

# Do Not Swear

James 5:12

Our message today will focus on verse 12, but may we go back and read the verses leading up to it. Because these words reveal some of reasons behind our propensity to make strong statements, even to “swear” and to “take oaths”. Verse 7,

7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

12 But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5:7-12 (ESV))

Here, as we learned from our message last week, we have the condition in which fellow believers in Christ, some of them landowners/employers, other workers/employees, are involved in a serious disagreement, the landowners/employers having cheated the workers/employees out of their deserved wages. And God is encouraging the ones who have been mistreated to have patience in their suffering.

And then, immediately following those encouragements, God gives this further admonishment for them to be careful not to be drawn into “swearing” and into the “taking of oaths”.

I must confess, I had at first found difficulty relating these two matters, that of being patient in suffering, and people’s perceived need to “swear” and to “take oaths”. But God understands our “frame” or “personalities”, and the propensity that we each have in our responses to strong difficulties.

My first thought was that people are often tempted to “swear” or to “take oaths” when they are caught up in arguments and disputes such as these. And regardless of which side of the dispute they are on, angry words and over-statements will quickly fly across bargaining tables, people “swearing” and “taking oaths”.

And that is all true. But as I kept studying these words, I came to accept that this matter of “swearing” and “taking oaths” is far more complex and pervasive and potentially sinful than we might think, so much so that God sees need here to give this strong caution of condemnation against it.

So then, the question, “Why is God giving us this very strong counsel? Why is it so important that He would warn us away from doing this sort of thing? And further, what takes place within the soul of a person when they find it necessary to “swear” or to “take an oath” of the kind that God would count worthy of condemnation?

May we begin our study by looking at some the precepts in the scriptures that speak about our “swearing” and “taking oaths”. First, in His “Sermon on the Mount”, Jesus gave the very same warning as we read here in the Book of James. In Matthew 5:33-37 Jesus said,

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 (ESV))

Reading these words alone and no other of the scriptures, there would seem simply to be a very strict prohibition against anyone ever swearing or taking an oath. But then, when we read further into the scriptures, we find that that is not necessarily so, and that does not seem to be what God is saying to us. Because, we see in other places in scripture, that many of the Godliest of people swore and took oaths, David, the Apostle Paul, even God Himself “swore” and took “oaths”. Hebrews 6,

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath. (Hebrews 6:13-18 (ESV))

So then, from these words, we can assume that “swearing” and the “taking of an oath” can have their proper places. But the warning still stands that such things must be done very guardedly and for the right reasons.

As I studied further in this matter, I found that over the history of the Jewish people, they had developed some corrupt habits regarding their taking and keeping of vows and oaths, habits that were not at all in accordance with God's clearly given word. They knew the scriptures, such as in Numbers 30, where God had said,

2 If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:2 (ESV))

They made vows, but in the practical working out of some of their vows and oaths, they sometimes found that they might have spoken too quickly. And as their circumstances would change, they would find it necessary to back off from some of the hard stands they had taken. And because of that, Jewish teachers and leaders invented a clever system by which they could determine whether a vow absolutely had to be kept or if perhaps "work arounds" could be made to the keeping their vows and oaths.

Other Jewish literature indicates that many rabbis taught that it was not necessarily a sin to break a vow if that vow was not made explicitly "in the name of God". Oaths made "in the name of heaven" or even "the gold of the temple" weren't regarded as ultimately binding. And then, based on that more lenient teaching, that kind of oath became more acceptably common, people making oaths by objects and persons other than God so that they could later have a way out when they didn't want to keep their word.

But in Matthew 5, Jesus pointed out the foolishness of that teaching by reminding us that to swear or to take an oath of any kind is very much the same as swearing it in God's name. And to break that oath or vow is to break an oath to Him.

And the further reality becomes clear that there are any number of other sins that can lurk quietly behind our rash propensity to swear and to take oaths. If we fail to keep our oaths, our words are tantamount to "taking the name of the Lord in vain". And further, beyond that, our swearing and our oaths become "lies". Sins building upon sins.

So then, simply put, God cannot be manipulated. The simple changing of our words will not give a person freedom to be untrustworthy in their conversation or their commitments.

I'm sure that there are many, many other reasons why God is so unyielding in this matter of our "swearing" and of "taking and of keeping oaths". But may I, for our remaining time today, dwell on just two or three of those reasons, the first being this matter of our "trustworthiness". "Trustworthiness".

A reminder . . . in our redemption, you and I have actually become “sons of God”, “adopted” into His family and therefore are “true sons of God”. And as “sons”, you and I have an altogether higher calling and responsibility than other forms of relationships, such as those of “servants” or of “hired hands”.

As “true sons and daughters of God”, you and I must understand and accept that we are held to the highest standards of accountability for our character, our behavior and our trustworthiness. The things we say and do represent the character and the trustworthiness of God Himself.

And may I remind us, that God is not like you and me, who might make a rash promise or vow today, but then find later, after circumstances have changed, that it’s in our best interest to break our word and back out on our promise. God is God! And He sees the future in the “ever-present now”. And because of that, He is never taken by surprise by a future development. His yes is yes and His no is no, and you can depend on it to remain that way. And so therefore, must ours also!

Another consideration is that when we feel compelled to swear or to take an oath, it often is because our integrity is being brought into question. Oftentimes, you can hear conversations where one person will say to another as they are trying to convince the other of a point they are making, “I swear what I am saying is true”! And with some of the people I have known, a favorite saying was, “I swear on a stack of bibles”. In some other cultures, you might hear some people say, “I swear on my mother’s head”. And probably the most familiar saying is “I swear to God, what I’m saying is true.”

Some of those sayings are probably in some ways similar to the expressions that the Jews used when swearing, “in the name of heaven”, or “on the gold in the temple”. People want their words to hold more weight, so they try to swear by something or someone greater than themselves.

But again, the reasoning and the motive is all wrong. If we find it necessary to take oaths such as those, then we probably have already established a reputation for not always telling the truth or keeping our promises.

If the people we are talking to, or making a deal with, know us and know from our past history that our word is trustworthy, then there are few reasons for us to ever have to display such vehemence as “swearing to God” that something we are saying is true. Our word will serve as our bond. And we can let our yes be yes, and our no be no.

One last consideration . . . and this one, is probably the most to-the-point! In our opening words, I asked the question, “what is taking place within the soul of a person as they ‘swear’ or ‘take an oath’ that would merit God counting their behavior as worthy of condemnation?” I believe it to be our “ego”. Our “ego”!

As you know, there is an “ego” within each of us. And our “ego” is no small contender within us! Our “ego” is a powerful force that must be reckoned with at every turn. It operates with a “passion” that empowers its desires and behaviors and drives men and women to say things and do things that they would not otherwise do. And for this message, may we simply give our “egos” the name “self”! “Self”!

So, where then does “self” fit into our study and into our understanding of God’s disdain for people’s propensity to swear and to take oaths? “Self” and its “ego” seem always to need to be “affirmed” in all that it is and does. And whenever the possibility arises for doubt or concern about the veracity, the truth, the accuracy, the reliability of a matter that “self” is proclaiming, it seems that self’s first response is to declare its point with greater and greater vigor, saying those words that we have been speaking about, “I swear it to be true”, or “I swear to God its true”.

And “self” has many reasons for protecting itself. Sometimes, it’s fear, as with Peter, when after Jesus was arrested, and Peter was accused of being one of Jesus’ followers. The scriptures tell us in Matthew 26,

73 . . . those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." 74 Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. (Matthew 26:73-74 (NIV))

Fear can cause us to swear and to say our denials in such a way as to be strong oaths.

But in the main, our reasons for swearing and taking oaths are often far more mundane in their cause. Unfortunately, we have simply developed bad habits. Self is most always “filled with pride” and wants so badly to always be believed and to be affirmed that we will spout out those words without even thinking that we are probably taking God’s name in vain, and that He is in serious disagreement with our behaviors.

And recall that God just addressed the prideful nature of “self” in the chapter we just finished, chapter 4, where we were told that

6 . . . "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6 (NIV))

And God warned,

16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:14-16 (NIV))

Recall from our study of chapter 4, that the Greek word translated in those words as “boasting” gives the exact reason why our boasting is so sinful, and why it is so abhorrent to God. The real meaning of “boasting” is “that I might glory”. That I “personally” might gain glory!

And so it is with this demand within our “self” that we be validated and affirmed in something that we are saying, so much so, that we would “swear” or “take an oath” as to its veracity. Simply put, “swearing” and “taking oaths” seeks to elevate “self” to being an “authority” on a matter, and that is a subtle form of “boasting”, doing the one thing that we must never do, and that is, rob God of His glory and claim glory for ourselves. That is behavior worthy of “condemnation”.

We must close for now, but I want to leave us with an encouraging word.

23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV))