and refusing to take an oath would protect a person from being ensnared by them.

Another thing is that it seems when someone adds an oath to a statement they make, it rouses suspicion. We automatically wonder why they had to add something to what they said to reenforce the truthfulness. The unfortunate thing is that they are often trying to cover a lie. I once worked with a fellow who would sometimes make a statement and then follow it up by raising his right hand and saying “indeed, honest”. As soon as he said that you knew he was lying.

Also, because we can’t predict the future, if we make an oath regarding something we are planning to do and then we are unable to do what we said, we run the risk of bringing God’s name into our failure. Especially as Christians, we don’t want to do anything that might hurt the reputation of our God. We want to bring Him glory and raise His name with the peoples.

After all this, let us face the thorny question of whether we are allowed to take any oaths at all. For example an oath of office or an oath of telling the truth at court. There are some, for example anabaptists, who will refuse to take any oath at all, including one in a court setting. But is this a proper interpretation of these verses in James and Matthew? We must look into context.

Jesus was dealing with those who were trying to figure out ways of getting around telling the truth. James was also concerned about lying due to the iniquity of the tongue. He was also concerned about claiming control of a future that belongs to God alone. So, vows with the intent to deceive or which claim autonomy from God.

We can also consider that God Himself made oaths and while this was in the Old Testament, they are brought up as still in force in the New Testament. In many of his letters, Paul invoked God as his witness that he prayed for the people he was writing to and to remind them of his upstanding behaviour while he was among them. Finally in Matthew 26:63-64 we read: *But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself”* So in a court setting, Jesus answered a question under oath.

Considering all this, the admonishment to avoid an oath is the best course. But there are times in this life where an oath might be necessary. We just need to make sure it is a simple statement of our truthfulness.

Often times, we like to have definite rules to follow. And sometimes the Bible gives us definite dos and don’ts. But many times there are situations like this where there is just the slightest shade of gray. I believe that is intentional. It forces us to continually depend on Christ for guidance and mercy and for salvation. If we had nothing but strict rules to keep, we might get the idea that we can be responsible for our own salvation. We don’t want to make that mistake; salvation is entirely through Jesus. Let’s thank Him for seemingly grey areas that help us to keep our eyes on Him.

Prayer

Lord God, as Your servant James warns us, our tongues are a very world of evil. They seem to stray from the truth as often as possible. It is their nature to lie and deceive. But we also understand that is because they are guided by our hearts and our hearts are desperately sick. No one can understand them.

Thank You for Your word that not only warns us about our tongues, but gives us advice in controlling them. The avoidance of swearing oaths keeps us from many traps and snares; it keeps us from unintentionally degrading the name of our holy God; and it helps us to avoid coming under judgement.

So thank You Lord God, for the protection You provide us against ourselves. Thank You Jesus for the work You did on the cross. Because of that work, we are covered in Your righteousness, and we are able to commune directly with our Father. Thank You Holy Spirit, Your constant guidance gives us the ability to direct our tongue in proper ways and avoid sinning with our lips.

We praise You in Jesus’ name

Amen