

## 29. The Sin of Swearing

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*Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.*

*(James 5:12)*

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### Using Oath Formulas

In the process of the maturing of our faith, how we speak is very important. As we know, James has focused on the sins of the tongue, the way we speak or should speak, at various times throughout his letter. I find it remarkable that in 5:12, he again focuses on this matter. He approaches it from a different angle perhaps, but he still revisits the sins of the tongue. Could it be that there is already a message in the frequency of James’ focus on this particular point? Our greatest and most constant sins are those of the tongue, how we speak about others or to them.

Nowadays, a suspect in an assault or murder case can be identified by DNA testing. DNA is an exact indicator as to who perpetrated a crime. A suspect can deny time and again that he did it, but DNA testing does not lie. In the same way, we can tell if someone is a Christian first and foremost by the way he speaks. Our language is a sure indicator of whether we really love the Lord and his people.

I know that we can mask our intentions in smooth words. In this sense, the DNA example does not fit. Sooner or later, however, our speech always betrays us. Our language —what and how we speak— eventually lifts the veil of hypocrisy under which we can hide for a long time. The mouth will reveal the depths of the heart.

Remember that there was much strife among the Christians to whom James originally addressed his letter. The churches had as members a large number of Christian Jews who still carried much Judaist baggage with them. Part of that baggage included the custom to speak in strong terms, using all kinds of oath formulas while avoiding the use of the Lord’s name.

Our Lord Jesus Christ had already addressed this matter in the “Sermon on the Mount”. We noted earlier the many lines that run from James’ letter to that sermon. Here again there is a connection. James remembers quite well

what the Lord Jesus said in that sermon, and he applies it to the churches of his time many years later.

Some have explained both passages in an absolutist sense, saying that we may never swear an oath under any circumstances. But that is not what the Lord Jesus or James means. I refer to the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Lord's Day 37) on this point, where we read that we may not constantly and needlessly swear oaths.

Our Lord was most concerned with pseudo-oaths, that is, swearing by the temple or the hair of one's beard. This was a typical Jewish custom. The Jews did not swear by God's Name, but by all kinds of other things. If I understand it properly, that is not James' concern in 5:12. He is addressing the sin of swearing (using God's name, indeed) against one another in the church.

### **Of Key Importance**

James 5:12 is part of the section where we are admonished to be patient. We may not grumble against each other, but we must be patient and learn endurance. James ends this section with the words, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear..." The original word translated in the NIV as "above" means "before", in the sense of first and key importance.

"Above all." Is this an admission that we are sometimes not so patient and long-suffering, and that we do not persevere as we ought? I mean here, as does James, patience with respect to one another. To swear is to call upon God. I do not think that these people were calling upon God to bless their neighbor, but to condemn him. People were becoming angry with each other, developing grudges against each other, and then swearing against them. This has nothing to do with official oaths taken before a magistrate or judge, but it has everything to do with how we treat each other in the church.

Swearing was common in the time of James. The Jews did it all the time, and in every way. The Jewish Christians were quite accustomed to it as well. The Greeks and Romans constantly called on all their gods. I read somewhere that there was an "extraordinary amount" of oath taking in that age, to the point where also secular Jewish and Gentile scholars warned and wrote against frequent oath taking.

Notice how James mentions heaven and earth here, in that order. The strongest oaths are those in which heaven (God or his angels) is called to witness or to act. Then there are the oaths that involve a pleading on earthly rulers or matters. In both cases, the effect is the same: we use an oath formula to condemn others and promote our own cause. We may think that if heaven is not

involved, the oath is less serious, but the point is that in both cases the language is needlessly fortified

In James' time, people spoke often and easily in capital letters with exclamation marks. They made a habit out of this. Their language was invariably fortified with oaths, imprecations, and other forms of cursing. I myself once received a letter in which all kinds of words were capitalized and there were exclamation marks, sometimes several, at the end of every other sentence. I threw it out without reading it. If people write in this manner, how do they speak? If we write or speak in this manner, we must stop. It is not only irritating, but also wrong.

"Above all, my brothers." It is the bottom line in the church. We may not randomly call God in, or condemn others in the name of the Lord. We may not deal with our brothers and sisters as people in the world deal with each other. The maturity of faith means that our speaking (and writing, in this era of instant messaging and email) becomes sanitized, simple, and sincere.

### **How Do We Speak to Each Other?**

Note that James is not concerned with the world but with the church. This is happening in the church of Christ. Are we like the world in this respect? Strong language with curses and expletives is not just found outside, but also inside the church. I do not think that we are any better in this respect than the Christians of James' time.

Swearing is in fact a form of intimidation. All strong language has the effect of intimidating others. We can speak of verbal aggression or even verbal assault. Perhaps we may never lay a hand on another person, but the words we use can be like knives that cut deep and leave terrible wounds and lasting scars.

How do we speak to each other? With this question, I assume that there is communication. There can sometimes be no communication, and we can give one another the "silent treatment". Sometimes, when I ask how relations are within the church or even within families, I hear, "Oh, we're not on speaking terms anymore." Is this normal? Of course not, for as with every relationship, the church depends on communication and fellowship in order to function. Giving each other the "silent treatment" is sometimes the same as condemning each other.

And when we do speak, what do we say and how do we say it? When our frustration level rises dramatically and suddenly, we can burst out and say things that are simply unacceptable in God's ears and destructive in human ears. In Proverbs 15:1, we read, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh

word stirs up anger.” How do we speak and answer? We must always keep in mind that the response of the hearer often depends on what we say and how we say it.

Through the years, I have come to suspect the introduction, “With all due respect,” because a scathing indictment and a list of heavy complaints usually follows. Whether the words are justified or not, they are presented in such a one-sided way that they are bound to elicit an angry response. “With all due respect” often means that there is very little or no respect, and that can be heard in what is said and how. “A gentle answer turns away wrath,” says the LORD, who is himself long-suffering. We must remember this in every aspect of life, in the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, teachers and students, and also office bearers and members of the congregation.

## **Yes and No**

Now James does not leave it at this. There is another side to the coin, as the Lord Jesus also explained in the “Sermon on the Mount”. James also writes, “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No,’ no, or you will be condemned.” This means that we are to be known and esteemed as truthful people. When we promise something with a simple yes or no, we do it. That one word should be sufficient because we are -and are known as- truthful, trustworthy people.

The words “yes” and “no” are used often in daily life. Some always say, “Yes,” and others mostly say, “No.” Children generally know exactly which parent to go to if they want something. But the point is that a simple yes or no should be sufficient because we are known to be truthful and trustworthy.

For example, if we make a promise in the church, such as at baptism, profession of faith, or marriage, we simply say, “I do.” This is not an oath, but given the place and situation, a vow. A vow is a promise before God and his people. It may have the ring of an oath, and function as such, but it is a simple yes. That is enough.

The point is that when we say, “Yes,” we have to do it. When we say, “No,” so it shall be. If we constantly waffle on what we have promised, we cannot build up fellowship or foster trust, and we will be condemned, as James writes. We must understand this clearly. If we condemn others or if we do not keep our simple word, we also will be condemned. We cannot break our promises on a constant basis and then think lightly about it, for the Lord takes this very seriously. By writing that we will be condemned, James means that we will be proven wrong in a specific conflict. He may not mean here —as some explainers suggest— final judgment and eternal condemnation, but I suggest that he

words it very strongly for a reason: God does not accept it when we break our word, and it can lead to final condemnation. Let us not minimize the seriousness of James' words.

Here we all come into a conflict, perhaps a conflict of conscience. I am sure that all of us have experienced situations more than once where we said we would do something, but did not do it. We can find all kinds of explanations for this, but there are no real excuses. Is our "yes" *always* yes and our "no" *always* no?

Then we must distinguish between willful negligence and circumstantial inability. Sometimes we have said we will do something, but other things stand in the way or our circumstances do not allow it. We need to explain this, then, to one another. It is another matter when someone easily makes commitments, knowing full well that he does not plan to keep any of them. The one excuse follows after the other, but it is pure negligence on his part.

### **We Must Be Trustworthy**

We must be trustworthy. We must do what we have agreed to do, at all times. That is the general reputation we should have, in the church first, but also in our community. Then when there is an exception to the rule, others do not have to become terribly upset because it was indeed an exception.

When we make a commitment, we must fully intend and strive to meet that commitment. We cannot take it lightly, for then we may cause hurt to others. This danger is also present when we spread ourselves out too thinly: we promise all kinds of things, but cannot get around to doing half of them because of time constraints or lack of energy.

This is especially true in the case of people who lead busy lives. There is a saying that goes something like this: "If you want something to get done, ask a busy person to do it." Sometimes, we can have so many things on our agendas and so much on our minds that we throw up our hands and toss in the towel. We wind up doing nothing. It is therefore important not to commit ourselves to doing something that we know we will probably not be able to achieve. It is hard to say no sometimes, but if we are too busy, that is exactly what we must say.

There must be consistency between what we say and what we do, so that we can depend on one another and there will be peace. We must realize that we live in a world that is radically deceptive. Deception is common to all people. It is so easy to tell little lies, to embellish the truth, to make ourselves look

better, to withhold important information, or to pretend to be someone we are not for the sake of public opinion and esteem.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira seems so small and trivial, a slight deception (Acts 5:1-11). But the Lord made it clear that he would not tolerate it. Their sin was not a matter of deceiving people, but of lying to God. Theirs was a special situation, but it does give a general message: in the church where the Holy Spirit lives, we must be truthful and we cannot pretend to be giving to the Lord when in fact we are not. The Lord himself did not deceive anyone, but always kept his Word. He did not raise false expectations, but did what he promised, even when this meant dying as a criminal on the cross.

He is our righteousness. He is also our example. James remembers the words of our Savior well: do not swear, and let our “yes” be yes and our “no” be no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Lying and deceit is the proper, typical work of the devil, as our *Catechism* also mentions.

We should be able to count on one another, as we together can count on our Lord Jesus Christ. Being truthful and faithful belongs to being mature in faith. Let us all strive for this. Then we will not enter into condemnation, but be acquitted by him who is the truth, the faithful witness, our Lord Jesus Christ.