



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Yes or No Should Do

James 5:12

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Introduction

1. I know her to generally be a person of integrity and character and tell this only to show how easily a cherished principle can be compromised.
 - a. A form signed by an elder or preacher entitled families to receive a tuition discount at the Christian school our kids attended if they were members of that congregation.
 - b. My friend called for a friend of hers who needed a form for her daughter, a new student. She was not a member of our congregation. So, my friend, who was, asked if I would sign the form. She assured me the woman fully intended to identify with us, just hadn't yet done so. I declined (and the woman never placed membership).
2. I don't think my friend would lie to me, i.e., tell me a known falsehood. She is one of those people who seldom leave you to wonder where you stand with her. But, whether from a desire help her friend, a moment of weakness, or because she just did not understand the implications of her request (the form affirmed membership in a specific congregation, not being a member at large), her request belied the integrity a Christian should exhibit.
3. Her case is relevant because James is dealing with the same theme in 5:12.

Body

I. Some Questions About Our Text.

- A. Understanding how 5:12 fits is one of the biggest challenges in interpreting James.
 1. Does it fit the context, or is it an isolated saying that has been inserted here?
 2. If it fits the context, how does it fit?
 - a) Does it go with 5:7-11, another example of behavior that could leave the oppressed believers subject to God's judgment?¹
 - b) Does it go with 5:13-18, the first of a series of closing exhortations?
 - c) Does it link what precedes with what follows, "a bridge between the passive command to persevere patiently without grumbling (5:7-11) and the active command to persevere in prayer (5:13-18)"?²

¹ The ASV and NASB are clearer here, translating κρίσιν (*krisin*) as "judgment", consistent with the rendering of the cognate words in v. 9; KJV is also basically consistent, though choosing a form of "condemnation" in both verses.

² Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 245.

3. What is the significance of the words, “above all” (πρό πάντων, *pro pantōn*)?
 - a) Is verse 12 intended to put the finishing touch on the preceding teaching?
 - b) Is it the way James introduces his final summation of things to remember, a literary device common to epistles of the day?³
- B. Of greater significance is determining what James intends by referring to oaths.
 1. Like Jesus (Matt. 5:33-37), James goes further than Judaism typically did in absolutely prohibiting oaths.⁴
 - a) Leviticus 19:12 required only that one not swear by God’s name falsely.
 - b) Exodus 22:10-11 commanded the taking of an oath in a matter of dispute.
 - c) Deuteronomy 4:31 and 7:8 are examples of God swearing an oath.
 - d) The prophets warned the people about taking oaths lightly, but did not forbid them (Zech. 5:3-4; Mal. 3:5; cf. Jer. 5:2; 7:9; Hos. 4:2).
 - e) Between the testaments, warnings issued were “against oaths whenever possible to prevent their frivolous use (Sir. 23:9, 11)” (Davids, 189).
 - f) Even in Matthew 5:33-37, the backdrop was what “was said to those of old” and the emphasis on false swearing (from Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21).
 2. The New Testament shows a similar range of use.
 - a) Several texts use “oath” (ὀμνύω, *omnyō* - 5:12) to refer to oaths God took (Luke 1:73; Acts 2:30; Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:3; 6:13, 16; 7:21).
 - b) When called upon to answer “under oath,” Jesus did not appear to hesitate (though admittedly, he did not use the word) (Matt. 26:63).⁵

II. The Problem with Oaths.

- A. Matthew 23:16-22 expands on 5:33-37 and shows what concerned Jesus and James.
 1. In 16-19, Jesus challenges their game playing with oaths, an apparent attempt to sidestep misuse of God’s name while leaving room to get out of a commitment.
 2. Verses 20-22 show the absurdity of their games in theological terms.
- B. Matthew 5:34-37 deals with the same problem and exposes it in practical terms.
 1. Verses 34-35 state the problem in broader terms than 23:16-19.
 2. Verse 36 declares that oath taking makes no difference with regard to reality.
 3. Verse 37 declares what should result: don’t use unneeded oaths; be honest.
 4. James 5:12 is an abbreviated statement of the same point in terms that show he has the same problem in view (“heaven, . . . earth or by any other oath”).

III. The Issue is Honesty.

- A. James was concerned with voluntary oaths being used to get out of keeping commitments instead of cementing them.

³ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries, 230-234.

⁴ See McCartney, 245. Note that “some Jewish groups, notably the Essenes, totally prohibited oaths except those of initiation into the group or of properly constituted court procedures. . .” (Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 189).

⁵ Of further interest is that Paul sometimes called on God as a witness to some point he made (2 Cor. 11:11; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10; Phil. 1:8; cf. Rom. 1:9; Gal. 1:20; 2 Cor. 1:23). Though some question whether this witness formula fits the category of an oath (see Moo, *The Letter of James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 175), Paul’s intent in such texts is to invoke a higher authority for the point he affirms.

1. Weaseling out of a commitment was simply a different form of one of the sins of the oppressive landowners whose actions set the theme for vv. 1-11.
2. Like Jesus, James affirmed that people of integrity do not require such games.
3. Practically, only such honesty would allow the community to function.
 - a) "... in a culture dependent on and dominated by oral speech for communication, the intrusion of an intent to deceive pollutes society at its very source."⁶
 - b) An oppressed community would especially need to know they could trust.
- B. In a world of so much duplicity, and games to further it, we need to hear James.
 1. We should ask what we think we need to prop up our commitments and why.
 2. We should check to be sure we are not fooled into playing similar games that allow us to be even a little less than completely honest (as if that is possible).
 - a) Being concerned not to use the word "swear" while using synonyms ("promise," "affirm") to do exactly what the Pharisees did.
 - b) Reacting with outrage against anyone who tells a bald-faced lie, but thinking nothing of phrasing things in ways that give us an out.
 - c) Decrying the lack of integrity of our world while justifying some practices as "the way business is conducted" or "things are done."
 - d) Acting like a half-truth is not corrupted by the half-lie that's part of it.
 - e) Justifying deceptive actions with "creative" loopholes that even the world knows are dishonest ("returning" items never intended to be kept; using a tax privilege designed for an organization for personal benefit).

Conclusion

1. James's readers also lived in a world where there were various shades of dishonesty. He gave no quarter: to have unwavering faith in God, no pretense or duplicity is allowed.
2. Only one course is acceptable: "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no." To do otherwise is to "fall under [God's] judgment" (NASB).

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⁶ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 218, summarizing a point from Paul S. Minear, "Yes or No: The Demand for Honesty in the Early Church," *Novum Testamentum* 13 [1971]: 1-13.