

James 5:12
Control Your Speech

1

Introduction

Mankind struggles with lying. Lies are told within the family unit to avoid consequences of sinful choices. Politicians lie to get elected and continue to lie once they are in office. People lie to the government—perhaps most notably on their income tax returns.

Educators lie, scientists lie, and members of the media lie. Our society is built on a framework of lies, leading one to wonder whether our social structure would survive if everyone were forced to speak the truth for even one day.

2

Introduction

Since God's Word portrays "unsaved humanity" as the children of the devil, and the devil as the "father of lies" (John 8:44), it should not surprise us that we live in a world filled with dishonesty and lying. That basic trait of dishonesty has led men to impose oaths on others in the futile attempt to force them to be truthful and keep their promises

3

Introduction

Manifesting this same dishonesty, the Jews not only swore according to Old Testament law by the name of the Lord (and occasionally violated such oaths), but also had developed the practice of swearing false evasive, deceptive oaths by everything other than the name of the Lord (which alone was considered binding). They swore by anything other than the Lord for the very purpose of pretending to "a truthfulness" that they had no intention of maintaining. Jesus also condemned this practice (Matt. 5:33–36; 23:16–22).

4

Introduction

This issue of swearing oaths had become an issue in the predominantly Jewish congregations to whom James wrote. Such oath taking is unnecessary among Christians since our speech is to be honest (Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9). Our lives are to demonstrate integrity and truthfulness. For the believer, a simple yes or no should suffice because they are faithful to keep their word.

5

Introduction

To encourage believers to be distinctive in the matter of speaking the truth, James issues a command to stop swearing. There are four features of his command that need to be considered: the distinction, the restriction, the instruction, and the motivation.

6

James 5:12

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,” lest you fall into judgment.

7

Stop Swearing – The Distinction

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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,” lest you fall into judgment.

The phrase “above all things” indicates that the command that James is giving is of primary importance. The command is the first of several that close out the epistle. As James winds down his letter, he touches on some important concluding matters.

This is a common occurrence in the New Testament epistles (cf. 1 Thess. 5:11–27). Because it occupies only one verse, some may be tempted to dismiss James’s prohibition against swearing as relatively insignificant. But the phrase “above all things” sets it apart as an important command.

8

Stop Swearing – The Distinction

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How believers speak is a primary concern to James since it manifests what is in their hearts, and is a test of living faith (Matt. 12:34–37; Luke 6:43–45). The prohibition against false swearing reflects the truth that a Spirit-transformed heart will reveal itself in honest speech. How people speak is the most revealing test of their true spiritual state. The heart is a storehouse and people’s words reveal what they keep there!

9

Stop Swearing – The Distinction

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James’s reference to his readers as brethren shows that his attitude was not one of condescension, but compassion. He identified with them as one who also needed to guard his own mouth and speak the truth. For him, too, the matter of honest speech was of utmost importance.

10

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

James 5:12

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,” lest you fall into judgment.

The specific speech-related issue James focused his attention on is that of swearing. In this context to swear does not mean (as it often does in English) to use the Lord’s name in vain, dirty talk, filthy jokes, or four-letter words. Paul forbids his type of speech in Ephesians 4:29. Instead, it refers to the taking of oaths. The Jews of James’s day had developed a complex system of swearing oaths, the influences of which Jewish Christians brought with them into the church. It is against the abuses of that system that James wrote.

11

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

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The Jewish system of swearing oaths had its roots in a time when written contracts did not exist. Oaths served to bind agreements between people. To take an oath was to attest that what one said was true, to call God to witness to that, and to invoke His punishment if one’s word was violated. To call God to witness to the truth of one’s promise and to invoke His judgment if one defaulted on that promise was a very serious matter.

12

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

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The Bible does not forbid taking oaths, acknowledging that in a world filled with liars there are times when they are necessary. Certainly it is not wrong to take an oath when testifying in court, being ordained, or getting married. Oaths are wrong when they are misused with the intent to deceive others, or when taken rashly or flippantly.

13

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

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The Bible gives examples of godly men who took oaths, lists God’s commands that oaths be taken, and records instances of God Himself taking oaths. Abraham took an oath to validate his claim that he dug a well in question (Genesis 21:25-26). In Genesis 24:2-4, Abraham required his servant to take an oath as he went to search for a wife for Isaac. David swore oaths with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12-17; 2 Sam. 21:7), Saul (1 Sam. 24:21-22), and God (2 Sam. 3:35). The people of Israel under Joshua swore an oath (Josh. 6:26), as did the people of Judah during King Asa’s reign (2 Chron. 15:14), and the returned exiles (Ezra 10:5; Neh. 10:28-30). The apostle Paul took a vow to God (Acts 18:18), and took an oath of truthfulness by writing to the Corinthians: “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying” (2 Cor. 11:31; cf. 1:23; Rom. 9:1). Even an angel swore an oath (Rev. 10:5-6).

14

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God expects vows to be kept. Because oaths invoke God’s holy name (Deut. 6:13), they are not to be taken lightly. Numbers 30:2 states that “ If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” (cf. Ps. 15:1–4). Women were also expected to keep their vows (cf. Num. 30:3ff). To fail to do so was to take God’s name in vain (Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:12).

15

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In light of the biblical evidence, James’s command “swear not” must not be viewed as a blanket prohibition of all oath taking. Oaths were permitted on serious occasions, but only in the name of God. James, therefore, does not forbid swearing in the name of the Lord, but by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. The source of James’s prohibition is our Lord’s teaching regarding oaths in Matthew 5:33–37. The Jews considered only the vows which invoked the “name of the Lord” as binding.

16

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

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In their thinking, God was only a party to an oath if His name were invoked. All other oaths, they taught, could be (and often were intended to be) violated without committing perjury. To put it in our modern day culture, “They had their fingers crossed”! Attempting to deceive others, many Jews would swear by anything but the name of the Lord.

17

Stop Swearing – The Restriction

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They would swear by heaven, Jerusalem, the temple, the altar in the temple, the veil in the temple, and anything else which seemed fitting. Such evasive swearing was intended to hide their lying hearts. In Matthew 23:16–22, Jesus condemned the Jewish religious leaders for this hypocritical practice. Despite what the Rabbis taught, God regarded their oaths as binding, and judged them for not keeping them.

18

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Matthew 5:33–37

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

19

Stop Swearing – The Instruction

James 5:12

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,”** lest you fall into judgment.

James repeats Jesus’ words (Matthew 5:37), and calls Christians to simple, honest speech. Christians are to be those whose yes means yes and whose no means no. They are to be people of integrity that do not need to swear by oaths to convince others of their truthfulness.

20

Stop Swearing – The Instruction

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Believers are to be known as people who keep their word, having such integrity that their simple yes and no will suffice for people. In the words of Paul, “Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). Speaking the truth in every situation will cause believers to shine forth in the darkness of a world of lies.

21

Stop Swearing – The Motivation

James 5:12

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,” **lest you fall into judgment.**

As motivation against swearing false oaths, James points out the consequences of violating them. Those who make false oaths will “fall into judgment”. The Mosaic Law warned, **“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.”** (Ex. 20:7). One way of taking God’s name in vain is to swear falsely (Matt. 23:16).

22

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The condemnation or judgment James has in mind here is not God’s chastening of believers. The Greek word translated “condemnation” is never used in the New Testament to refer to believers’ chastening. It is a word which speaks of “pronouncing sentence”. It is used in James 2:13 to describe God’s sentencing to hell of those whose lack of mercy which reveals their unregenerate hearts. In Acts 8:33 it described Christ’s judgment at Pilate’s hands.

23

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James certainly does not teach that believers will never misuse their tongues (James 3:2). Christians may slip into speaking falsehood on occasion, but this should not be the pattern of their lives.

24

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The sobering warning James gives in verse 12 is that those who continue to blaspheme God’s holy name through lying oaths face eternal damnation. It is another test of living faith. Those whose lives are characterized by a pattern of lying give evidence of having an unregenerate heart. And the Bible teaches that liars, spiritual children of the father of lies (John 8:44), will be sentenced to hell forever (Rev. 21:8, 27; 22:15).

25

So What ...

As believers, we must take great care in our speech. We must endeavor to be people of integrity and true to our word. Others should see that our lives are different by the way we keep our word. If those who are unsaved around us cannot take us at our word, how will they be able to believe the Gospel when we present it to them.

26