

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

TALKING STRAIGHT

James 5:12

By

Steven J. Cole

October 16, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly
sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

October 16, 2005
James Lesson 22

Talking Straight
James 5:12 (Matt. 5:33-37)

If you are ever called on to testify in court, you will be asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Are you violating Scripture to put yourself under such an oath? Our President and other elected officials must place their hand on a Bible and take the oath of office. Are they disobeying the very Bible that they swear upon?

Some Christians would answer, "yes." I would be among those who say, "no" (I will explain why later). But however you answer, you need to be clear on the meaning of James' command in our text, which succinctly repeats Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33-37. These words go beyond the taking of oaths or vows and deal with the issue of truthful speech.

No matter what your views on taking oaths, everyone would agree that there is a crisis of truth in our culture. Many do not even believe that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Whatever is true for you is true, even if it contradicts the facts. Politicians, contractors, and car salesmen are notorious for promising things that they know they can never deliver. With every broken promise, distrust increases and the fabric of our society unravels a bit more.

The fact that the Promise Keepers men's movement has attracted thousands of men to its rallies says something about the need to restore integrity among men who actually do what they say they will do. If we promise to love our wives, to be faithful unto them until death parts us, then we should keep those promises. If we make a promise to a customer in our business, we should keep our word, even if it costs us. If we promise our children something, we should do what we promised. In our everyday communication, we should speak the truth and not shade it with nuances to hide the truth. All of these things are implicit in James 5:12, which is saying:

As believers we must be truthful in our communication so
that we do not fall under judgment.

To understand James' words here, we must understand how the Jews of that day were using oaths. Oaths ought to foster truthful communication, but in reality they had become a façade for lying. The Jews said that if you swore using God's name in your oath, you had to keep your word, but if you swore by some lesser thing—Jerusalem, the temple, or whatever—you were not bound. Jesus confronts this in Matthew 23:16-22:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”

This was the situation behind Jesus' command in the Sermon on the Mount, not to make any oaths at all, but to “let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’” (Matt. 5:37). In other words, the real issue was speaking the truth at all times. In a moment, we will see why neither Jesus nor James were prohibiting all oaths. We will consider James' teaching under four headings:

1. Believers must work at truthful communication.

Immediately we wonder, why does James say, “But above all...”? Is refraining from swearing or taking an oath really more important than anything else James has said thus far? Probably not. Commentators differ on why James says “above all.” Some relate it to the preceding context, especially to what James has said throughout the letter about the control of the tongue (1:19, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11, 13). They would view it as summing up his line of thought on that subject, emphasizing that truthful speech undergirds everything else. Others say that it is a literary phrase that just means, “finally,” or “in conclusion.” Perhaps Douglas Moo is correct when he says (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 232),

“James wants to highlight this prohibition—probably because he sees it as getting at the ultimate issue of personal integrity.”

Some see no logical or thematic connection between this verse and the context. They view this section as a random jumble of exhortations with no flow of thought. But James has been dealing with both worldliness and a spirit of pride, which result in relational conflicts. From 4:1-5:18, he makes the point that true faith resists arrogance by humbling oneself before God. This includes humility in relationships stemming from humility before God (4:1-12); humility with regard to the future (4:13-17); and, humility as we patiently wait for God’s future judgment (5:1-11). Now he deals with humility in speaking the truth apart from boastful, self-serving oaths. In the final part of this section (5:13-18), he will show that true faith practices humility by depending on God through prayer. So the theme of humility ties chapters 4 and 5 together.

Oaths are necessary because bending the truth for personal advantage comes naturally to us as sinners. In speaking of the depravity that is common to the human race, Paul says (Rom. 3:13), “... with their tongues they keep deceiving...” You don’t have to teach a little child to lie. Rather, you have to teach him to tell the truth, especially when it is seemingly not to his advantage to do so.

James is not speaking here to those outside of the church, but rather to believers (“my brethren”). Becoming a Christian does not automatically produce truthful communication. The Bible is filled with exhortations to God’s people to be truthful in word and deed. For example, Paul says that we should be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). A few verses later (4:25), he writes, “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” The apostle Peter (1 Pet. 3:10) cites from Psalm 34:12, “The one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit.”

So don’t assume that because you’re a Christian, you won’t struggle with the sin of being deceptive. We all need to work at truthful communication. But, what does the Bible say about taking oaths or making vows?

2. The Bible does not prohibit all oaths, but it does restrict them.

When James says, "Do not swear," he is not referring to taking the Lord's name in vain, although Scripture clearly forbids that. The third commandment states (Exod. 20:7), "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain." Our Lord affirms that commandment when He teaches us to pray, "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matt. 6:9). God's name refers both to His spoken name and to His entire person. We are to reverence God. It is always wrong to use the name of God or of our Lord Jesus Christ as swear words or exclamatory words. We need to be careful, too, not to use words like "Gee" or "Geez," which are just shortened forms of "Jesus."

But James is not dealing with that subject here. Rather, he is talking about not invoking God's name in everyday speech to assure the truthfulness of what you say. If someone often says, "I swear to God that's true," you begin to wonder whether *anything* he says is true. Your word should be true without needing to make a big deal about it.

But the Bible does teach that there are certain occasions when it is proper to take an oath or make a vow before God. Because of this, I disagree with those who prohibit taking an oath in a court of law. For example, Deuteronomy 10:20 commands God's people to swear by His name. In Jeremiah 12:16, God says of even the pagan nations, "Then if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the Lord lives,' even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, they will be built up in the midst of My people."

In the New Testament, the only time that Jesus spoke in His trial before the Council was when the high priest said to Him (Matt. 26:63), "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." So Jesus answered under oath. The apostle Paul often swore by the Lord when he said, "God is my witness" (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10; see also Gal. 1:20).

Even more significantly, God sometimes swears by Himself, either by His words or by enacting His covenant. He swore to David with an oath that one of his descendants would always sit on his throne (Acts 2:30). God swore to Abraham that He would bless him and multiply him (Heb. 6:13-14). The author of Hebrews goes on to say (6:17-18) regarding our salvation, "In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us."

So the Bible does not prohibit all oaths. Rather, it forbids both *frivolous oaths* and *false oaths*. *Frivolous oaths* are those that are so commonplace that they lose all significance or meaning. This would include taking an oath when it is not necessary or proper. When the drunken King Herod swore to the daughter of Herodias that he would give her up to half his kingdom because of her dancing (Mark 6:23), it was a frivolous oath. When she asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter, Herod felt bad, but because of his oath, he was unwilling to refuse her (Mark 6:26). Or, Jephthah foolishly vowed to sacrifice the first thing that walked out of his door when he returned from battle. When it happened to be his only daughter, he foolishly kept the foolish vow. He never should have made it in the first place and he should have broken it when it meant killing his daughter.

Often such frivolous oaths stem from pride. Herod wanted to look good in front of his dinner guests, so he couldn't go back on his oath, even though he felt bad about killing John. Sometimes we want to impress others with our spiritual commitment, and so we make a boastful vow. But vows should be reserved for the most solemn and important occasions, so that they really mean something when we make them. To take an oath in court, or to vow to be faithful to your mate at your wedding, or to vow to be faithful to the Lord at your baptism are examples of good vows.

Let me comment on the practice of a popular seminar teacher, who encourages his audiences to make a vow to read their Bibles at least five minutes per day. After explaining the importance of daily Bible reading, he warns them that it is better not to make a vow

than to make it and not keep it (Eccl. 5:5). Then he asks everyone who wants to make this vow before God to raise their hands. Is this a healthy spiritual practice? In my opinion, no! I think it fosters a legalistic approach to the Lord, and it heaps guilt on the person who fails. Such guilt isn't helpful in promoting a close relationship with the Lord. You should read your Bible as often as you can because you *want* to get to know the Lord better. But if you miss a day, just come back to it the next day and move on. I think that such spiritual vows tend to prop up the flesh, rather than promote love for God from the heart.

The other kind of oath that the Bible forbids is the *false oath*. A false oath is one that the person making it does not intend to keep, but he makes it either to impress or deceive others. Jesus and James were directing these commands toward these kinds of oaths. The Jews had elaborate rules, that if you swore by the temple, you weren't bound by your oath, but if you swore by the gold of the temple, you were bound. It was kind of like, "I had my fingers crossed, so I really didn't mean what I said."

If people said what they meant and meant what they said, there wouldn't be a need for any such oaths at all! The Jews of that day were just playing games with each other, but more importantly, they were not living with integrity on the heart level before God. You may be able to fool someone with a deceptive or misleading contract, where they don't understand the fine print. But you didn't fool God. He knows the thoughts and intents of your heart, and if you were practicing deception, the fact that you did it "legally" doesn't matter to God!

To sum up, the Bible does not prohibit all taking of oaths or vows, but it does restrict them to important occasions. When we do take an oath, we need to consider it carefully and prayerfully, and then we need to be conscientious to follow through. If we are unable to keep our word, we should confess it to God and to the person we have wronged. And, we should seek to make restitution in ways that reflect genuine repentance.

3. The real issue at stake is truthful communication.

In commenting on Matthew 5:33-37, Haddon Robinson (*The Christian Salt & Light Company* [Discovery House Publishing], p.

156) says with regard to the Sermon on the Mount, "If anger was the real issue of murder, lust the real issue of adultery, selfishness the real issue of divorce, then deceit is the real issue of oaths." He adds (p. 158), "Jesus wasn't addressing whether or not we should take an oath. He was talking about whether or not we are truthful.... We don't tell the truth because we have taken an oath; we tell the truth because we are truthful."

Truthful communication is essential for good relationships because truth is essential for trust. If you don't trust someone, you're not going to allow that person to get close to you. We lie or deceive others because we mistakenly think that it will hold the relationship together. So we rationalize bending the truth, thinking, "If she really knew the truth, she would never speak to me again." But that's like trying to fix a broken pipe with masking tape. You may slow the leak temporarily, but you're only delaying disaster. The pipe will burst and cause far more damage than if you had just fixed it properly when the leak was first detected.

If we practice deception in our marriages, we may preserve superficial peace on the surface, but beneath the surface, a volcano is building. When the truth is revealed, the volcano will erupt and cause far more damage than if we had honestly dealt with the root issues when they first came up. The same thing is true in rearing our children. If you deceive them, telling them one thing while you're living a lie, at some point they will see through your deception and they will reject the God you purport to follow. It's far better to live with integrity, confessing your sins and asking forgiveness of your family when you're wrong. If they see reality in your walk with God, they will be far more inclined to follow Him than if they see hypocrisy and deception in your life. So the root of truthful communication is walking truthfully before God, who sees your heart.

Here are a few ways that we can easily fall into deception and falsehood: (1) *The half-truth*: you tell the truth, but not all the truth. Abraham did this when he claimed that Sarah was his sister. She was his half-sister, but he didn't mention that she also happened to be his wife! (2) *The "white" lie*: these are the "innocent" lies that "don't hurt anyone." You call in sick to work when you're really well. (3) *The lie to cover for someone else*: "He's not in." (4) *Exaggeration*:

stretching the truth to make yourself look better or to evoke sympathy for your cause. (5) *The silent lie*: the other person assumes something flattering about you that is clearly false, but you don't speak up to correct it. (6) *The cover-up lie*: You hide your own wrongdoing with the rationalization that it would hurt the other person too much to find out the real truth. (7) *The evasive lie*: you change the subject or conveniently dodge the truth by not answering directly.

A boy was on the witness stand in an important lawsuit. The prosecuting attorney cross-examined him, then delivered, he thought, a crushing blow to the boy's testimony.

"Your father has been telling you how to testify, hasn't he?"

"Yes." The boy didn't hesitate with the answer.

"Now, said the lawyer triumphantly, "just tell us how your father told you to testify."

"Well," the boy said modestly, "Father told me that the lawyers would try to tangle me in my testimony, but if I would just be careful to tell the truth, I could repeat the same thing every time."

If Abraham lied about Sarah and David lied about Bathsheba and Peter lied about knowing Jesus Christ, then none of us are exempt from temptation to this sin. Work at becoming a person of truthful communication! James ends with a warning:

4. If we engage in boastful, deceptive speech or false oaths, we will fall under judgment.

Judgment is a significant issue for James. He just said (5:9), "Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door." He's talking to Christians ("brethren"), not to unbelievers.

How will Christians fall under judgment? Jesus said (John 5:24), "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." Paul wrote (Rom. 8:1), "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." So with regard to eternal judgment, those who have truly trusted in Christ do not need to fear.

But Paul warns the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:15) that we will be judged for our works: "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." He later (1 Cor. 11:32) explains to the same church that they needed to judge themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper so that they would not be judged: "But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world." That discipline can be very severe, including physical illness and even death (1 Cor. 11:30)!

Conclusion

William Barclay (*The Daily Study Bible, Matthew* [Westminster Press], 1:160) sums up Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33-37:

Here is a great eternal truth. Life cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved and in others of which he is not involved; there cannot be one kind of language in the Church and another kind of language in the shipyard or factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of standard of conduct in the Church and another kind of standard in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life, and kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life and every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in his name; he hears all words; and there cannot be any such thing as a form of words which evades bringing God into a transaction. We will regard all promises as sacred, if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God.

Or, as Gordon Clark put it (*A Christian Philosophy of Education* [Trinity Foundation], p. 158), "Since God is truth, a contempt for truth is equally a contempt for God." Don't be in contempt of God! Work at being a person whose yes means yes and whose no means no.

Application Questions

1. In what situations are you most susceptible to lying? How can you guard against this sin?
2. Do you agree that as a general rule, making vows is not a healthy way to grow spiritually? Why/why not?
3. When do we cross the line between being polite (but not totally truthful out of love) and deception?
4. Do we sufficiently fear the coming judgment of our works (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10-11)? Should we fear it?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.