

Stop Swearing

~James 5:12;19-20

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Contract vs spoken contract

Good morning, everyone. This morning we are finishing up the Book of James, touching on a couple of verses in chapter 5, specifically verse 12. Pastor Serge was teasing me that he had a huge section of passages last week that could have been 5 messages, and I only have to work with one, so it's easier for me. But I reminded him that it wasn't a bad thing, because it could indicate how much Pastor Tom trusts Serge, like "to him who is faithful with much, more will be given". So he must really trust Serge and have a lot of confidence in his abilities as a teacher of the word. So not something to worry about, but rather a great honour. Me on the other hand, I got verse 12.

I'm just joking, but today's passage is about not swearing oaths. Now I don't know about you, but I haven't exactly sworn a bunch of oaths this week. Perhaps someone here did some jury duty, but otherwise I think your initial reaction is probably, "phew, I'm off the hook this week, I don't struggle with 'Oath taking'". But before you lean back and relax too much, we are going to look at the context of this passage and see that it actually does have application to all of us in our day-to-day life.

Lets read the passage in James Chapter 5 verse 12, You can turn there now. And then we will flip to Matthew chapter 5 right after because Jesus actually shares the same thing at the Sermon on the Mount.

"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."

So right away we see that the straight forward message of the text is that when you say something, have the integrity of following through with what you say. You shouldn't need to back up your promise by swearing an oath.

Now flip to Matthew Chapter 5, and let's see how Jesus put it in verse 33. Here we see it's very similar: Let's just look at verse 33 to look at the context:

"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.'

In other words, don't swear on something and then not follow through. If you swear by something – do what you said you would! Because it holds that much more importance when you swear by something – like "I swear on my mother's grave" right?

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

So the warning is something they were familiar with. And the next part of the verses in Matthew, Jesus continues in typical Sermon of the Mount fashion, where he says "you have heard this... but I say to you this..." so he will change it a bit, but it also gives us a little insight on how they were possibly abusing this practice: Matthew 5:34 says

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

We see that perhaps people were avoiding following through on their promises by swearing by things that don't carry as much weight. Like for instance, If you're in a courtroom and they have you swear on a Bible, That seems to carry more weight than, say, if they had you put your hand on a rock and swear by the rock that you would tell the truth. Swearing by the Bible carries more weight than swearing by a rock. It seems that they were swearing by heaven or by the earth or on themselves - and this would be less bad if they didn't follow through, than if they were swearing by the name of the Lord. – They knew that using the Lord's name in vain is breaking one of the 10 commandments. So it appears that some were not following through on their commitments. The reason James is bringing this up we can see in chapter 5 verse 4:

“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”

Workers weren't getting paid what they were promised. If employers were backing out of what they said they would do, that's a big issue.

And Jesus points out, that if you swear by heaven or by earth, thinking that there's less gravity to that, then swearing by the name of the Lord, you're mistaken. For Heaven belongs to the Lord. The earth is under his dominion. Even swearing on yourself – you can't even change your hair colour – because you belong to the Lord. Swearing on a rock is not a loophole that allows you to not follow through on your word.

In business in Canada, some think that if a contract is not in writing then it's not official, however, in our country a verbal contract can be just as binding as a written contract. So someone making a deal verbally, someone can't just not follow through because they didn't write it down. What matters are your words. And in a similar way, this is why we are told, let your “yes” be yes, and your “no” be no. You shouldn't require a caveat to have the integrity to follow through.

This week there was a situation. I'm sitting at the desk doing some work, and Andrea offered me a glass of iced tea. She was holding a full glass, and I said no thank you, but could I have a sip of yours? She let me have a drink, and then refilled it with the pitcher of iced tea and set the glass beside me. Now, I noticed that she put the glass of iced tea right next to me, and I considered just drinking it all before she got back to be funny, but chose to just leave it. When she came back in, she noticed that the glass was not full, and she said “Did you drink my iced tea?” I said no I didn't, and she said “are you sure? Because I thought I filled it all the way.” And my response was “no I swear I didn't”

Isn't that interesting? I said “I swear I didn't”. And I noticed instantly that I said it because that what I'm preaching on. And even though it was just a colloquialism, I wasn't meaning it literally, I had to think, what is the reason I said that, even in a funny situation. Which leads to the last part of what James and Jesus both say – that anything more than this comes from evil and condemns us. Is that true? Because so many of us might throw this sort of thing into our conversations in a far more casual context. Does it come from an evil place?

As I pondered this, I realized that swearing by something, formally or informally, could be because we are lying and trying to seem like we are telling the truth, or we maybe don't tell the truth consistently and need the integrity boost – like the boy who cried wolf. Perhaps when we are not believed by someone, we want to save our pride, so we swear that we are being truthful to defend our pride. Or we are swearing flippantly and using the lords name in vain. There is not much good that comes from swearing casually or not.

But then my mind wondered, is it a sin to swear an oath? Like if you are in a court room and they ask you to put your hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, is that sinful? Should Christians not be doing that? And this is where it gets a bit more complicated than a simple yes or no. You see, in scripture, we see Paul swearing by the Lord's name to validate his message. In Galatians

1:20 he says “(In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)” He’s invoking the name of the Lord, to enforce that he’s telling the truth. He does it again in 2 Corinthians 1. And we see that God himself makes an oath that’s talked about in Hebrews 6:14:

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

God makes an oath, swearing on himself! So we can know that taking an oath is not sinful in itself, because God cannot sin. So it really depends on the context and the conviction of the person swearing the oath. Like a lot of things, it’s a matter of the heart.

We learn in Romans chapter 14 that Paul says our conviction matters on these issues. If you feel that it is a sin, then it can be a sin if you do it, but if you feel that it is fine, then it can sometimes be fine if you do it. That’s a whole study in itself, but we see that we must discern context and conviction. We don’t have to be legalistic about it, but if you are concerned or convicted, then don’t do it. If you find yourself in a court and they ask you to swear an oath, and you’re uncomfortable with that, then you don’t have to. It turns out that in Canada and the US, you are not required to take that oath, and you can just opt out. So there shouldn’t be any reason for you to not just speak with integrity without invoking the Lord’s name. And on the other side of the coin, Jesus and James are clear that it’s not the oath that is the problem, rather the need for an oath should not be required, but simply your honesty and integrity should be consistent and enough.

You should not need an oath to add weight to your character to confirm what you’ve said.

Let honesty be on your lips. This means at work, in parenting, in marriage, in school, to your parents, in all contexts. Your ‘yes’ should be yes, and your ‘no’ should be no. By being consistent, telling the truth, your reputation will improve so that the people in your life will grow to be able to trust your word. And in this way you will love God more by not using his name in vain, and you will love other more, the same way that you want to be treated. Because let’s be honest, nobody likes it when people back out on their word. If people say they are going to do something or be somewhere, and are constantly not following through, that can ruin trust for people. But in every situation we encounter with these things – we need to be filled with grace.

When someone hurts us, isn’t fully honest with us, offends us, or doesn’t follow through on their commitments, our heart immediately wants justice! We want them to know that it is wrong, sinful, and we want others to know that that person can’t be trusted, especially when it’s a repeat offence! However, when it come to us not following through on our own commitments, well, there’s valid reasons – my alarm didn’t go off, I didn’t feel well, I was particularly busy. We want mercy.

With others we want justice, with us we want mercy. These 2 things collide at the cross.

You see, at the cross Jesus paid the ultimate price for you and I. It is sinful to not love your brother or sister. And every sin, no matter how small we think it is, requires justice to be served. The problem is that we can’t actually pay that price because the wages of sin is death. We are breaking a cosmic law against our cosmic creator. It might feel small or insignificant to us, but it’s a much bigger issue than we understand. And just because you or I don’t think it’s a big deal, doesn’t mean that it’s not a problem that needs to be dealt with. If someone makes a bomb threat and thinks it’s not a big deal because they didn’t actually have a bomb, it doesn’t matter that they don’t agree, they can and should

be charged for that crime. In the same way, it's easy for us to justify our sin, but God must hold us accountable, he wouldn't be a just God if he turned a blind eye.

And since we cannot pay the price of death and live to tell about it, Jesus paid it for us. He went to the cross and took all our sin on himself. He took the judgement we deserved and paid for it all in full, for those who will put their trust in him as their lord and saviour.

And this is where mercy collides. We need mercy. Because we deserve to be held accountable for our sins, but we want freedom from them. Jesus gives you that free gift.

You must simply acknowledge your sinfulness, ask forgiveness, and believe and trust in the faithfulness of Jesus to forgive you. Then you can start your journey of living under the law of Christ, seeking to bring God glory. At the cross justice is served and mercy is given freely.

The final verses in the book of James say this:

[My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.](#)

James wants us to keep one another from wandering from the truth of Jesus. The world can deceive us. We can deceive ourselves. We must not be condemning one another. It's easy to point at the shortcomings of others. It's self-righteousness at its finest. Our arrogance and pride can run rampant when we feel justified. Instead, we must surrender our own sinfulness to Jesus, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we come to Jesus for our own sustenance. And then we can invite others to join us. Sharing the gospel is just one beggar showing another beggar where to get food. You can invite others to meet Jesus with the love the Christ requires of us. Ultimately, James wants us to live out our faith in practical ways while showing genuine love for God and others. Living out our faith actively, so that others may come to know Christ, and their souls will be rescued by the wonderful mercy of the Gospel.