

## Why Not Just Tell the Truth?

- James 5:12
- Here's a pop quiz for you. What is more serious than impatience? What is more dangerous than grumbling? I believe James would say, "Lying is more serious than impatience, and lying is more dangerous than grumbling." Because it gets to the ultimate issue of personal integrity. We are bombarded by lies on a daily basis. We hear lies on the radio, and on television. We read lies in the newspaper. We hear lies from our politicians. We are lied to by advertisers. And if we can be totally honest with ourselves, we tell lies, too. We lie to ourselves. We lie to each other. We even lie to God. George MacDonald, the famous writer and preacher from the 1800's said, "I always try - I *think* I do - to be truthful. All the same I tell a great many petty lies, things that mean one thing to myself and another to other people." That reminded me of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The March Hare says to Alice, 'you should say what you mean.' 'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know.' 'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!'
- Lying has become a way of life on Social Media. Someone said, "A lie can travel around the world while truth is still lacing up its boots." We see it in the media; we call it "fake news." We see it in politics, where every time a politician opens his mouth these days, there are 50 people who are fact-checking every word. Only because they have to! One President in the late 1990's said to his top aides that, quote, "There is nothing going on between us," and he was referring to his White House intern. Of course it came out that there was plenty going on, so when the President was asked before a grand jury to explain his statement that he had made to his top aides, he replied, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is. If the--if he--if 'is' means is and never has been, that is not--that is one thing. If it means there is none, that was a completely true statement." Go back 25 years before that President and you hear another President say at a press conference, "I am not a crook." Which of course, was a lie. Of course, we could spend the rest of our time here this morning cataloguing different lies uttered by current politicians, and all go home depressed.
- We see it in business. Just look up the term, "resume padding." That's where a job applicant makes claims about his education or accomplishments that aren't true. The same thing happens in sports. You remember the name George O'Leary? He is out of coaching now, but he was hired by Notre Dame in 2001 to be the head football coach. Five days later he was fired when it was discovered he had never received the Master Degree from NYU that he claimed on his resume, and that he had never played a single game of football at the Univ. of New Hampshire, much less the three years he said he had played!
- And sadly, we see it in the church. From pastors or elders who live a double life, to treasurers who lie about missing church funds, to people in the pews making excuses as to why they can't get involved, or show up on Sunday, or give, or pray, or be faithful to love the church Christ died for. You know what an excuse is, right? A skin of a reason stuffed with a lie.
- Maybe that's why James says, **Above all**, tell the truth. Let's look at two principles we learn from this text and others that are companions to it. First, say no to swearing. Second, say yes to truthfulness.
- **Say no to swearing**
- James is not speaking of taking the Lord's name in vain, here. But may I just throw something in for free? If you are in the habit of using God's name when you are not talking to Him or about Him, that's taking the Lord's name in vain, and I encourage you to ask the Lord to help you adopt a different habit? If you say, "Oh my God, you're very great," to quote from a song by Hope and a verse by the psalmist, that's one thing. But when somebody says, "You know, so-n-so is going out with what's-his-face" and you say, "Oh my God!" that's quite a different matter. A matter which I am pretty sure MY God takes seriously. Honor Him in your speech. Don't be careless with His name, the name that is above every name, the name that Jesus taught us to pray to as hallowed, the name that makes demons tremble. Don't take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- James IS speaking here about invoking the name of God, or anything else, in an oath, to guarantee that what you say can be trusted. Now the Jews to whom James was writing were very careful, as were their forebears, about not using God's name in an oath. But they had no problem in swearing to something by using phrases like, "by my beard" or "by my house," or, "May I never see my children's children if I don't..." And as we see in this text, and in Matthew 5, many would swear "by heaven," or "by earth itself!" or "by Jerusalem." Compare Matthew 5:34-37 to James 5:12, and you see that James is using almost the exact construction on this principle as his older brother. **(Slide with comparison)**
- Let's look at **Matthew 23:16-22** to understand this more clearly. Do you see the point? The Pharisees were making oaths that they knew they would never keep. They could come back later and say, "Oh, I swore to you by the temple, but not by the gold in the temple." Or the altar but not by the gift on the altar. Jesus says, in this passage and in Matthew 5, you cannot swear by anything in creation because it is all God's and it is all under God's authority, including the hairs on your head and you cannot control whether they turn gray or white or just give up the ghost and fall out! Remember the games we played as children, where we would cross our hearts and hope to die? Or we would pinky swear. Or we would say, "I was crossing my fingers. I don't have to do what I said I would do because I had my fingers crossed!"
- What James and Jesus are both commanding here is that the integrity of our character should be such that our word should not require an oath in order to be trustworthy. Now many people immediately want to take this to a civil question of whether we should put our hand on a Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Since Jesus said we should not swear an oath, isn't He also including taking an oath as a witness in a trial? Taking an oath to become a juror? Or to take a political office? There have been groups of people, like the Anabaptists, the Moravians, the Quakers who took this as a blanket prohibition of all oaths. Most biblical scholars don't believe that's the application James or Jesus would have for us. The concern was not to take an oath to tell the truth, which Paul does often in his letters: "But I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth." (2 Cor. 1:23) The admonition, the warning is to never use an oath in order to *avoid* telling the truth. To promise something with an oath that you never intend to do. Instead, James says, and Jesus says,
- **Say Yes to Truthfulness**
- Jesus said, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.' James said, "Let your 'yes' be yes, and your 'no' be no. Tell the truth. Don't lie. Proverbs says, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord." (Prov 12:22) Paul said in Colossians 3:9, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices" That's interesting, isn't it? We learn from very young how to practice at lying, to become skilled at it, but when we come to Christ, we are to put away that practice. Paul also said, "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth to his neighbor, for we are members one of another." (Eph. 4:25) To lie to a brother or sister is to harm yourself, for we are members of the same body.
- Now there are relativists in our culture who want to treat truth like a plaything, a mirage. These are the ones who say, "There is no Truth with a capital T. There is only little-t truth, which is a construct. Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth." I would say to them, your life proves that you don't believe that. Because when you get your Duke Energy bill and the company has inadvertently added a zero, you call them up. You say, "You have made a huge mistake. The power bill should have been \$175, but you charged me \$1750!" You don't expect them to say, "Hey, \$175 is your truth, but \$1750 is our truth. Pay the bill or lose your power." No, and it's the same when you go to the doctor to talk about your MRI. You don't want him to tell you his truth with regard to the results. "Well, the MRI shows a huge mass in your pancreas, and conventional wisdom says we need to aggressively treat that or you will not be here next year at this time. But my truth is that you are fine. Forget about it. Live happy. It's probably nothing, in fact I am sure it is." No, the relativist trashes his own doctrine at that point and demands the objective truth.

- Our eternity depends on the truth of the Gospel. We believe it, not because it feels good or we like its outcome better than the outcome presented by other faiths. We believe in it because it is true. CS Lewis said, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'
- In the same way, our integrity stands upon our truthfulness. Our character is who we really are, not who we pretend to be or wish we could be. So, what are some applications?
- **First, our word should be as utterly trustworthy as a signed legal document.** The old guys used to say, "My word is my bond." It must be.
- **Second, use few words.** Simply say, "yes," or "no." The more we pad our yes or no with extra words, the more suspect our answer is. Look sometime at Peter, being accused of being a follower of Jesus when the Lord was on trial. With each denial, Peter used more words, even swearing an oath and cursing the third time he lied and denied.
- **Third, speak the truth to your spouse.** When trust is eroded because of lies and deceit, there is trouble. The only way out of the trouble is to re-establish trust, which takes time. Start with repentance. Then follow that with truth-telling. Men, if you tell your wife you are going to do something this week: read your Bible, work hard at your job, pray with her, spend time talking with her about your day, do it. Wives, the same applies to you. Keep your word.
- **Fourth, speak the truth to your our children.** Broken promises to a child do much greater damage than we can ever imagine. If you tell your son you're going to take him fishing this Saturday, and something comes up that you cannot get out of, well, that happens. And our children are very forgiving. But if something "comes up" 6 Saturdays in a row, then you have broken your word. Repent, ask your son's forgiveness, and then take him fishing. Our children want to trust us, and they naturally do. We must not damage that.
- **Fifth, children must learn to speak the truth.** Do what you say you are going to do. I heard a true story last week about a student at Westminster College who got two packages in the mail from his mom. One was a care package, filled with goodies. The other was filled with the household trash. The note said, "Son, here is the trash you promised to take out before you went back to school." Listen, young people. On a more serious note, don't live a double-life. Tell the truth to your parents. Your character, and in some ways, their joy, is connected to your truthfulness. John wrote, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." He was speaking of spiritual children, but the same applies to our physical children!
- **Sixth, speak the truth in the workplace.** There's little that is more frustrating on the job than a shirker, a person who says he's going to do his job but never does. Don't be that guy.
- **Seventh, speak the truth in the church.** Many have joked that King David must have been in the middle of a building campaign when he said, "All men are liars." But we don't have to look much past the birth of the church to see the seriousness with which God takes lying in the body of Christ. Acts 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, whom God struck dead because they lied to the elders about their giving. Some would say, that's a little bit harsh, isn't it? At least they were giving! But God demonstrated in that one act that deception in the church is deadly poison, and at the very least, it will keep people from growing up. Paul said, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ." (Eph. 5:15) Maybe that's why James follows up encouragement to tell the truth in verse 12 with, "so that you may not fall into condemnation." And Jesus ended His admonition about truth-telling with, "anything more than this comes from evil." And we need to be reminded also of what God spoke to John in **Revelations 21:6-8**
- Saints, we must do this: Let our yes be yes and our no be no. Let's pray now for more grace.