

XXIII. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and Truth-Telling”

James 5:12

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This is our 23rd study in the book of James. We are just looking at one verse in this study and it's James 5:12 which says, *[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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I had every intention of finishing this book within 17 to 18 studies but we'll end up with 25 so we'll have two more to go, Lord willing. Some have told me how this study of the book of James has been convicting in areas of their lives and it has also been encouraging. James has also set this up this way.

James tells us we're in a broken world but all this adversity is under the sovereign hand of God and He is using it to develop Gospel wisdom. The theme of the book of James is a Gospel life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation in a sin-cursed world informed by the God-sent gift of wisdom from above. You have a Gospel foundation in Christ and a Gospel motivation of love for Christ. You have a Gospel life that can be lived with Gospel wisdom and God uses adversities to affirm what you know and show you what you need to know and uncover any strongholds of idolatry that are trying to work their way even into your new heart.

The result of that is that you get to a place of true religion, not false religion. Man-made religion is man's arrogant expressions of how he thinks he can be right with God through his religion. Christianity is not a man-made religion. It is a Gospel-given, derived religion. Religion for the believer is the result of our God-given, Gospel-delivered relationship that we have with Christ. This is what shows up in your tongue, your life, fellowship and how you live out your faith for Christ. James identifies them all by saying 'true religion and...' something that goes with it.

Now we are at true religion and truth telling. He is taking us at our word. You are brothers and sisters in Christ. He keeps repeating the word 'brothers' and here are things I see in our life and in the church and I understand they are possible but we must not let them become acceptable. If these external sins are there then it's because of an internal reason in your heart. I don't want to wash up the external side of the sin but I want to get to the heart, James says so that Gospel wisdom that comes from a renewed mind fills up the heart into new decisions for life where we put off the old man, put on the new because of a heart flow of Gospel wisdom that you increasingly know through a renewed and transformed mind as to how you deal with life. Adversity is one of those things that God uses to teach us this Gospel wisdom.

Some of said this has been convicting in that it has been more obvious in things I had not seen, yet encouraging to know that condemning guilt has been removed in Christ and to have the power now of how my life can now conform to Christ. This has been just as much a challenge for me as well as a pastor studying this book to prepare for sermons.

I have to deal with this for three weeks as I am preparing to preach this book and I'm talking about some serious conviction that has been happening in my life. This area in this study has probably been one of extraordinary importance.

So why just this one verse for this study? I want to give a couple of reasons for this. Number one is because this verse has become extremely confusing in the professing church of Christ. During the Reformation it was very confusing among the anti-Baptists in particular. They read this verse as if it said 'do not swear by heaven, do not swear by earth, let your yes be yes and no be no' and decided that they couldn't take any oaths or vows at all. So if you put them in the army they wouldn't take a vow. If they were to get elected to an office they wouldn't take a vow. If they were taken to court they wouldn't take a vow. They wouldn't have marriage ceremonies or church membership because they involved taking vows. With this absolute rejection of taking vows they would quote from this passage in James 5:12. So is it sin for a believer to take oaths and vows or not? We have to give some attention to this.

Here is a second reason why we need to give some attention to this. The second reason has to do with the words of James when he says 'above all brothers.' He just said that this one is important. The third reason is that I believe what is taught right here can be life changing in the lives of Christians and the church if we understand what James is saying as he is explaining what Jesus expounded on the Sermon on the Mount and world shaking. Some other ways it can be life shaking is that there is a whole vocabulary you can learn and a whole vocabulary you can forget. How many times have you heard Christians say 'let me be honest with you'? So what were you before? Listen, let me be totally honest. So were you partially honest before? How often have you heard this; I swear, I swear on my mother's grave, I swear on the Bible, I swear on a stack of Bibles. So is she dead? So it doesn't count if it's on your father's grave? As if one Bible isn't enough? There is a whole vocabulary you and I can forget if we understand what this text says. We don't have to use it anymore.

What is it that James is saying to us in this text? I am going to divide this verse up into three things, ask three questions and then give one takeaway. This has potential to be life changing and world shaking. So let's look more closely at this verse in James 5:12 which says [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 is circling back. In James 1 he emphasizes that the Christian life is not perfect but persevering and persistent. The Christian life of necessity needs prayer. The attempt to live the Christian life without prayer is a fabrication. The attempt to live the Christian life and only pray is an illusion. You pray because you're dependent upon God's grace and then you pursue holiness because God calls you to do that. So you need prayer and perseverance. Perseverance requires a grumble-free zone in the church of Jesus Christ to flourish. There needs to be steadfastness, a strengthening of your heart through the means of grace and patience because the Lord is working all things together for our good and we need to be patient with what the Lord is doing. So James covered perseverance again in James 4 and in the next study he'll circle back to prayer as we look further into James 5. James 5:16b says [16b] *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

In this study we are back to a third thing that preoccupies James from the opening chapter throughout. Out of the 83 verse in James over 25 percent deal explicitly with the sins of the tongue in order to get to the heart because the tongue reveals what is in the heart and directs the affairs of the heart. Here is another time we're back to the tongue. What do you speak, say or not say as a Christian from a heart filled and overflowing with Gospel wisdom that is Christ-centered, Bible-shaped and Holy Spirit-engaged? What is James saying to us here? James has this constant focus of setting his sights on professing believers that their Gospel life would be saturated and lived with Gospel wisdom. Here he comes back to the issue of the tongue again.

James affirms the importance of this, two ways. Think of this kinds of like a sandwich. There is an upper slice of bread and lower slice of bread. The upper slice of bread is kind of a positive statement. James says "Above all my brothers..." Again, James is addressing professing believers in Christ. Now after all I have just said to you this one is above all. He just affirmed the importance of what he is about to say. Get this one right. Don't miss this one.

When I was in Junior High we had to take shop and I'm not that gifted in this area. In shop I built for my mother for Mother's Day a double scissor holder out of wood that I still have to this day. Every time I look at it I remember something I learned that day in class when Mr. Bradshaw said to me "You're not through yet." I thought I had done everything I was supposed to do and he said "You haven't set the nail." He took out a nail punch, set the nail and then put some wood putty on top of it. Every time I look at this perfect example of wood craftsmanship that was produced with my 13 year old hands that day I remember being taught to set the nail.

That's what James is doing here. He has just set the nail on Biblical doctrine of perseverance of the saints in the previous verses. He is going to set the nail on effective intercessory prayer in the next study. Now he is setting the nail on how you become by God's grace and for His glory in Christ a truth teller for this is above all. It's crucial.

Then the bottom slice of the sandwich is negative. James says at the end of 5:12, *let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.* In the last study James said not to be a grumbler and fall under condemnation when the Judge comes. He is saying that while believers have issues with the tongue we must put away patterns of speech that belong to those who are under the judgment of God. We must not engage in, make acceptable or sign peace treaties with patterns of speech that identify those under condemnation. James has already named gossip, slander, and grumbling so now its truth telling.

What does it mean to be a truth teller? After giving us the affirmation of its importance, now he gives a prohibition. James says the bridled tongue is a work of grace that I want to set the nail on so here is my prohibition. He says in James 5:12, *...do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath...* So there is the negative. James got this from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. James is giving an explanation and an affirmation of what Jesus had already preached. When James heard this sermon of Jesus' he wasn't even a believer yet.

I want to make a point out what is not a point right here. As you raise your children through family worship at home, bring them to church and involvement in church activities and you think they are not getting anything, it is amazing what they are getting. James is quoting again from the Old Testament books of wisdom, from

Leviticus, and from the Sermon on the Mount directly and heard all of those things as a child and young man before he was converted. He wasn't converted until after the resurrection of Jesus. God's Word is doing its work. Keep putting God's Word before your children because it is fastening itself in all those places. Yes your children will say I don't want to do that but you be a parent and know with confidence that God's Word is at work.

I can affirm this personally living a life of abject rebellion in which I refused to describe it to people after I left home because I hated it so much. When that happened I still remember night after night what I had heard from my mother, my dad, my grandparents and what I had heard growing up in the church that God used to reign me back to a commitment to Jesus Christ.

James is using these things and expounding on what Jesus has already said. Why would you swear by your head when you can't by your head change one hair color? He didn't know we were going to have hair dressers later. James says that is not the believer's way of life. The world may have that way of life but why is it that we don't have that way of life?

James then goes to the positive, from the prohibition to the admonition. The admonition is to let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'. People who have been saved by grace who are focused upon Christ with a transformed mind, by God's grace increasingly have speech that is four things. One is plain – yes/no. The second is clear speech. We don't try to create loopholes in our conversations to accommodate falsehoods. Our speech is understandable. I am convinced that some lawyers put things out there in such a way that the average person can't understand what is being stated. The legal language of our day has been so obfuscated that I can't understand what it is saying without a dictionary in front of me. Fourthly, Christians not only want to say something truly but they want to be understood truly. In other words, Christian language is hearer-centered, not speaker-centered.

That's why Paul said in Ephesians 4:29, [29] *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.* It is how can I speak truth, truthfully in love, in a timely manner with well-chosen words in this way and my burden is not to say something truthfully technically but to say something truthfully understandably that the person who heard me understands. In my business I state my facts clearly and understandably with no loopholes to get more money later or out of a responsibility later. So our speech is to be plain, clear, understandable and truthfully. We take the burden that the person we're talking with understood what I was saying.

With this exhortation before us, now we have some questions to answer. Here are three crucial questions from my mind that perhaps would be in your mind. The first question is what about oaths and vows? If James tells us not to swear by oaths or vows then are oaths and vows permissible or are they sinful? Oaths and vows are not sinful. There are five reasons why they are not sinful. Reason number one is that oaths and vows are prescribed in God's Word and you can see this in Leviticus 19. Sin is the transgression of God's Law. Why would God codify sin if vows and oaths were sin? Oaths and vows are not in and of themselves sin. Can you sinfully use oaths and vows? Yes. Can you sinfully do an oath or vow? Yes. In and of themselves they are not sinful because God prescribes them in His Word.

Number two, God does vows. God takes oaths. God swears. Hebrews 4:3 says *[3] For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest," although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.* Here is God's disciplining hand upon Israel out of wrath against sin was delivered with an oath that God made. Our salvation is delivered with an oath. Hebrews 6:13-15 says *[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.* God made a promise to Abraham through the Abrahamic covenant that leads to the new covenant in Jesus Christ delivered by God bringing an oath.

Number three, using a couple of illustrations the Apostle Paul, we are told in the Scripture, committed himself for the sake of evangelism to a religious vow, called the Nasserite vow, concerning the cutting of his hair. So Paul engaged in vows, not to be saved but as a saved man he used a vow. Jesus is under oath when he is before Pilot on the judgment stone. In Matthew 27:11 it says *[11] Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so."* It is for this reason I have come into the world. Jesus Himself declared what He had come to do under oath and engaged in a vow. He would do it in His ministry for as He delivered a truth He would give a vow. Amen, amen means so be it forever. Verily means truthfully I say to you so Christ used vows. So oaths and vows are not in and of themselves sin but they have a place in a fallen world to be used.

Why would they be used? Here are four reasons why vows and oaths would have a right use to be used in religious and civil situations, ceremonies or moments. Number one is that we're in a fallen world. This is a world under Satan who is the father of lies. So in order to have some order and some accountability you have to have them in a fallen world. A second reason why God had prescribed oaths and vows in a fallen world is for affirming significant moments and commitments, whether it's an ordination of preacher, membership vows, baptismal vows or in a court as a juror. These are significant moments because you have taken a job of responsibility or elected to an office. A third reason is for clarity of our commitments. A fourth reason is for some level of assurance for those who are dependent upon you doing what you said you would do.

When we are called as a witness to a court hearing there are people's lives who are dependent upon what we're going to say in that courtroom. There is nothing wrong with the outside world expecting and demanding from any and all to say 'I make a promise before God that I will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' People's lives are depending upon it. Now among Christians it ought to be superfluous. We can do it but it shouldn't be necessary. In the world there are people that need assurance. If you have a business that delivers a product and people are using that for their needs then it is appropriate that it be done in a moment like that. It's appropriate to take oaths and vows when called as a juror in a court situation. It's appropriate for an ordination vow of a preacher for the Bible tells us that faith comes by hearing the Word and we need some assurance in a significant moment in setting aside someone for the Gospel ministry so we need to hear the oath.

It's important for families when taking their baptismal vows to not only affirm what they believe but to make their commitments to what they believe and then for us who have heard it to stand up and say 'we'll do our best to make sure that we are

standing with you, equipping you and having all those means available for you to do what God has called you to do.' It is appropriate when elders and deacons who shepherd a church that a church will not go beyond its leadership by in large and it's appropriate for the membership to hear them state under oath before God that this is what they are committed to do.

Question number two is can Christians participate in oaths and vows? Yes, for the sake of others, for the sake of a significance of a moment, for the sake of the assurance of those who are dependent and for the sake and fact that oaths and vows are necessary in a fallen world. For Christians though, it is unnecessary. It's okay for me to take an oath and a vow but it's not necessary. I don't need the oath and the vow to make me know I need to be truthful. All I have to do is say 'yes.' I understand why other people need to hear me take the oath and vow in this culture and in a fallen world but as a Christian, I don't need it.

I had a great blessing seeing my son in law getting inducted into the University of New Hampshire hall of fame and I couldn't help but think of another time with him as I listened to his acceptance speech. My mind went back to the 17th hole at the Birmingham Golf Club where he had been trying for 17 holes to ask me for my daughter, Abigail's hand in marriage. I found a way to make it hard for him for 17 holes. He said "Mr. Reeder I have really loved playing golf with you but there is something I really want to ask you. I'd like to live the rest of my life with Abigail." I said "What does that mean son?" It was a December day but sweat drops started rolling down his face. I enjoyed this so much. Then he told me of his heart desire to be Abigail's faithful husband and give his life so that they could serve the Lord together. Just a few months later I had the privilege to stand at the ceremony and hear them take oaths and vows but I didn't need that ceremony because I knew that young man and what God's grace had done in his life when he told me what he was going to do for Abigail. I didn't need to hear him vow because I knew his 'yes' was 'yes' and his 'no' was 'no.' That doesn't mean it wasn't appropriate for us to mark out the significance of a marriage with oaths and vows and for other people to hear that.

So when Christians speak we don't need oaths and vows because our 'yes' is 'yes' and our 'no' is 'no.' Others may need it in the culture but we don't and that's why Jesus said in 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.'* [17] *You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?* [18] *And 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.'* [19] *You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?* [20] *So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.* [21] *And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.* [22] *And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.*

He is saying that whenever I become dependent upon vows and oaths for me to tell the truth then it's just a matter of time until I'll lie. If my vow here is necessary for me to be faithful to Christ and His Word then it will be just a matter of time before I create a vow I can worm my way out of. An oath taking culture soon becomes a finger crossing culture. You remember that when you were a kid, right? You said you were going to do something but you didn't do it and the friend says 'why didn't you do it' and

you say 'I had my fingers crossed when I said it.' Oh so when you're fingers are crossed your promise isn't any good? No, my fingers were crossed. I didn't see your fingers crossed. Not only were my fingers crossed but I was hiding it from you as well because they were behind my back. That's what we do.

Whenever vows and oaths become necessary for you and I to tell the truth it's just a matter of time before we take a vow and an oath and frame it in a way that we create a loophole. Do you want to see the tipping point in our culture? This is not partisan politics, this is just pure history. The tipping point in our culture was the Clinton presidency. I did a sermon on 20 ramifications of the Lewinsky/Clinton situation. If I had a 21 year old daughter who wanted to be an intern at the White House, forget that because I can't trust him. While under oath, we hear 'it depends on what alone means or what 'is' means and then I had the culture elite applauding those circumventions of the truth saying how wonderful, wise, thoughtful and crafty it was. I knew what that meant for our culture and its descent in a culture of lying even with oaths and vows.

So is there a time for Christians to participate? Absolutely, but if we need an oath and a vow to be a truth teller then it's just a matter of time before we become a liar. That is what James is going after and dealing with. He is dealing with the culture of oath taking and vows in order to affirm trustworthiness and it's necessary to have it. That's why at one time we could do a business deal with each other and just shake hands because 'yes' meant 'yes' and 'no' meant 'no.' Even the hand shake wasn't necessary but we just did that to formalize the moment.

Now we buy a house and I sign a contract. Then we sign another piece of paper that says we were telling the truth when I signed that contract. Another paper I signed said that I understood I was telling the truth when I signed that contract that said I would truthfully do what I was supposed to do. It is recognizing a culture that has become a culture of lies and it uses oaths and vows as another mechanism to lie. You can't ever have enough oaths and vows to get around that because we'll end up creating oaths and vows to nuance what we've said in order to get out of what we have said.

So what are James and Jesus telling us about oaths and vows? They are saying it is appropriate, right in a fallen world that oaths and vows are present. It is needed and it marks out a significance of a moment. It gives assurance to others. It brings clarity of commitment and all of that but once an individual and a culture becomes dependent upon oaths and vows then the oaths and vows will become a mechanism for lying. It ought not to be that way among Christians. There is a place for us to participate but it's unnecessary for the believer. It is superfluous for us. We don't need a stack of Bibles or even one Bible before God. Our life is under oath. Everything we say and do is under oath. Everything we say is by the grace of God, for the grace of God and to the glory of God.

Conservatives get mad at me because I don't sign on to the term limits deal. I will try and use this as an illustration. I don't believe in term limits for office holders. Their response to me is that they are thieves. If you have a guy in office for 35 years that is a thief then he'll steal. If you put him in for eight years then he'll just steal quicker. You aren't solving the problem. You may have cut down on how much he can steal but you haven't solved the problem of a trustworthy government. Oaths and vows give a declaration in a fallen world so that we know how we have function but it isn't going to solve the problem of trustworthiness and accountability. For believers we do them, but

we don't need to do them and we don't have a personal culture of oath taking or vow taking because we don't need it. All of our life is under the eye of God.

That brings me to the takeaway. Because Christ is the truth and has told us the truth in His Word and the Gospel then an authentic Christian is set free to say what we mean, mean what we say and never be mean when we say it. Say it plain and clear so that the hearer understands. Speak the truth in love. When someone goes through a difficult time they need to know the truth but what they may need right now is a hug and then later the truth. That's called wisdom. We need wisdom to know when and how to speak the truth – well-chosen words in a well-chosen moment – but we don't compromise truth with lies. We don't create ways technically to say truth that actually misleads others about who we are, what we are committed to doing and what we're called to do.

Christ is the One that set us free from that. I don't want to be a part of the kingdom of darkness. Satan is a murderer and father of lies. So I don't want to use vows and promises in order to say lies. I want to say "God, by Your grace in Jesus Christ set me free to say what I mean, mean what I say and never be mean when I say it." I don't need to cover up with language because Jesus knows me. Secondly, I don't need to nuance my language in order to appear to be somebody to somebody else because I'm a child of God and I don't need to do that. Jesus told me the truth when He said "I am yours, you are mine and you are a joint heir with Me." I don't need to fabricate a life with technical language that misleads. I am already a child of the King. I can be honest about my sin because Jesus loved me when I was a sinner and Jesus has paid for all of my sins. I can be a truth teller to God and to other people for I'm free to do that because of what Christ has done for me who is the Truth and the Truth will set you free.

I don't need a stack of Bibles or even one Bible. I don't need my mother's grave. Yes is yes and no is no. It is always delivered thoughtfully, timely, with clarity and charity and love. We are in a culture that has become a culture of lies and applauded by the cultural elite. We are even teaching people how to do it in our schools. Go find for me right now a business school with an ethics school in it. Our ethic is that you do what is good for business and what is good for business is how much money you make. It is called the ethic of greed that destroys. If you have to use language that is technically right in order to get around someone than do it. We are in a culture of lies.

Let me tell you how our culture got this way. It shouldn't surprise you that the world will lie because of the father of lies. We are in a culture of lies today because the salt and light of Christian truth telling is not holding it back. We have our proverbial fingers crossed at marriage altars. I know there is Biblical grounds for divorce but I'm talking about keeping the vows you make when they only meet your needs and that's the way we cross our fingers. I will do what I said in my business deal as long as I make money and because we have become untrustworthy. We have removed the salt and the light that is holding back the inevitable of trustworthiness of the culture.

Here is the positive. This is a great and extraordinary opportunity for us. If Christ's grace and mercy and truth in Jesus Christ has taken hold of us and set us free so that we can mean what we say and say what we mean, what would happen when our marriage vows really mean something in contrast to the world? What would happen if our membership vows really mean something and not just getting a break on tuition with the school or maybe that would allow me to get a job at the church? What would happen if our ordination vows really meant something when men stood up and said they would

uphold the Word of God and the system that is taught through the Scriptures and expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and they weren't looking for loopholes? What does alone mean? What does is mean? What inerrancy mean? We know that they mean.

In Christians business dealing what would happen when people know that you're going to do what you say you'll do for you can count on that even if it costs him. That person will get it done because they made a commitment to do it. The contrast would be enormous in a world that can't seem to trust anyone. What would happen if we in charity and love spoke the truth truthfully, understandably, clearly, plainly, with charity and weightiness?

This is what I think it looks like. When I was going to Asia someone sent me a picture of Korea. It was a satellite picture taken at night of the Korean peninsula. From the tip of the Korean peninsula south all the way up to the demilitarized zone it is ablazed with lights. From the demilitarized zone all the way up to the northern border of North Korea there is one light spot. The darkness of communistic atheism is drowning the country. Go look at the revivals that took place in South Korea since 1940.

I'm saying that because we're a city set on a hill and if we will light the way by speaking the truth in love by saying what we mean and mean what we say because Jesus has set us free to say it and not be mean when we say it, then our marriages, commitments, businesses will be different and watch what would happen as a testimony of distinctiveness of the power of God's grace in this world. We need the light to shine for Jesus Christ that we will do and speak the truth and then watch the Lord draw people to Himself who is able to change liars into truth tellers because of Jesus who told the truth and the truth will set you free. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for this absolutely, revolutionary text of Scripture. I pray that You would now speak to our hearts. Take a moment and deal with the Father. Lord, thank You that Jesus has perfectly done what is true to save me. Now He set me free so that while it's alright for me to take a vow in a fallen world, I don't need to. Jesus my Savior, I want to say what I mean, mean what I say and bathe me in the love of Christ so that I'll never be mean when I say it. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.