**“Let your yes be yes and your no be no.”**

**James 5:12**

**“But above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you do not fall under judgment.”**

Good morning to you all. Please open your Bibles to the New Testament book of James. After a few weeks away today, we are returning to our primary book of study. We are in chapter 5 of the epistle and have entered the section of the epistle addressing how followers of Christ can apply the teachings that he has been sharing with them earlier in the letter. We have previously discussed the ways in which followers of Christ need to practice patience in their lives. James provided examples of the prophets and Job who were patient even though they went through tough times. These examples of patience show us that those who follow Christ show their faith is real when they patiently endure suffering just like they did. Today we are addressing the taking of oaths, vows and swearing in the name of God. This is a very broad topic because over the past 2,000 years there have been many different perspectives shared regarding the taking of oaths and swearing in the name of God. Today we are going to look closely at this topic by first outlining what Scripture says regarding oaths and swearing and then we will look at how the church has implemented this teaching in the past few centuries. Our goal as we discuss this topic is to understand what Scripture says regarding the topic and how we as the church can support each other in living out our faith.

Before we begin looking at this verse, we need to review quickly what we have learned so far in the Epistle of James. From the very beginning we have seen that the Epistle of James was written to believers in Christ who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The Apostle James was the half-brother of Jesus who began as an unbeliever in Jesus as being the Messiah. But, after he saw the risen Christ he became a follower of Christ and also a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. This transformation that James went through most definitely left a huge impression on him and he then began to take the new life he had in Christ very seriously. The goal of the Epistle of James is to encourage his readers to live the new life they have in Christ openly for others to see how a believer in Christ is different than the rest of society. James is not teaching that someone must live a good life and do good things to inherit salvation, he is arguing that a life changed by the Holy Spirit should be witnessed by the fruit being evidenced in that person’s life. We are now entering the final section of the epistle, which we could call the application section. For the next three messages we will discuss the instructions James gives to his readers showing them how they can live out their faith in Christ in practical ways.

Let’s begin by once again reading the verse together. **“But above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you do not fall under judgment.”** The first comment James makes is that this teaching is above all the most important section of the letter. Why is he saying this is above all? He is saying this because the main idea of the entire letter has been to teach that followers of Christ can show others, they have a real faith by living out what they profess. This teaching he is about to share is very important and so as we begin to discuss this today let us remind ourselves that James wants us to live out this teaching in our lives to show evidence of our salvation.

The first commandment James gives his readers is that they are not to swear by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. Before we move on let us first define what is meant here by swearing and oaths. In Greek the word swear is pronounced omnyō and means to affirm, promise, or threaten with an oath. This would be like someone making the statement “I swear on my mother’s grave that I am telling the truth.” In making this statement the person is saying that they are telling the truth, and they are willing to invoke the name of their mother to support that statement. Now, I do not want to be Mr. negative here but even if someone makes such a bold statement, they still could be telling a lie. If their mother has already passed away, what could they really be risking by making such a statement? They are not risking anything. So, we can conclude that making such an empty statement does not add any credibility to the swearing and is not worth saying. When James is commanding his readers not to swear this is what he is talking about. Swearing that you are telling the truth by adding something to support the claim is not helping to prove your truthfulness. The other point we need to make is that James is using swearing in the context of making oaths, not in the way we usually hear it referred to in the culture today. He is not discussing using profane language or being crude. That is another kind of swearing, which is also not edifying for a follower of Jesus.

He further commands that neither heaven nor earth should be invoked in that swearing. The reason this should not be done is because a follower of Christ should not have to add anything to their claim of telling the truth to make that statement more believable. Followers of Christ need to be so trustworthy that they only need to say they will do something, and their word should be enough to suffice the other party. If I have to say that I am being honest with you before I make a claim it might lead you to assume that there are times when I have not been honest with you. So, the first thing that we have learned in this verse is that if we desire to honor God with our tongue, we should never have to swear to be believed. Our character and the way in which we conduct our lives should be evidence to others that they can believe what we are saying.

So, what exactly is James teaching his readers regarding oaths? Let us first go back to the Old Testament book of Exodus chapter 20 and review the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20 verse 7 God commands the people not to use the name of the Lord in vain. This commandment has been interpreted many different ways over the years and there has been confusion on what this commandment actually means. When God gave the people this commandment, He was instructing them not to use His name in a hasty or trivial manner. For example, to use God’s name in a hasty manner would be to take an oath that you do not intend to follow through with. Sometimes people will invoke the name of a parent or something else that is valuable to them so that their oath is more believable. The name of God is holy and therefore it should not be used in a manner that does not reflect respect upon His name.

Now, what we need to discuss is what kinds of oaths and swearing are considered to be honorable to God according to Scripture. The first question we need to ask is, are oaths ever used in Scripture? The answer to that question is yes. There are many times in the Bible when oaths are taken and used in a responsible manner. Let us take a look at a couple of examples. In Exodus chapter 22 verses 10-11 we have one of the commands God gave to the nation of Israel regarding oaths. Here is the command ““If anyone gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep or any other animal to their neighbor for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before the LORD that the neighbor did not lay hands on the other person’s property. The owner is to accept this, and no restitution is required.” In this situation the person who lost an animal they were entrusted with needed to take an oath to swear that they were not the one who lost it. The oath is to be taken before the Lord meaning that it is being sworn in His name. Using the name of the Lord to take an oath means that the oath that was taken is being legitimized in His name. This is not considered to be a misuse of the name of the Lord.

One other example of the responsible use of oath taking is when God Himself made an oath with Abraham after he was willing to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. In Genesis 22:16-18 this is what God swears in His name to Abraham "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore ; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." We see that God swore this oath according to Himself meaning that He would follow through and that promise would be fulfilled by Him. What we see in these two instances is that oaths are appropriate when they are used in an honest manner. The only way that a sworn oath is to be made is through the name of God, not anything else. When God’s name is invoked in an oath the person making the oath is swearing that they will do exactly what they have sworn. If this was not carried out then the name of the Lord was used in vain resulting in a sin as well as violation of the law. We, as followers of Christ, are called to do the same.

The next part of the verse tells us that the best way to avoid taking oaths in a dishonorable manner. James writes that a follower of Christ should have their yes be yes and their no be no. The reason he has instructed this is because followers of Christ are called to be truthful in their interactions with others. If someone has integrity and is trustworthy then there is no need to swear or take oaths to convince others they are telling the truth. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the gospel of Matthew chapter 5. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus also teaches regarding oaths. In verses 33-37 Jesus says “Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes ' or 'No, no '; anything beyond these is of evil.” In this passage Jesus is teaching that swearing an oath is something that is to be taken so seriously that it is to be done only in special circumstances. We are commanded not to swear by anything under heaven or on the earth. We should be a people of such credible character that taking oaths or swearing should not be necessary. This is not easy to do, especially in a world where it seems that everything around us involves lying and deceit. Let us rise above that and act in a way that honors the God we serve.

Finally, in today’s verse James echoes the words of Jesus when he writes that we should not swear or take oaths in swearing by heaven or earth because doing so will cause us to fall under judgment. What he is reminding his readers is that those who use the name of the Lord in vain or continually show a lack of respect for God will be judged for that behavior. This is consistent with the teaching in this epistle that those who have a heart that has been changed by the power of God will not act in such a manner and will therefore not fall under God’s judgment. When Jesus was teaching the apostles about the day of judgment, He made the statement that every word said and action taken on this earth will be judged at the end of the age (Matthew 12:36). Also, the writer of Hebrews tells his readers that nothing is kept secret from God and that all people will are laid bare and before the eyes of God. One day every person will have to give an account of everything they have done (Heb. 4:13). Therefore, everything that we say and do is being witnessed by God and we need to take very seriously the things we say and do as a follower of Christ. As we conclude our time together today let us spend a few moments to discuss how we should apply the teaching of James in this verse.

1. The first application we need to take from this verse is that swearing oaths and making promises is something that is allowed according to Scripture. However, these oaths need to be taken very seriously and not in a hasty manner. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 20-21 Moses instructs the nation of Israel regarding oaths in this manner. “You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. He is your glory and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen.” Moses says that when a person swears by the name of the Lord and honors the oath that is sworn, that person brings honor to God. So, the first lesson we learn is that we need to be very careful with the oaths that we swear to abide by and when we make a promise according to the Lord that we honor that oath. This will show others that we honor the God we serve and look upon His name respectfully.

2. Our second application today deals with vows, which are an oath taken in the name of the Lord. One of the times in our lives when a vow is made is when we get married. Marriage vows are a very serious manner and need to be honored in a manner that shows God, we honor Him as well as our spouse. The way that vows in some marriage ceremonies have been diminished is troubling because we have seen in the culture today a view of marriage that has also been diminished. One such example is when Katie and I attended a wedding where the vows were for the couple to stay committed to each other for as long as love lasts, not until death. Unfortunately that marriage ended very quickly because their love did not last very long. If God is not the tie that binds that marriage together then it is doomed to failure. Last week when we were able to sing happy anniversary to the Cianciolas and this week the Andersons as well as the Brauns allows us the opportunity to celebrate the commitment that these couples have to each other under the sight of God. The way that marriages such as these honor God is they show others that the marriage vows that were taken have been taken very seriously and in reverence to God. Not only should we celebrate these marriages, but we should treasure them as examples of how we can honor God with the oaths and vows we take in His name. As I say this, I do know that not all marriages are able to stay together and there are situations when a marriage must end, but what James is showing us in this verse today is that when we take a vow or oath in the name of the Lord, we need to take it very seriously and do the best we can to honor the Lord in the way we carry it out.

3. The last lesson we can learn today is that we need to be careful about the oaths we take because we will be held accountable for the ways in which we use the name of the Lord. In our discussions and interactions, we should have our yes be yes and for our no to be no. Either we will agree to do something or if we do not feel we can fulfill a pledge we should answer no to it. It is better to say no and not hold ourselves to a standard we cannot fulfill rather than try to please others by saying yes when we have no intention of carrying out the promise or do not have the ability to do so. When we promise to do something for someone else let us take that promise seriously and do what we say we are going to do. Having credibility with others will show them that we not only value them as an image bearer of God, but we also honor the God we serve with our actions as well as our words. In everything we do may we acknowledge our God and reflect His love to those around us.

Today as we conclude, let us reflect on the ways in our lives that we have either honored or dishonored God with our words. Let us take the opportunities given to us to honor God who has given us every good and perfect gift that we have. Rather than make oaths we do not intent to see through, may we be people who live out our faith by being people with integrity who represent Jesus Christ in a way where others will want to know Him more. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit and with the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ can we accomplish this goal. As we say so often in our prayers, may we always give to our God the honor and respect that He so rightly deserves. Please join me in a word of prayer.