

Talking Truth  
James 5:12  
ABC 9/8/19

An article titled, *60% of People Can't Go 10 Minutes Without Lying*, begins with these words: *There are 2 things you can say for sure about human beings: our opposable thumbs make us great at using tools, & we are all big, fat liars. By age 4, 90% of children have grasped the concept of lying, & it just gets worse from there.*<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, that doesn't surprise you. It does get worse. According to *The Day America Told the Truth*, 86% of kids lie to their parents regularly, followed by friends (75%), siblings (73%), & 69% of spouses lie to each other.<sup>2</sup> Estimates say 40% lie on their résumés<sup>3</sup> & 90% of people lie about themselves in their online profile on dating sites.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we're all liars. Children lie to their parents & parents lie to their children. Husbands lie to their wives & wives lie to their husbands. People lie to their employers who in turn lie to them. Politicians lie to get elected & continue to lie once in office. People lie to the government & governments lie to us. Educators lie, scientists lie, & the media lies. Our society is built on a framework of lies, leading us to wonder whether our society would survive if everyone spoke the truth for just 24 hours. In Mortimer Adler's classic book, *How to Read a Book*, he says this:

*The question, 'Is it true?' can be asked of anything we read. It is applicable to every kind of writing.... No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved; by the same token, to criticize it adversely for its failure in this respect is to treat it with the seriousness that a serious work deserves. Yet, strangely enough in recent years, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in Western history, there is a dwindling concern with this criterion of excellence. Books win the plaudits of the critics & gain widespread popular attention almost to the extent that they flout the truth—the more outrageously they do so, the better.*<sup>5</sup>

Several years ago Rev Fred Holloman, chaplain of the Kansas Senate, prayed this:

*Omniscient Father: Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing, & the other just the opposite. & if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that, too. & if each side is telling ½ the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.*<sup>6</sup>

That we live in a world of lies should surprise no one familiar with the Bible, which calls unregenerate humanity children of the devil who is the father of lies (Jn 8:44). That basic

<sup>1</sup> <http://mentalfloss.com/article/30609/60-people-cant-go-10-minutes-without-lying> 5/7/12

<sup>2</sup> James Patterson & Peter Kim, p 48

<sup>3</sup> [www.forbes.com/2006/05/20/resume-lies-work\\_cx\\_kdt\\_06work\\_0523lies.html](http://www.forbes.com/2006/05/20/resume-lies-work_cx_kdt_06work_0523lies.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/C1597486-E7F2-99DF-310BFD76D5647B1D/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/C1597486-E7F2-99DF-310BFD76D5647B1D/)

<sup>5</sup> p 165

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ron Luce, *The Power of One: Stand Up, Be Counted, Make a Difference*

dishonesty has led us to use oaths in an attempt to get others to think we're being truthful. Both the simple oaths of children to the sophisticated legal contracts & peace treaties are necessary because of mankind's dishonesty.<sup>7</sup> We probably sin more with our tongues than in any other way. We can't do everything, but we can say anything. **5:7-20 PRAY**

Vs 12 is one of the vss in this book that isn't clear to many scholars as to how it's related to the context before or after. Many treat it as a one off thought of James that he throws in before getting to his concluding section in vss 13-20. But it may be that vs 12 is related to the vss after it more than some think. One way to look at it is that it's about speaking truth. Vs 13 also can be taken as speaking truth to God in prayer & singing truths about God back to Him. In vs 19, the end of this section says, **My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth...** So from beginning to end, this final section of the book of James is bracketed by *truth*. When James says **above all** in vs 12, that may indicate the importance level of this subject, or it may signal the final section of the letter, or both, like how Paul says, **finally, brothers** in other letters when he builds up to his final appeal & main reason for writing (2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thes 4:1; 2 Thes 3:1; Phil 4:8). For Christians, truth is of utmost importance. It's critical we speak the truth & let the truth pervade & inform all of our life. As you look around, you know there's a crisis of truth in our culture. Many don't even believe there is such a thing as absolute truth. Whatever is true for you is true, even if it contradicts the facts.

## **12**

God expects vows to be kept. Because oaths invoke God's holy name (Dt 6:13), they aren't to be taken lightly. Num 30:2 says **if a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth** (cf Ps 15:1-4). To fail to do so was to take God's name in vain (Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12). If we vow to love our wives, to be faithful unto them until death parts us, then we should keep those vows. If we make a promise to a customer, we should keep our word, even if it costs us. If we promise our children something, we should fulfill it. In our everyday communication, we should speak the truth. All of this is implicit in vs 12, which is simply saying, as believers, we must be

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<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *James*, p 263

truthful in our communication so we won't fall under judgment. To our culture, **do not swear** sounds like a command not to use swear words or profanity, but to the Jewish culture of 2,000 years ago that this is written to, this has to do with swearing to tell the truth. To understand James' words we must understand how the Jews of that day were using oaths. The Jewish system of swearing oaths had its roots in the OT. In a time when written contracts didn't exist, oaths served to bind agreements between people. To take an oath was to attest that what one said was true, to call God to witness to that, & to invoke His punishment if one's word wasn't kept. Obviously, this was a very serious matter. Oaths should've fostered truthful communication, but they'd actually become a smokescreen for lying. The Jews said 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 weren't bound to keep your word. Jesus confronts this in Mt 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 & blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? & '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 & by everything on it. & whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple & by Him who dwells within it. & whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God & by Him who sits upon it.**

All of creation is God's & we can't call up a part of it without ultimately referring to Him. All oath-taking which calls into witness people or items of God's created order actually calls God's name as witness. This was the situation behind Jesus' words in Mt 5:33-37.

**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 rabbinic tradition, God was only a party to an oath if His name were invoked. All other oaths, they taught, could be (& were intended to be) violated without committing perjury. Attempting to deceive others, many Jews would swear by something other than God. This was intentional to hide their lying hearts. The swearing of oaths had degenerated into a system which indicated when a man could lie & when he couldn't. Jesus says don't swear at all by those things. Just say YES or NO & mean it. Speak the truth always. That's some of the cultural baggage & background the original

readers of James grew up with. We all probably grew up with different phrases we considered especially binding. Things like:

*Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my \_\_\_\_\_*

*I swear on my mother's \_\_\_\_\_*

*I'll swear on a stack of \_\_\_\_\_*

It's been said that the more someone has to swear they're telling the truth, or say, *no, really, honestly, or for reals*, is more of an indictment on the person's usual lack of trustworthiness & truthfulness. James is saying, speak the truth to others all the time. Just say YES or NO. Your truthfulness as a pattern develops trustworthiness. You don't need to bring God into it or grandma's grave or a stack of Bibles or needles in eyeballs; just be truthful! Everyday speech, church speech, work speech, & courtroom speech are all to be the same: truthful!

**1. Be Truthful** Why does James say, **But above all**? Is not taking an oath or vow really more important than everything else James has written? 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 see it as summing up his line of thought on that subject, emphasizing that truthful speech undergirds everything else. Others say it's a phrase that just means, *finally, or in conclusion*. It could be James wants to highlight truthfulness because he sees it as getting at the ultimate issue of personal integrity & not being double-minded.<sup>8</sup> Some see no logical or thematic connection between this vs & the vss on either side of it. They view this section as a random jumble of exhortations with no flow of thought. But James has been dealing with both worldliness & 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); &, 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-

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, p 232

serving oaths. In the final part of this section (5:13-18), he'll show that true faith practices humility by depending on God through prayer. So the theme of humility ties chapters 4 & 5 together.

Oaths are necessary because lying for personal advantage comes naturally to us as sinners. In speaking of the depravity that's common to the human race, Paul says, **with their tongues they keep deceiving...** (Rom 3:13). You don't have to teach a little child to lie. No, you have to teach them to tell the truth, especially when it's seemingly not to their advantage to do so. & keep in mind, James isn't speaking here to those outside the church, but to believers he calls **my brethren**. Becoming a Christian doesn't automatically produce truthful communication. The Bible is full of exhortations to God's people to be truthful in word & deed. For example, Paul says we should be **speaking the truth in love** (Eph 4:15). A few vss later he writes, **Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another** (4:25). Peter, quoting Ps 34:12, says, **The one who desires life, to love & see good days, must keep his tongue from evil & his lips from speaking deceit** (1 Pt 3:10). Don't assume, 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. Are Oaths Wrong?** When James says, **Do not swear**, he's 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 they say is true. Your word should be true without needing to make a big deal about it. But the Bible does teach there are certain times when it's OK 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, Ex 22:10-11 & Dt 10:20 both command God's people to swear by His name. In Jer 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 NT, the only time that Jesus spoke in His trial before the Council was when the high priest said to Him, **I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God** (Mt 26:63). Jesus answered under oath. Paul often swore by the Lord when he said, **God is my witness** (Rom 1:9; 2

Cor 1:23; Phil 1:8; 1 Thes 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 & multiply him (Heb 6:13-14). The author of Hebrews goes on to say 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 (6:17-18).**

James himself counseled Paul to go along with other men in taking a vow & to be purified (Acts 21:15-26). We know it wasn't sinful when Jesus spoke under oath. We know it's not sinful when God swears by His own name, & commanded Israel to swear by His name. In the actual text of vs 12, it says not to swear either **by heaven or by earth or with any other oath**. **Other** means other of the same kind. James prohibits not official oaths, such as in courts, but the use of oaths in everyday talk to prove integrity. Christians should be totally honest, making oaths unnecessary. Truthfulness is the issue. Since God holds one to this standard, oaths are dangerous, for they make some speech more honest than other speech. Thus they must be avoided to keep deceptiveness from bringing God's judgment upon us.<sup>9</sup> There are occasions where a solemn oath or vow is appropriate to ensure the truth. What is forbidden are frivolous & false oaths. **A. Frivolous oaths** are ones so commonplace they lose all significance or meaning. This would include taking an oath when it isn't necessary or proper. When drunken King Herod swore to the daughter of Herodias that he'd give her up to ½ his kingdom because of her dancing (Mk 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 (6:26). 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. Vows should be reserved for the most solemn & important occasions, so they really mean something when we make them. To take an oath in court, or to vow to be faithful to your spouse at your

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, pp 189-191

wedding, or to vow to be faithful to the Lord at your baptism are examples of godly vows. The other kind of oath that the Bible forbids is the **B. false oath**. This is an oath the person making it doesn't intend to keep, but makes it either to impress or deceive others. Jesus & James were directing their commands toward these kinds of oaths. If people said what they meant & meant what they said, there wouldn't be a need for oaths at all. The Jews of that day were playing games with each other, but more importantly, they weren't 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 & intents of your heart, & if you're practicing deception, the fact that you did it *legally* doesn't matter to God! Again, James isn't forbidding solemn vows before God & witnesses to pledge love for better or worse till death. Because men tend not to always tell truth, the OT allowed oaths, but warned of breaking them or using them casually or rashly (Lev 5:4; Num 30:3-15). Better to never invoke God's name in a vow or to never swear at all than to make & break an oath or vow (Dt 23:21-23). When we do take an oath, we need to consider it carefully & prayerfully, & then we need to be conscientious to follow through. If we're unable to keep our word, we should confess it to God & to the person we've wronged, & try to make restitution in ways that reflect genuine repentance. In commenting on Mt 5:33-37, Haddon Robinson says,

*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, 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.<sup>10</sup>*

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 it will hold the relationship together. So we rationalize bending the truth, thinking, *if she really knew the truth, she'd never speak to me again*. But that's like trying to fix a broken pipe with duct tape. You may slow the leak temporarily, but you're only delaying disaster. If we practice deception in our marriages, we may preserve superficial peace on

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<sup>10</sup> *The Christian Salt & Light Company*, p 156, 158

the surface, but beneath the surface, a volcano is building. When the truth is revealed, the volcano will erupt & cause far more damage than if we'd honestly dealt with the root issues when they 1<sup>st</sup> came up. It's far better to live with integrity, confessing your sins & asking forgiveness when you're wrong. The root of truthful communication is walking truthfully before God, who sees your heart. ½ truths, white lies, exaggerations, silent & evasive lies are all still lies. As Christians, we may lapse into falsehood on occasion, but lying won't be the unbroken pattern of our life. The story's told about a boy 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 quickly answered.

*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 & Peter lied about knowing Jesus, then none of us are exempt from this sin. Work at becoming a person of truthful communication. People of integrity have no need to swear elaborate oaths to convince others of their truthfulness. Nor would they swear falsely to deceive people. Jesus lifted all conversation of His people to the level of sacredness. Believers are to be known as people who keep their word, having such integrity that their simple YES & NO will suffice. Speaking the truth in every situation will cause believers to shine forth in the darkness of a world of lies. James ends with a warning which serves as our...

**3. Motivation.** As motivation against swearing false oaths, James tells us the consequences of breaking them. Judgment is a significant issue for James. He just said, **Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door** (9). & remember, he's talking to Christians (**brethren**), not to unbelievers. How will Christians fall under judgment? Jesus said, **Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, & believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, & does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life** (Jn 5:24). Paul wrote, **Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** (Rom 8:1). So with regard to eternal judgment, those who have truly trusted in Christ

don't need to fear. But Paul warns the Corinthians that Christians 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** (1 Cor 3:15). He later explains to the same church that they needed to judge themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper so they wouldn't be judged: **But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world** (1 Cor 11:30-32). The sobering warning James gives here is that this is another test of living faith. Those whose lives are characterized by a pattern of lying give evidence of having an unregenerate heart. & the Bible teaches that liars, spiritual children of the father of lies (Jn 8:44), will be sentenced to hell (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15).<sup>11</sup> Jesus is **the way, the truth, & the life** (Jn 14:6), & those who repent & come to trust in Him as Lord find Him to be a Savior **full of compassion & mercy** (Js 5:11). We serve a God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18). Lying is NOT part of His personality. He does not lie because He cannot lie. If we claim to be His children, shouldn't we strive to live up to that high standard as well? Yet we must agree with James when he says, **we all stumble in many ways** (Js 3:2). We've all fallen short in this area. We've all made promises we didn't keep. We've all lied under pressure & said things we knew weren't true. We've fudged the truth, told little lies, played fast & loose with the facts, & we've done it again & again. What hope is there for any of us? The Psalmist considered the whole human race & then threw his hands up in despair, saying, **All men are liars** (Ps 116:11). He was right, wasn't he? We're condemned by our own deceit. If God requires honesty, who will ever stand in the presence of the Lord? Only one Man qualifies, the Lord Jesus Christ. He's the only honest Man who ever lived. He never lied, never stretched the truth, & never deceived. That's why we need Jesus. He spoke the truth because He is the truth. He never cursed, yet He was cursed by God the Father. He became a curse for us. He who never sinned became sin for us. He who never blasphemed was treated as a blasphemer. He died for the murderers who killed him. Recalling his career as a slave trader, John Newton called himself *the African blasphemer*.<sup>12</sup> The blasphemer was saved by the death of the One who died in his place. Do you believe this? Your only hope in

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<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, p 271-273

<sup>12</sup> [www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bnewton.html](http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bnewton.html)

life & in death is the cross of Jesus Christ. Run to the cross! Don't delay or say to yourself, *I don't deserve this*. No, you don't. That's why you should come now, come quickly, come while the door of heaven is still open to you. God saves liars. Jesus died for all of our ½-truths, exaggerations, & false & misleading speech. He died for people like us. All we have to do is come to Him by faith. Jn 1:14 says Jesus came to the earth **full of grace & truth**. To know Jesus is to know the truth. To follow Jesus is to follow the truth. To believe in Jesus is to believe the truth. To love Jesus is to love the truth. That's why truth-telling is so crucial for us. We know the truth, we've believed the truth, we've committed ourselves to following the truth. Therefore, we must become People of the Truth. William Barclay sums up Jesus' words in Mt 5:33-37 with this:

*Here is a great eternal truth. Life cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved & in others of which He is not involved; there cannot be one kind of language in the Church & another kind of language in the shipyard or factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of standard of conduct in the Church & another kind of standard in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life, & kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life & every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in His name; He hears all words; & 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.<sup>13</sup>*

*Since God is truth, a contempt for truth is equally a contempt for God.<sup>14</sup>* Don't be in contempt of God! Work at being a person whose YES means YES & whose NO means NO. What can we do to promote radical truthfulness in our lives?<sup>15</sup>

- 1) We must be sensitized to the horror of deception in the Body of Christ. It being a terrible sin is shown by the deaths of Ananias & Sapphira. The heart, as well as the mind, must not only accept this truth but welcome it.
- 2) We must remember that for Jesus, words are an outward sign of an inward condition. Jesus said, **For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks** (Mt 12:34; Mk 7:14-23). A continually truthful spirit will produce an increasing accuracy of speech.
- 3) We must understand we'll be judged by the words we say (Mt 12:36, 37).
- 4) By the work of the Spirit within us, we must appropriate the life of Christ in us so that His words become our words & so we'll speak the truth, for Jesus never lied, **nor was any deceit in His mouth** (Is 53:9).

<sup>13</sup> *The Daily Study Bible, Matthew, vol 1, p 160*

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*, p 158

<sup>15</sup> R Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, p 251

5) We must feed on the Word of God. Jesus' prayer for us is, **Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth** (Jn 17:17). When we discipline ourselves to feed on God's Word, we'll fill ourselves with truth, progressively producing what God desires, **truth in the inner parts** (Ps 51:6a).

6) It's from carelessness as much as intentional lying that so much falsehood abounds. We must be careful about what we say. If it isn't true, we ought to correct ourselves. If we've been giving the wrong impression, straighten it out.

As usual, James has minced no words: **12**

May God, help us to be people of the truth & be truthful in all our conversations.