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James 5:12

<sup>12</sup>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.

After the bible, *Pilgrims Progress* is said to be the most read book of all time. The author, John Bunyan, wrote the book in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Largely, he wrote it while he was in prison for preaching the gospel. But the gospel was not the only thing that ever came out of John Bunyan’s mouth. In fact, before he became a Christian, he had reached a point of discouragement in his life where he convinced himself that the only way he could find comfort, happiness, and any sense of meaning was to sin with all his heart. So he gave himself to sin.

He writes in his autobiography, *Abounding Grace*, these words:

So I continued in my sin. My mind always greedy for more of it, and yet always begrudging the fact that it did not bring satisfaction or the satisfaction that I hoped it would. I continued like this for a while or more, and then one day as I was standing at a neighbor’s shop window cursing and swearing and playing the mad man in my usual, sinful manner, the women of the house, who sat inside, heard me. Even though she was a very loose and ungodly woman, she protested that I swore and cursed at such a fearful rate that it made her tremble to hear me. Furthermore, I was, according to her, the most ungodly fellow she had ever heard in all her life. That when it came to swearing, she said, that by my actions, I would destroy all the youth of the entire town. At this reproof, I was silenced and put to shame in my heart, and also I stood there with my head hanging in shame, and I wished with all my heart that I could become a little child again — that my father might teach me; that he might teach me to speak without this wicked swearing. I am so accustomed to it, I thought, it is vain for me to think of reforming my speech. That, I believed, could never happen.

Speech, words, and what comes out of our mouths — this is James’ point here in Chapter 5, verse 12, and it has been a major point throughout these short five chapters throughout this letter. His main idea in James 5:12 is to keep your word and speak the truth. Be truth tellers. He’s now narrowing his focus as he talks to us about our speech to the subject of integrity.

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In one sense, this verse feels like it drops into the book of James out of nowhere. He's been talking about money — what to do if you have it and what to do if you don't have it. Some of you heard those messages and said, boy, I wish I were in the first section rather than the second section, but his practical everyday wisdom is so helpful in terms of what to do with “stuff.”

Then he talked to us about patience. He's talking to us about the everyday Christian life. We draw from his instruction in that who we really are has more to do with the little things in life more than the big, big things. Of course both matter, but James is helping us to work out our faith into everyday life. Out of nowhere comes this verse. That is James' style. It is like reading the book of Proverbs. It is wisdom on various subjects. But this is not new to the book of James.

At the end of Chapter 1, he gave us three categories. This is true religion. This is true faith: Bridle your tongue, avoid worldliness, and help those in urgent need (helping the widow and orphan).

These are real marks of what it means to follow Christ. As we have studied, we've wanted these categories to be there because they are not typical for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to think in these categories. And now as we have progressed, James has been filling these categories with content.

He is telling us this: Christ comes into your life — the word of God comes in and gives new life. James 1:16-18 says that we are brought to life. Then he says we are to “do” the word. Out of the change that the word does in us, we are to walk it out. He doesn't want to leave us to our own imagination to figure that out. He develops these three categories and more.

Today, we are going to look at this verse, and I will give an old-fashioned Puritan teaching:

1. Teaching
2. Importance
3. Application
4. Questions and Objections

I. **Teaching**

The teaching is all about truth-telling. The Christian is to be trustworthy. You can take the Christian at his/her word.

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James is quoting Jesus from the greatest sermon ever preached: The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:6-7.

In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus gives this teaching, and James is quoting Jesus. He has condensed it. It's as if James, in the early church, is so familiar with that teaching of Jesus that they have made it their own, and James is giving it to us in a condensed fashion: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, you should not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn."*

James quoting Jesus is such a strong statement that some have taken Jesus very literally. The Quakers, for example, have said they will never take an oath — we won't take an oath and we will not swear. They have taken this passage very literally. But the problem with this interpretation is that it turns the bible on itself and then it becomes contradictory. In other places in the bible we are told to keep our oaths.

Deuteronomy 10:20 says, "You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear." Is that a contradiction to what Jesus taught and what James is teaching? I think if you look closely, this verse in Deuteronomy is actually capturing the point. The point ironically is if you swear by anything at all, you are swearing by God because everything belongs to God.

Therefore, you belong to God, and your speech should always be the truth so that an oath is not helpful or needed. It's even an offense because it implies that there are other times when your speech cannot be trusted.

In Jesus day, they had developed an intricate system of taking oaths and swearing. Jesus addresses that in another message recorded in Matthew, Chapter 23, where he speaks to the religious leaders of his day and he reveals in that teaching that they had developed an elaborate way to swear and take oaths. They would swear by the temple, or the gold in the temple, or the gift on the altar and Jesus exposes that. They had developed this clever way of swearing and lying.

It's kind of like, as a child, where you would say something and then cross your fingers behind your back. This is what the religious leaders of that time were doing. Friends, this teaches us that legalism will not produce an honest heart.

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In James, following in the teaching and tradition of our Lord and Savior, he comes and says, let's simplify: Always tell the truth. That's the point of this passage.

Josephus, who was a Jewish historian right after the life of Christ, wrote this about the Essenes: The Essenes were a religious sect who lived right before, during, and right after the time of Christ. Any word of theirs has more force than an oath. They avoided swearing, regarding it as worse than perjury. For they say that one who has not believed without an appeal to God stands condemned already.

This group is more truthful and honest in their daily speech than others who are taking an oath. In fact, they think it is a bad sign that you need to take an oath in order to persuade people that you are telling the truth. That is the teaching that James is bringing to us: Tell the Truth.

He ends this verse, as he often does, by bringing in the topic of the judgment — lest you fall in condemnation. He did this last week when we talked about patience. It is a warning about judgment and it reveals to us James' theology.

Flip back to James 1:16. I think it is very important to us in light of this message.

James 1:16-18:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

James is saying to us that we became Christians because we were brought forth by the word of God. But here is the context that is so fitting for today's message: God is unchanging. He is not like the heavenly bodies. He *made* the heavenly bodies.

You see, the heavenly bodies shift, they are shadows; they are in different places at different seasons. There is a variation and turning, but not with God. God is unchanging and God's word is true always. His word brought forth these bodies and it is powerful, and you can always rely on the word of God.

And when his word comes in and you see the veracity of it, it changes you and brings forth new life. This is James' foundation from which to build: We are changed by the unchanging and powerful word of God.

Now, he doesn't stop there. Very quickly, in Chapter 1, he pushes forward to say that when that new life comes, you are changed and you need to live out the word. In verse 22, he says be doers and not hearers only — be ye doers of the word. You are no longer under judgment because Christ has paid for the penalty of your sin. Now live like someone who is not condemned — live like the one who saved you.

The Gospel changes us and that change is seen in what we say. We tell the truth as followers of Christ.

## II. **The Importance**

James 5:12 begins rather strangely by saying, "But above all..." Now, when you read that phrase, doesn't it surprise you? What does "above all" sound like to you? Most importantly, don't take an oath? Now we are almost embarrassed for James because we might think that James has missed it. We begin to think that James might have spent too much time in the carpenter shop rather than the time he needed in grammar and literature. Maybe this is just an unwise or sloppy transition because he can't mean, "above all."

I want to suggest that many times when we read the bible and we have a question about whether or not something is right, we should dig deeper because this is not something we should accept. We want to understand it and the understanding will really reveal to us some of the importance of what God is trying to do in that passage.

Here are the explanations that are typically given for this passage:

1. What James means by "above all" is a transition to the coming of the end of the book. A transition of conclusion (i.e. he has two or three things left to say).
2. He might be stating that "above all" really means what it says — this is important so I am flagging it in order for you to catch it.
3. He's quoting Jesus and, therefore, calling attention to the words of Christ.

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Now I am going to suggest to you that all three of these explanations are right — they all kind of funnel to the central point that means “above all.” He is nearing the end of the book, so he is concluding with some very important information, and these are the words of Jesus, which are a direct teaching of Christ. But he really is calling critical attention to this.

Here is the question for you and me: Why does this come as a shock to us? Why does an appeal of integrity through our words come as a shock?

I think the answer to this question is that the problem goes much deeper than we are aware of. The problem with our lack of integrity is a much deeper problem. Our hearts are so easily deceived. We do things out of pride, greed, and sinful motivation, but many times we don’t identify these things as prideful or greedy.

It’s unusual for someone to hear us say, “Wow, I am so greedy and prideful.” We become comfortable with the shading of the truth. We become comfortable with presenting one idea of who we are when the reality is very different.

One of the things I work at is being transparent in my preaching. I work to be transparent and some people feel awkward with that, and they will come and question it. I tell them that things may be worse than they even imagine. But thank you, Lord, for a savior. Now, listen, qualifiers are needed here, because you do not want to meet someone and then start dumping all the filth you ever had in your heart upon them. That is not the point. The point is that we can easily be deceived, and the call to integrity becomes a deeper problem than we sometimes realize.

James is spending a lot of time in this book calling us to think about our words and to take them seriously. He is telling us that this is not optional, friends. There should be something radically different about your speech. This is not some kind of mistake that James is making.

I remember about 20 years ago, there was a young man who was on the professional golf tour. He was attending our church, and he became a friend for a season. We went out to play golf together a few times. The first time we went out to play, he didn’t hit his drive very well, and I was kind of embarrassed for him. He had a bad lie, and I felt so bad for him.

Here he is, out with his pastor, on the professional tour, and he has such a bad lie. So, I tell him he can move his ball, but he declined. Next thing you know, he hits this screaming four-iron 240 yards about three feet from the pin. All of a sudden, I wasn't embarrassed for him anymore. There was no need to be embarrassed for him at all.

The same is true for James — there is no need to be embarrassed for him. He is not making a mistake. He is inspired by the Holy Spirit. When he says “above all,” he is calling our attention to shock us into taking note of our speech. He is saying that as a follower of Christ, your speech should always be truth. Be a truth teller.

### III. **Application**

First, let's look at the things to avoid:

1. Leveraging: Don't give yourself more credibility than other people want to give you. If someone does not believe us, then we will sometimes swear with intention of lending more credibility to our statements. Friends, if someone promises you that they will never do something, then you might want to take note. We should be alarmed by the sales person who is promising something. It takes a certain maturity to be okay with people who do not believe you. If you tell them something and they don't believe you, then leave it at that. It takes a maturity. This verse tells us that you do not need to prove you are right.
2. Duplicity: James hates double-mindedness, and he addresses it a number of times in his letters. (This is speaking one-way about someone when you are with them, and then another way when you are not with them.) James is calling us to single-mindedness in our speech. This is a big one, isn't it? It is a challenge for us to be truth tellers and to have integrity. Do not communicate a double message, which includes gossip and slander as well.
3. Exaggeration: Whether by telling a story or flattering others, do not exaggerate what you really believe to be true.

This is not a comprehensive list. I just want to get us started in applying this message. We do not need to leverage our testimony. We want to be single-minded and avoid duplicity and exaggeration.

Now let us look at some things we should do:

1. Take a stand: The passage is saying to let your yes be yes and your no be no. There are times when you need to take a stand; you need to speak the truth. We see in this verse that this is a part of the simple truth-telling that Christians are called to do.

There is a story, which is pretty well known, about a hockey player, Paul Mulvey. There was a big fight at a hockey game and his coach told him to get out there, and he looked at his coach and said something like, “No. This is ridiculous. I don’t want any part of it.” This was such a drive of the stake in the ground; but decades later, people remembered it. There are times when you must say, “No.” And there are times when you must say, “Yes.”

Dan Cathy, owner and COO of Chick-fil-A, was recently asked about his stance on same-sex marriage. It’s not a surprise that he was asked, since he is known as a Christian businessman/owner. For example, Chick-fil-A restaurants are not open on Sundays. They are making a lot less money when you figure what they could be making if they were open on that day. I understand that they even play Christian music in their restaurants. They are taking a stand, so he gets asked this question.

He stated that marriage is between one man and one woman. So then, he gets blasted. Google, Microsoft, and Starbucks can come out and say that they are in support of homosexual marriage, but when one Christian man says, hey, I think marriage is between one man and one woman, all of sudden he is forcing his religion. Dan Cathy took a stand.

There are times when you stand up and say yes or no because that is what love does. We do not love one another when we say God doesn’t really care because God does care. He loves us, but he calls out sin.

There are times, friends, when I am in a conversation with someone and they want to ask me about abortion, homosexuality, or some other controversial subject. This is not the kind of subject I want to use to start telling them about Christ. I would like a softer entrance, because I do not want to be misunderstood. I love them, and God loves them, but sometimes I am not in control of the subjects of discussion, and the



challenging questions come. Love demands that we are honest and say, in this case, “No, God does not approve of that.” I can put in all the qualifiers I want by saying, I have sin in my life too, and my only hope is in the cross. I invite them to come to Christ.

Friends, this is huge. We could spend the entire day on this subject. There are churches everywhere — churches right here in our city — that will not touch this issue. I ask, “How can you not touch these issues?” People need the truth of God. I am not in favor of the way they are often handled within the church. Sometimes the church comes across in self-righteous and unhealthy ways, but we still need to take a stand.

2. Say less: This is a main thought in the book of James. Bridle the tongue and say less. We will be more truthful by saying less. Sometimes we talk and talk when we are nervous or uncomfortable.
3. Focus on the intent of your communication: We can deceive others by what we do not tell them. We can literally be true but be misleading and deceptive. Let’s focus on what we are intending to communicate, and this will protect us.

Let me give a word to all of the parents who dedicated their children this morning. As you are disciplining your children, as they grow, you need to know the right questions to ask. For example, if you go to your son and ask if he punched his brother and he says, no, I did not *punch* my brother. Then you go to the other son and he tells you that his brother *slapped* him across the face. Then you go back to the first brother and ask — more specifically — if he *slapped* his brother? If there is a long silence, remember: Anytime your child repeats your terms back to you in his answer, he is narrowing the scope of the field to mislead you.

4. Be cautious in making promises: There are certain times that a promise is expected to be made. One of those times is at the altar, saying “I do.” This is an appropriate place to make a promise. Another would be in the baptistery. There are, however, a lot of places that are not the right place to make a promise. You can go to the examples of the judges in the Old Testament and Herod in the New Testament. There are people who made foolish promises and paid a very dear price.

5. Keep it simple: In the Christian's life, there is a spiritual quality in the poverty of spirit. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This helps us to see that the Christian is someone who is broken over sin.

Jonathan Edwards does a great job in his book, *Religious Affections*, saying that in his culture a poor man did not overly insert himself but was comfortable taking a back seat. Culture almost demanded that. In some ways, our culture has changed from that; but, Edwards used that to teach that there is restraint in the Christian that is not always pushing himself to the forefront. He should be poor in spirit, with simplicity in his life and speech.

#### IV. **Questions and Objections**

Now, if you are listening to this sermon carefully, you could struggle with some of the general ideas. I do a little bit. Is all manipulation in communication bad? God made us as wonderful creations in his image, and we have the ability to communicate and persuade.

You may say, "You know, Brian, this feels so limiting. Are you telling us it is wrong to persuade people and to use the whole orb of communication?" I think this is a good objection and question, and I think the answer goes back to the issue of content. Do we use the wonderful ways that God gives us to communicate to distract from the truth or to enhance the truth?

For example, I love coffee. I love to go to Starbucks, and sometimes I meet people there. I can tell when I meet someone there for conversation that they might not typically go to Starbucks. I'll order black coffee, and they will order some drink that has a little bit of coffee and a lot of syrup or milk. They have disguised the coffee, which is fine when it comes to coffee. But when we speak, we want the full aroma of the truth to come out. In communication, we want our diversity and uniqueness to enhance the truth.

One other objection: Is there a time where it is right to mislead someone? What if I was in Nazi Germany, and I am hiding Jewish people in my home and the officer knocks on the door to ask if there are Jews in the house? Is that a time where it is right to say no?

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I think my answer to that question would be that we need to be careful about hypothetical situations. You will see this in movies and television when someone needs to kill one person in order to save a city. Or there are ethical situations and dilemmas that people are put in TV shows and movies. What these stories do not put into account is God. God is there — watching and leading.

In some ways I want to opt out of this question to say, if you are put in that type of situation, God will give you grace for that moment. Is it a greater sin to hand over the Jewish people in your home then it is to lie? I believe that God in his sovereignty and providence will keep you from those situations and if you get into one, he will show you what to do. But it is certainly not the way to determine your truth telling policies.

So, we end with this radical call to tell the truth. I want to go back to John Bunyan, who God did save. Yet, it happened where he left that initial conversation saying, I've got to speak better. He worked on religious language and being a better and healthier communicator.

He writes, "One day the good providence of God took me to Bedford for the purpose of my work. At one of the streets of this town, I came across three or four women sitting at a door in the sun talking about the things of God. Having a willingness now to listen to their discussion, I drew closer to them to hear what they were saying as I, too, was a good talker on the matters of religion. But I have to say, I heard but did not understand as their discussion was far out of my reach. They spoke about a new birth, the work of God in their hearts, and also how they were convinced of their own miserable state by nature. They talked with how God had visited their souls with his love and the Lord Jesus. And with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and strengthened against the temptations of the devil. Moreover, they discussed the suggestions and temptations of satan in particular. They told one another of the ways in which they had been afflicted and how they were bore up, strengthened under his assaults. They also talked of their own wretchedness, of their own sinfulness of heart, and of their unbelief. They scorned, despised, and abhorred their own righteousness as filthy and insignificant to do them any good."

Here is what he is saying: Here are these women talking about the things of God and they have experienced a new birth. They are talking about the word of God and not trusting in themselves. And, very interestingly, they despise their own righteousness. I can't reform my life, but God gives me new life.

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Listen to this statement. “It seems to me that the joy in their hearts was the source of their speech. Their talk was filled with the beauty and pleasantness of scripture, and there was an appearance of grace in all that they said. It was as if they had found a new world, as if they were a people who dwelt alone and were not to be considered the same as others. At this, I felt my own heart begin to shake and to be mistrustful of my own spiritual state as I saw that all my thoughts about religion, salvation, and the new birth had never entered my mind and neither did I know the comfort and the promise of the word of God. I did not know about the deceitfulness and treachery of my own heart. As for secret thoughts, I took no notice of them neither did I understand how satan worked — his temptations and how they were to be withstood and resisted.”

He goes on to say, “Therefore, when I heard and considered what they said, I left them and I went about my employment again, but their talk and their conversation, it followed me. My heart lingered with them as I was greatly affected by their words. I was convinced that I lacked the real distinguishing marks of a truly godly man.”

Our speech comes from a new heart. Friends, come to Jesus. The command in scripture about our conversations says that it must be truthful, and how it must not tear down our brother. It is impossible when we really consider the magnitude of it, but the invitation in God’s word is to come to Jesus. If you are a Christian, come to Jesus and find relief and find rest. If you will not harden your heart today, but will receive his word, his truth, his changing-power in your heart, he will take the burden.

He gives us a new heart and that joy is reflected in our speech.