



The Letter of James
Bible Study Session 14
James 5:12

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Greek NT

<5:12> Πρὸ πάντων δέ, ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ὀμνύετε μήτε τὸν οὐρανὸν μήτε τὴν γῆν μήτε ἄλλον τινὰ ὄρκον· ἦτω δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ Ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ Οὐ οὐ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπὸ κρίσιν πέσητε.

Die Gute Nachricht Bibel

12 Vor allem, meine Brüder und Schwestern, lasst das Schwören, wenn ihr irgendetwas beteuern wollt. Schwört weder beim Himmel noch bei der Erde noch bei sonst etwas. Euer Ja muss ein Ja sein und euer Nein ein Nein. Sonst verfallt ihr dem Gericht Gottes.

NRSV

12 Above all, my beloved, 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.

NLT

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned for it.

The Study of the Text:¹

Context of our passage:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT
 Of James²

PRAESCRIPTIO BODY		1.1 1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26
Controlling the Tongue	73-93	3.1-12
True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
Reclaiming the Wayward	194	5.19-20

Literary and Historical Setting:

The location of this pericope reflects again the randomness of so much of ancient paraenetic material. Added to that is that the material in James reflects bits and pieces of James' preaching ministry to Palestinian Jewish Christians in the middle of the first Christian century. Thus, randomness of position in a writing should not be overly surprising.

The passage does address the issue of speech, which James has repeatedly touched on through the letter:

James 5:12 (NRSV). 12 Above all, my beloved, 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 1:19 (NRSV). 19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to

¹With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

²Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

anger;

James 1:26 (NRSV). 26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

James 3:1-12 (NRSV). 1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

James 4:11-12 (NRSV). 11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor? James 5:9 (NRSV). 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

All of this underscores the importance of what we say as believers. Words matter!

A possible historical setting for this admonition by James may possibly lay in his efforts to protect Christians in Palestine from the temptation of the emerging Zealot warfare in the middle of the first century. Clearly an anti-Zealot stance was his point in 5:7-11 as he encouraged victimized believers to trust God's justice and not resort to physical violence in reaction to the injustices being dumped on them. A few commentators see in 5:12 an emphasis against oath-making that would place believers in some jeopardy from Herod and other Roman officials. Loyalty to Rome via formal oaths were often demanded by the officials. Pharisees and Essenes were exempted from having to make them, but not other Jews. These two groups were famous for their opposition and absolute refusal to swear allegiance to Rome.

But whether this is in James' view or not cannot be determined conclusively.

Exegesis of the Text:

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

172 above all,
 my brothers,
do not place yourself under any oath,
 neither under heaven,
 nor under earth,
 nor under any other oath;
 rather
173 **let your yes be yes**
 and
174 **--- your no -- no,**
 lest you fall under judgment.

Summary:

The rhetorical structure of this single sentence in the underlying Greek text is simple: a negative command (statement 172) followed by two positive commands (statements 173 and 174). The elliptical nature of statement 172 means that it could be diagrammed as four statements, but it seems better to diagram it as one. This is closer to the structure of the underlying Greek text. The nature of the admonition is to avoid making oaths under any circumstance.

The corrective ("rather") in statements 173 and 174 advocates integrity of speech, especially in regard to affirmations or denials. The warning expressed in the dependent clause is that to do any less is to risk divine displeasure in eschatological judgment.

1) Compare James 5:12 to Matt. 5:33-37. Describe similarities and differences between the two passages.

James 5:12		Matt. 5:33-37	
	above all,	^{5.33} Again	
	my brothers,	1 you have heard	that it was said by the ancients,
172	do not place yourself under any oath,		“Do not break your oath,
	neither under heaven,		but
	nor under earth,		keep your vows to the Lord.”
	nor under any other oath;	^{5.34} But	
	rather	2 I tell you	Do not swear at all:
173	let your yes be yes		neither by Heaven,
	and		for it is God’s throne;
174	--- your no -- no,	^{5.35}	neither by the earth,
	lest you fall under judgment.		for it is his footstool;
			neither by Jerusalem,
		^{5.36}	for it is the city of the Great King;
			neither swear by your head,
			for you cannot make one hair
			black or
			white.
		^{5.37} Instead,	
		3 let your word be yes yes, no no;	
		and	
		4 anything beyond this is of the Evil One.	

Which sections of both passages match one another?

List the distinctives of James from Matthew.

List the distinctives of Matthew from James.

2) Compare James 5:12 to the Mishnaic tractate Shevuoth 3.1.

Shevuoth 3.1:

Oaths are of two kinds, which are actually four kinds; they are

“I swear that I will eat,”

or

“I swear that I will not eat,”

or

“I swear that I have eaten,”

or

“I swear that I have not eaten.”

If one said, “I swear that I will not eat,” and he ate the smallest quantity, he is liable. This is the opinion of R. Akiba.”

In this Jewish exposition of different kinds of oaths, two basic categories of oaths are present: (1) the promissory oath which looks to the future with either a positive or negative promise, and (2) the assertive oath which looks to the past with either a positive or negative assertion regarding something that happened in the past.

Which part of James’ declaration relates to this ancient Jewish structure regarding oaths?

3) From Matt. 23:16-22 and Mark 7:10-12, describe what was the problem with oath-making in the first

Christian century?

Matt. 23:16-12 (NRSV). 16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’ 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, ‘Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.’ 19 How blind you are! 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 sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

Mark 7:10-13 (NRSV). 11 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God) — 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

4) But a larger interpretative issue is whether or not the Bible forbids making any oaths. Study the following passages for an answer.

Old Testament Teaching about Oath-Making:

Leviticus 19:12 (NRSV). 12 And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

Deut. 5:11 (NRSV). 11 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Deut. 6:13 (NRSV). 13 The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.

Exod. 22:10-11 (NRSV). 10 When someone delivers to another a donkey, ox, sheep, or any other animal for safekeeping, and it dies or is injured or is carried off, without anyone seeing it, 11 an oath before the Lord shall decide between the two of them that the one has not laid hands on the property of the other; the owner shall accept the oath, and no restitution shall be made.

Jeremiah 12:16 (NRSV). 16 And then, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, “As the Lord lives,” as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people.

Individuals and Oath-Making:

Angel of the Lord:

Genesis 22:16 (NRSV). 15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, 18 and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

God himself:

Hebrews 6:13-20 (NRSV). 13 When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, “I will surely bless you and multiply you.” 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. 16 Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. 17 In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, 18 so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. 19 We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

The Apostle Paul:

Romans 1:9 (NRSV). 9 For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers,

2 Corinthians 1:23 (NRSV). 23 But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth.

2 Corinthians 11:11 (NRSV). 11 And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

Galatians 1:20 (NRSV). 20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

Philippians 1:8 (NRSV). 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 2:5 (NRSV). 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:10 (NRSV). 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.

From both the teaching and the examples in the Bible, what can be concluded about the legitimacy of oath making?

Do these passages suggest that James 5:12 and Matthew 5:33-37 should not be understood as absolutely prohibiting any kind of oath-making?

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1. How easily does truthfulness come to you?
2. Do you always keep your promises? Especially, those made to God?
3. What would happen in our society if truthfulness began characterizing everyone's speech?
4. What is the impact when a believer in Jesus is not truthful?