

Integrity

James 5:12

I touched briefly upon this exhortation last week, as the last of four successive exhortations given by James, the last of the four related and connected applications of the gospel bearing upon our lives as those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ. And with all that I will say this morning, please bear that context in mind. These are the words of the Apostle James given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit for the encouragement and growth in grace of God's people, those redeemed and justified by faith apart from and without reference to their actual law-keeping.

These, then, are instructions for those who love and worship the one true and living God. Ultimately, these are instructions for how we are to love God, for this exhortation of James is an integral aspect of the requirements of the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."

The subject is swearing, or, I might say, taking oaths. And as an application of that third commandment, James is making what can only be called an obvious reference to Jesus' own words in,

Mat. 5:33 "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, 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."

James' words,

v.2 "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by

heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment."

"Do not swear." James uses two different words as synonyms, well translated in many versions, "do not swear...with any other oath."

Now, when I was growing up, the word "swearing" had reference to a certain collection of what in polite company were called four-letter-words. They were the words we were forbidden to speak, and I can only wish that all parents would have trained their children as mine did me. There are a group of words I have simply left out of my working vocabulary, and I find myself quite offended when others use them in my presence. But that's not so much the focus of what James is talking about here. Here the swearing has reference to taking oaths. Making promises or even just some form of affirmation, calling God as a witness. Or as James' mentions, using some expression other than God as a replacement for using God's name. Such as "heaven" or "earth." And about that practice, James says so very simply, "Don't do it."

With good reason, for great are,

I. THE DANGERS OF OATHS.

Let me start with that third commandment. If the first commandment relates to the object of our worship, and the second commandment the manner of our worship, then the third commandment addresses the attitude of that worship. And the attitude must be a reverent honor for the name of God. And the name of God is God. The name of God is the revelation of God, the manifestation of God, the presence of God. It comes to stand for the very nature and existence of God. And the first and greatest danger of oaths is,

A. The danger of dishonoring God's name.

In other words, using God's high and holy name in any way other than to ascribe him worship. Dishonoring God's name means to make use of that holy name in a common, ordinary, or profane manner. That's what the word profanity really means. Using God's name in ordinary conversation.

There are many ways that is done, as we'll study with the commandment, but here is one primary example. Taking an oath. Calling God as a witness. Invoking God's presence. Carelessly. Thoughtlessly.

How horrible it is to speak words of condemnation so carelessly as it is done today, invoking God's name to execute damnation upon someone for trifling aggravations. But that's not what people really mean when they utter God's name with a direct reference to his judgment of damnation to hell upon the wicked. Yet that's the point. It's not what they really mean. Thus they are using God's name and invoking his judgment when all they really mean to express is some form of mild or even moderate anger or frustration. How frivolous and empty, vanity and profanity.

And in many ways, even worse, the expression of calling God to witness a promise or a commitment is added for mere emphasis. Consider the phrase, "in God's name," or "in the name of God." "For God's sake." And the description of God's ultimate power, "God almighty." All those common expressions are so often used for degradingly trivial matters. We ask questions in God's name or we implore people for God's sake, and we think little about what is actually being said. And that's exactly the point, thinking little about the glory of God's name. That's profanity--dishonoring God's holy name by using it carelessly.

Let me explain a little bit about what the Jews of James' day might think and do. They had made a distinction between binding and non-binding oaths. If God's actual name were used, the oath was binding. But if they substituted for God's name, say "heaven's name," then the oath would be non-binding. They would not incur God's wrath if that oath were to be broken. Jesus obviously addresses that circumstance in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus we read,

v.12 "But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath."

What foolishness that is, to make a substitution for God's name in order to evade the primary intention of the command, to honor God's name. And you ought to recognize, beloved, that those euphemistic substitutes for God's name accomplish the very same profane purpose. To substitute the glorious name of God with a euphemism is to profane that name!

And we have plenty of substitutes today. Look up "gosh" or "golly" in your dictionary sometime. A euphemistic variant of the name of God is used to express mild surprise or delight. That's profanity, taking a glorious and holy name and using it in a common and ordinary circumstance. Dishonoring God's name by using a cheap substitution on frivolous occasions. It's a reference to God, and a dishonoring and ungodly form of an oath. Even the euphemistic shortening of Jesus' name to "Gee," to say nothing of the careless use of his whole name on so many occasions.

So think about your own patterns of speech, and consider how careful you ought to be of false oaths, professing or promising something, with a careless or irreverent reference to God. And to his glory. That's why both James and Jesus mention heaven and earth.

B. The danger of dishonoring God's glory.

Just think about it. God created all things, from nothing, by the word of his power. It was all very good, and the very existence of all creation cries out to proclaim the glory of God. The greatest summary of the product of that creative work would probably be best expressed, "heaven and earth." So here we see the practice condemned by James as it was by Jesus, of taking an oath, making a promise, "in heaven's name." Or "in earth."

Jesus' words which I read earlier are so specific: "But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black."

Please don't pretend that you aren't calling upon God when you call upon his works. When you invoke the name of heaven, you are actually invoking the presence of God seated upon his throne. When you invoke the name of earth, you call up the presence of God made evident in his kingdom upon earth. So don't do it. And don't take an oath by your head, for you have no power whatsoever even over the control of your own life, as if your head somehow had the power God.

The Shorter Catechism sums it up well. "The third commandment requires the holy and reverend use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, Word, and works." Thus if you invoke the works of God or the attributes of God in an oath, it is no different than invoking the name of God himself. Even something such as "O my gracious" or "O my goodness" or "Mercy" ought not to be spoken unless you are consciously and reverently speaking of the graciousness or goodness or mercy of God." They are all appeals to the glory of God, and such careless and flippant appeals are very much the sort of thing that both

Jesus and James have in mind.

Notice how serious this matter is. Look at the final phrase of verse 12. This sinful practice carries with it,

C. The danger of judgment.

v.12 "Lest you fall into judgment."

"... so that you may not fall under condemnation." And that very warning from Jesus' lips was intended for the Pharisees, as were his words of explanation found in,

Mat. 12:36 "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

There is a fascinating variety of verses about the future judgment in Scripture, and worthy of much good study. Suffice it to say that now, that although our eternal destiny is not determined by our own law-keeping, being justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, yet at the day of judgment there remains a sense of accountability. Not the threat of condemnation, but still we live with the expectation of accountability. And with that accountability, the appropriate warning of judgment.

For the unbeliever, the one trusting in himself or in his own works for salvation, that judgment will certainly usher in eternal damnation. But for the Christian, still there is the need to live in the light of that future day of judgment. We shall be judged according to our works, and rewarded, but we must also live with the reality of judgment, though without the threat of condemnation.

So what should you do? It is not enough simply to say what

you should not do. What is the alternative to the hypocritical and self-serving swearing that James' condemns? Simple, and it's simplicity ought to bring us all back to reality. With James' exhortation, and with Jesus', you need to reclaim,

II. THE HONOR OF YOUR WORDS.

Simple words.

v.12 "...But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment."

James is obviously still thinking of,

Mat. 6:37 "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

We live in such an age of equivocation. Words are consciously considered to have two or more interpretations. They are used with intentional ambiguity, evasive and ambiguous. And we think that's clever. Words with multiple meanings whose meanings we use for our own benefit, so that what we say might not necessarily be what we mean. We think it's clever, James thinks it is evil.

When you speak, let your words speak plainly and clearly. And definitively. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Thus,

A. The virtue of definite truthfulness.

As opposed to indefinite deception.

You see, it is actually possible today to deceive someone intentionally all the while claiming that what you say is the truth. History now records that famous equivocation of a previous president when asked a question about his behavior, under the obligation of a legal oath. If you remember that, he defended his

actions against immorality by claiming, "It depends what the meaning of "is" is?"

That is the offense to which James speaks in verse 12! "Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" no. Do I need to explain to you what that means? I doubt it. Do I need to challenge to always, always maintain this high road when it comes to the temptations to equivocate or manipulate by a clever use of words? I expect that I do.

It starts, like all other sin, in childhood. Children are adept at equivocation. A child might clearly know that what he did was wrong, but if you're not careful, a child can come up with such a clever explanation about why what happened was not technically a violation of the rules that it make you believe in their innocence! As if your child is a lawyer arguing a fine point of legal technicality in order to get an obviously guilty defendant set free. It is a natural tendency of the fallen sinful nature.

What a dangerous place this world becomes when words lose meaning! Your words do have meaning, and as I just read a few moments ago, meaning with eternal consequences, "by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

So make it your purpose to speak with definite truthfulness, always. If you say "yes," let that mean yes. If you say "no," let it mean no. Don't debate over about what the meaning of the word "is" is, or any other self-evident word. And don't use ambiguous or indefinite words in order to hide yourself or deceive others. And always, always, without exception and with no reservations, speak the truth.

Sadly, the reputation of being a liar can be earned by just one

lie. While the reputation of being truthful requires lifelong vindication. It is as if you lie once, you're a liar just as if you commit adultery once you're an adulterer and steal once you are a thief. So pursue the reputation of truthfulness, and never give anyone any occasion to call into question your integrity. For that is what this text is all about, integrity. Let your yes be yes and your no no.

And you see, if you do, you will never need to take an oath. You will never need to say, "It's true, I swear." If you always speak the truth, then oaths are completely irrelevant. That's James' point. And even further, if you make a promise keep it. If you make a commitment, fulfill it. It used to be said that a man's word was his honor, and it ought to be said again! If you give your word, you have given your honor. And never ought you to violate your own honor. So we see,

B. The virtue of definite commitment.

A man's handshake used to mean something. There was a day when contracts were not always required, signatures unnecessary. Even in business, deals were struck and a man would never dream of violating a contract entered into with such a solemn obligation as a firm handshake. Yet today, even a written contract is often insufficient motivation for many to remain faithful to their obligations.

I don't want to trivialize this with a variety of specific examples, because this is first and foremost a matter of your heart. I am preaching in order to reclaim the honor of fulfilling your commitments, the honor of remaining faithful to keep all your promises. Let your words mean something. Let them mean everything. If you give someone your word, keep it. Even if it costs you!

There is a great tendency today to avoid commitments, to avoid promises. With the appearance of righteousness, as if our propensity to break our promises is a justifiable excuse to never make a promise. So we frequently say things like, "I can't make a commitment but I'll try." Or, "I can't promise, but..." We avoid commitments and obligations because we are afraid of them. And sometimes, maybe often, because we are lazy and dishonorable.

We don't like being called to commitment. We don't like being held accountable to those commitments. We back away from commitment the moment it gets difficult, and we excuse it with flippant and careless reasons that have only to do with our selfishness.

Look at the big matters of commitment, such as marriage. Many fail even there. When you get married, your "yes" needs to be "yes." For better or for worse, no matter what the consequences. As a matter of godliness and honor, you will keep your promise. Even if it hurts.

So it ought to be with church membership, the commitments of those who promise to submit themselves in the Lord to those in this local congregation who bear the God-given responsibility to watch out for their souls.

So it should be in your social and business contracts. Your convenience, or inconvenience, does not invalidate a contract or agreement. And the strength of that commitment should not depend upon whether or not it was notarized. "Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" no." So don't view James' words simply as a prohibition of things that you shouldn't say. Consider the positive duties expressed, the positive obligations to enter into commitments and obligations. With this final point,

III. THE HONOR OF LAWFUL OATHS.

I don't believe that James, quoting Jesus, forbids all forms of oath-taking under all circumstances. For several reasons. First of all, the unity and completeness of Scripture. Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. And there are specific injunctions in the Bible in which God has laid down legislation as to how and when oaths should be taken. For example,

Lev. 19:12 "You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

And, Num. 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."

In fact, God himself uses this form of oath-taking.

Ps. 132:11 "The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne."

And, Ps. 89:35 "Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. 36 His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me."

And in the New Testament, we have Paul taking oaths as well.

2 Cor. 1:23 "Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth."

That's an oath. "I call God as my witness..."

So surely Jesus, and therefore James, can't be condemning all oath taking, but rather only the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in their dishonoring and flippant disregard for the glory of God's name. So what and how are oaths appropriate? Our our Confession of Faith has a whole chapter on oaths and vows,

beginning with these words,

22:1 "A lawful oath is part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calls God to witness what he asserts, or promises; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears."

Further, we read,

22:2 "Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters ought to be taken."

So what makes an oath a lawful oath? To speak positively the opposite of what James condemns, lawful oaths are,

A. Oaths taken with an holy use of God's name.

In the words of the confession, "The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear; and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence."

In the words of the Bible,

Deut. 6:13 "It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear."

So if you are called upon to give testimony in a court of law, and are asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?", you are free to swear, "I do." Call upon God as your witness to tell the truth. And when you do, keep your oath!

If you have occasion to get married, and God is called as a witness for the covenant commitment that you enter, then take that oath in God's name with all holy fear and reverence. And keep your promise!

In ordinary conversations however, you ought not to take oaths, for these words of James speak to that context. “Let your “yes” be yes and your “no” no.”

The key point, beloved, is that that oath shall be taken only in God’s name, with a due consideration and recognition of his glory. And with a proper and reverent regard for his presence.

B. Oaths taken with a reverent regard for God’s presence.

In other words, when you invoke God’s name, when you call upon God as your witness, you ought to realize something extremely important. God becomes your witness! He is present to bear witness to the promise of your commitment, and thus, you ought never to take such an oath rashly or vainly, without full consideration of standing before the presence of God.

So let your oath-keeping faithfulness and your promise-keeping commitment bring glory to the God whose glory and whose presence you have called upon to be your witness, before whom you live every moment of every day.