

MBC – 2/6/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH
“The Truth About Telling the Truth”
 James 5:12

Let’s get right into our study of James this morning. We are just looking at one verse, but according to James, it’s one of the most important things he has to say. Turn with me to—

- James 5:12 ¹²But 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. (Pray . . . not about us trying to be better people, but about us looking at Jesus and trying to be like Him because we love Him, and we want our lives to bring Him praise and glory. Give us Your Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of Your blessed Son. You make the changes this morning.)

“But above all – first and foremost” James says, “do not swear” – he isn’t talking about profanity here – cussin’ – but making oaths and taking vows: It’s when you say something like: “I swear by my mother’s grave. . . I swear on my John MacArthur Study Bible!” But why does he say, “Above all?” Above what? Does he mean this is the most important thing he has said so far in his letter?

Well since the beginning of ch.4 James has been pointing out worldliness – different ways Christians can behave like the world: when we follow our own lustful desires, when we speak evil about one another and judge one another; leaving God out of our plans, and being impatient with people and our circumstances. And then he says “*above all*, my brothers, do not swear.” Because that is so like the world! One of my favorite commentaries on James said this, it’s so good—

- “This evil of swearing reflects the spirit of worldliness in one of its most reprehensible forms. James has in view the self-serving attempt to hide the truth by appearing to appeal to God to establish truth. Such duplicity is totally inconsistent with Christian honesty.”

That’s exactly what James means. It’s one of the most important commands in this letter because it so accurately exposes our hearts: Are you committed to truthfulness, whatever it costs you? Or will you resort to a lie if it will get you out of trouble? If you always tell the truth, why would you need to reinforce it with an oath or a promise? The Holy Spirit is saying – to you and me this morning: “Stop lying, right now, and speak only the truth.”

Intro - Lying lips.

Lying goes clear back to the Garden of Eden, doesn’t it? When the serpent spoke to Eve, he twisted God’s words: “Did God say ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” No, God didn’t say that: He said you *can* eat of *every* tree of the garden, *except* one. But that threw Eve off,

and while she was still confused, he told a boldfaced lie: God told Adam, “In the day that you eat of that tree, you will die.” The serpent told Eve, “You will not surely die!” That was the mother of all lies. And don’t people still believe that lie – that God isn’t really going to judge them for their sins?

- No wonder Jesus said in Jn.8 that Satan is a liar and the father of lies, and He went on to say that those who lie are children of the devil because children imitate their father. And beloved, as God’s children, we must imitate *our* heavenly Father, whose Word is truth. When we lie, we misrepresent our Father – and we are like our old father. Serious stuff.

Jesus says to His disciples, “You are the light of the world!” We are to be a source of light and truth to the world. God knows the world needs it. But if the same lips that speak the Gospel also speak lies, how will the world know when to believe us? Lying is an awful sin in the Bible—

- Proverbs 12:22 ²²Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.
- Proverbs 6:16-17 ¹⁶There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: #2 is “a lying tongue.”
- Proverbs 26:28 ²⁸A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.
- Psalm 5:6 says of God: ⁶You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the blood-thirsty and deceitful man.
- Revelation 21:8 ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” Unrepentant liars will go to hell.

Lying compromises our witness because it calls into question our integrity. And it always, always, harms our relationships because lying puts a *question mark* in the place where trust should be. I read a WaPo article this week – a secular perspective on lying. Pretty insightful—

- “One of the most insidious dimensions of lying is that eventually the liar himself or herself loses grip on reality, loses the distinction even in the liar's own mind between what is true and what is false. It brings about a change also, a deep moral character change within an individual's life.” (This is from an unbeliever!)
- "Lying takes a great deal more work than telling the truth. Now why would that be so? Because in lying you have to invent a reality other than reality. In lying, you have to construct a situation that you did not experience. You have to create an alternative universe, so to speak. And you've got to work hard intellectually to keep that alternative universe straight. (Liars need good memories," right?)

*You've heard that other old saying, "Oh what a tangled web we weave/When first we practice to deceive." When we choose to lie, we create a domino effect of consequences over which we have no control. Amen? One lie leads to another, and another. James says, the solution is so simple – tell the truth!

We've seen in our study of James that he often refers to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, so let's turn there this morning to the passage James was thinking of—

- Matthew 5:33–37 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, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

I. Christians and the truth.

This might not sound very practical if you aren't in the habit of making oaths. But the bigger issue, the massive issue is about Christians and truthfulness. Beloved, Jesus says that citizens of the Kingdom of God tell the truth! Not half-truths – because a half truth is a whole lie, right? And we don't need to reinforce it with oaths, or explanations or caveats. Jesus says that anything beyond yes – or no – comes from evil. That is profound!

- Listen to the voices all around us: When our politicians pile up vague words, and talk in circles, and refuse to answer simple questions, they are purposely evading the truth. They are *obfuscating* – Putting up a smokescreen – deliberate confusion. And the result is the chaos we are in today: no one knows what to believe or who to trust because we've been lied to so much. But we can't go down that road . . .

Simple honesty is so rare today—

- I heard about a guy who wrote to the IRS: "Enclosed is a check for \$150 for taxes I owe the govt. I cheated on my taxes last year and haven't been able to sleep since If I still have trouble sleeping, I will send you the rest."

Back to the Sermon on the Mt., Jesus is describing the character that will mark the citizens of His kingdom – those who are going to heaven. One of the most obvious marks is truthfulness. Jesus said, "Say yes or no, and don't add conditions and exceptions. Don't add fine print at the bottom, just say what you mean, and mean what you say."

- Oh, it's *so* easy for you and I to be self-deceived in this area. We can get into such a habit of bending and stretching the truth, exaggerating and qualifying that we lose sight

of what is true until we get into some jam and tell a lie that we never thought we would tell. All because we haven't settled it in our minds to only speak what is true.

But beloved, our God is true and *everything* He is and does and speaks, is marked by absolute truthfulness—

- In Ps.31:5, God is called the God of truth.
- Jn.14:17, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth.
- Jn.14:6, Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
- In Jn.17:17, prays that His disciples will be “sanctified *in the truth – Your Word is truth.*”
- 1 Tim.3:15: Christ's church is called the pillar and support of the truth.
- Eph. 4:15: the church grows as we speak the truth in love to one another.
- Rev.19:11: When Jesus returns on a white horse as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, His name is “Faithful and True.”

And God's children should be set apart as distinct from the world by our truthfulness.

*The truthfulness of your word is in direct proportion to your faith in God and His Word. When you tell the truth, and keep your commitments and obey the truth no matter what the cost, you show that you trust the God of truth. And you show that you believe that God will always, always, bless truth and truthfulness over falsehood.

- *I assume most of you parents repeated to your own kids what your parents told you and what their parents told them – “if you tell us the truth, it's going to be a lot easier on you than if we find out you lied!”
- But if you fall back on lies when the truth could embarrass you or get you into trouble, or cost you money – what does that say about your heart? And what does it say about your trust in your heavenly Father? *Lying is always a failure of faith.*

I want to show you why James and Jesus dealt with oaths and vows, and then I want to show you how that applies to you and me—

II. “You have heard that it was said.”

Jesus says in—

- 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.’

He isn’t quoting a specific verse, but summing the Old Testament teaching on oaths, vows, and swearing.

- Numbers 30:2 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.
- Leviticus 19:12 You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

Notice here that if you bring the name of God into your vow, and fail to keep it, you have broken the 3rd commandment against taking God’s name in vain. Serious. Look at—

- Deuteronomy 23:21–23 “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. ²²But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. ²³You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.

You see what God is saying here: You don’t have to make a vow, but if you do, and bring God into it, He is going to hold you to it, so be very careful. Solomon put it bluntly—

- Ecclesiastes 5:4–5 ⁴When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

*In a speech he gave this week, former VP Mike Pence said *“The American people must know that we will always keep our oath to the Constitution, even when it would be politically expedient to do otherwise; they must know, as the Bible says, that we will “keep our oath even when it hurts.”*

He got it pretty much right! The Old Testament teaching was this: vows are voluntary, but if you make a vow, make sure you keep it.

A. The corruption.

But by the time of Jesus, the whole concept of oaths and vows had been twisted into a way to conceal lying. They went to Lev.19:12—

- “You shall not swear by my name falsely,” and said, “Well yes – but if you swear by any other name, then you aren’t bound.” I.e., if you worded it right, your yes didn’t have to be yes.

They twisted—

- Numbers 30:2 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.

And they said, “Well yes, if you *bind* yourself by a pledge you can’t break your word, but that must mean that there is such a thing as a non-binding pledge!” (That’s an oxymoron!) So they developed a complicated legal system of binding and non-binding oaths, and you needed a good Jewish lawyer to tell you which were which.

- Again, sounds exactly like our Washington politicians!

The Mishnah, the Jewish commentary on the Torah, said this: “If a person makes an oath by *Shaddai*, or by *Sabaoth*, or by “the Merciful and Gracious,” or by “Him who is long-suffering and of great kindness,” he is bound.” But if he swore by heaven and earth, he wasn’t bound. It was a game, like having your fingers crossed. And the Pharisees were masters of the art—

- Matthew 23:16–22 ¹⁶“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁷You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²²And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

It was all a game and Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. They would be held liable for their lies regardless of how they tried to hide them. But Jesus went beyond that, He set a *new* standard, a *higher* standard than the Law of Moses—

III. “But I say to you.”

- ³⁴But I say to you, Do not take an oath *at all*, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

Well actually, with Just for Men, you can. . . The new standard for citizens of His kingdom is this—

- Do not take an oath at all.
- Say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; and anything *more* than this comes from evil.

Oaths and vows are unnecessary when you always speak the truth. You don’t need to reinforce it or bolster it.

*But this brings up the question: Is it always wrong for Christians to make a vow or be put under an oath? Now listen—

A. When oaths and vows are appropriate.

*Jesus and James were teaching that vows and oaths shouldn’t be used to emphasize the *truthfulness* of what we say – that should be a given – but there are special occasions when they are appropriate to emphasize the *importance* of what we say. Let me give you two examples—

1. Marriage:

It is appropriate to make a vow of covenant faithfulness when you marry another person. God makes marriages – He is the One who makes two people one, and He holds us to our marriage vows whether we take them seriously or not. It’s always been my policy that I won’t marry a couple unless they will promise before God that they are going to stay married. They haven’t all kept that promise, but marriage still *requires* that promise, before God. And who would enter a marriage unless they had that promise from the other?

2. Court of law:

It’s unnecessary, but it’s not wrong for a Christian to swear to tell the truth in a court of law. I’ve done that myself. When Jesus was on trial before Caiaphas, He was told to answer, under oath whether or not He was in fact the Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus responded: “You’ve said it!”

And actually, Paul made oaths to emphasize the importance of what he said—

3. Paul did it.

- 2 Corinthians 1:23 ²³But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.
- Galatians 1:20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

- 1 Thessalonians 5:27 ²⁷I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

4. Jesus did it.

He did it when He would say “Truly I say to you.” Truly (or KJV, “Verily” = *ame_n* = “certainly, let it be so,” or what our MCS kids say at the end of our prayers: “Amen - yes, Lord, yes!”)

As a matter of fact, in the Gospels, Jesus is the only One who ever says “*Ame_n*,” and in John’s Gospel, 25X He makes statements in which He says “*Ame_n, ame_n*” or “Truly, truly, I say to you,” not because what He is about to say is more true than anything else He said, but because we especially need to hear what He is about to say. And—

5. God the Father did it.

- Hebrews 6:13–19 ¹³For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” ¹⁵And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷So 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, ¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,

Of all beings in the universe who never, ever need to swear or make an oath, God doesn’t need to! But here, He does both – not for His sake, but for ours. He was saying—

- “Now when the Christians at Middletown Bible Church read this passage on February 6th, 2022, I want them to have strong encouragement about their salvation. I’m going to add an oath to My promise just to show them how very much I want to establish their hope. So I’ll swear by the most valuable, precious thing in all the universe; the highest, most glorious, thing of all—My own Name!”

So God did something that was unnecessary — it was extra, simply because He wants His people to have an unshakable confidence in His promises to us in Jesus Christ.

IV. The truth and you.

1. Make oaths and vows rare.

Unless you are getting married, testifying in court, or getting sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice – avoid vowing or swearing. It’s unnecessary, and all it does is cause people to question

your word when you don't swear or vow. Maybe you know certain people who do this constantly when they talk – and often it's in God's name. Why do they do it? Because they are liars. If you have to add punch to your promise, it just bears witness to the fact that your word alone can't be trusted.

- Matthew Henry said, “the worse men are, the less they are bound by oaths. The better they are, the less they need them.”

2. Keep your word.

Every one of us needs to search our hearts here: “Does my yes mean yes, or does it drift into a maybe . . . ?” Can people count on what I say?” Beloved, James would say to you and me, “Above all – be true to your word, keep your commitments, and your appointments.” Don't dodge something you don't intend to do with a false promise.

- I know a person (not here!) who is so kind, thoughtful – and would give you the shirt off his back. But when he says he will be somewhere, or do something, he almost always flakes out.

There used to be a saying, we don't say it much anymore: “A man is only as good as his word.” Beloved, God's children should be known for keeping their word. We need to pray about this.

3. Speak accurately.

This follows on the last one. Sometimes out of niceness Christians aren't truthful. When someone says, “Hey let's together for coffee sometime!” Do you say, “Sure!” without even thinking if you will follow through?

Someone told me once that for Christians, *yes* means “maybe,” *maybe* means “not on your life,” and Christians don't say “no!” That would just be mean.

- But isn't it refreshing to be around people who say what they mean and mean what they say? And we listen when they speak because we know we're getting it straight. All of God's people should be like that when they speak.

Another way we don't speak accurately is when we *exaggerate* or constantly use *superlatives* – are you fudging on the truth to make your point, or just to be heard? Don't embellish your stories.

- And I'm not just talking to our fishermen out there. But I'm not ruling them out either!

Think about it: The more you exaggerate, the less impact your words have on people – right? And be aware of adding intensifiers to your speech – why do you need to do that if you are speaking truthfully and accurately?

- Have you ever thought about how often you say “*really?*” E.g.; “I was *really* there.” “Seriously, this *really* happened!” “No, this is *really* true.” Hello? Either you were there or you weren’t, it happened or it didn’t, and it’s true or it’s not! The “*really*” is unnecessary.

And if “*really*” adds fake *intensity*, “*just*” adds fake *humility*! “I *just* want to say. . . I *just* don’t know . . . oh, I *just* can’t think right now!” Fake! Then sometimes we add “*really*” to our “*just*” to intensify our humility: “Oh, I *really, really just . . . you know, just really. . . just . . .*”

But seriously, those are unnecessary words if you are truthful and accurate. I *just really* want you to get this. . .

4. Only speak what is true, but don’t speak everything that is true.

You know what I mean: Some people hide their meanness behind a façade of truth: “Well I’m the kind of person who just speaks whatever is on my mind! You’re gonna know right where I stand, brother! I tell it like it is!” You know people like that. They think their honesty is a virtue, when it’s really unloving and self-centered.

Truth isn’t the only test for what should leave our lips. We are to speak the truth in love, for the purpose of giving grace to those who hear. Listen to these Proverbs:

- Proverbs 12:18 There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
- Proverbs 12:23 A prudent man conceals knowledge – he restrains his lips, he thinks before he speaks – but the heart of fools proclaims folly.
- Proverbs 10:19 When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

Ask yourself, before you speak (not after): Even if this is true, what is my purpose in saying it? What am I trying to accomplish? Will it give grace to those who hear? (Eph.4:29)

5. Don’t spread untruth.

The world does this – constantly – fake news, right? And fake science. You read something on the internet, you pass it on – whether or not you know it’s true. That’s one of the main reasons our world is in the chaos it’s currently in. Amen? But Christians should not be guilty of perpetuating falsehoods.

- Several years ago, I got tired of people sending lies around through email and FB, so whenever I would get one of these whack-o fake news articles or conspiracy theories, I

would research it, and send the link with the facts to all the people they had sent it to: “Reply all.” And in the subject line I just typed: HOAX! A couple times I even said, “Christians shouldn’t spread lies.” That wasn’t very subtle, but it seemed to work.

- You say, “But in these crazy times, how do we know what is true and what is not?” Exactly! So if you’re not sure, don’t pass it along to the rest of us. And to answer the question, “How do we know for sure what is true?” This is what we know is true (Bible). Amen? So spread this word all you want.

6. Commitment to truth will keep you from sin.

If you have it locked in your mind that you will not cover up sin with a lie – ever – it will keep you from sinning. Let me explain: when you know that someone (like your husband or wife, or your children) might ask you if you have done or said something – and you are committed to tell the truth – you are going to think twice before you act or speak.

I just heard about a person who told their kids: “I don’t lie. I used to, but now, I don’t. So you can ask me whatever you want, and I will not lie.” I thought, that commitment is going to keep that person from sin! But what a great commitment to make.

I want you to ask yourself these questions—

- Are you depend-able – are people able to depend on you?
- Are you trust-worthy – are you worthy of people’s trust?
- Are you reli-able – are people able to rely on what you say?

Our honesty affects our relationships, doesn’t it? We all want to be around people who say what they mean and mean what they say. Wasn’t that our Lord Jesus? He was a straight-shooter. When you and I read Jesus’ words, they have such power and impact. And they cut right to our hearts because we know they are absolute truth.

- In ch.7 of his Gospel, John tells the story of the Pharisees sending the Temple police to go and listen to Jesus, catch Him saying something incriminating and arrest Him. That didn’t happen. When the Pharisees asked the officers why they didn’t bring Jesus in, all they could say was, “*No one ever spoke like this Man!*” Beloved, if we follow Jesus we will speak *only* what is true, and *always* what is true. And our words will stand out as His words did in this deceitful, dishonest world.

I’ve given you 12 questions on the back of your outline to test your honesty – please take some time to pray over this. Let’s pray.