

Honest to God . . . and Everyone Else!

Endurance Part 3

James 5:12

The news media recorded and repeated the rather interesting prayer of the chaplain of the Kansas Senate several years ago. It went like this: Omniscient Father; Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing, and the other just the opposite. And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that, too. And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together. In Jesus' name Amen.ⁱ

According to some poll figures I read recently,

- 86% lie regularly to their parents
- 75% lie to their friends
- 73% lie to their siblings
- 69% lie to their spouses
- 43% lie about their jobs.

A twin sister of dishonesty is cheating, which according to one report is absolutely rampant in the work force and on the college campus. High tech offenses include using information from the Internet without proper attribution, buying term papers from on-line paper mills, and sharing answers and course work via e-mail.ⁱⁱ

I found it interesting that my daughter's former High School—having graduated this week—before they turned in their term papers they had to go to turnitin.com, establish an account and upload the paper. It would literally spit back the percentage of potential plagiarism.

Another sibling of dishonesty and cheating is stealing. According to one study by the American Management Association, U.S. businesses annually lose over 10 billion dollars to employee theft, commercial bribery and another 4 billion to embezzlement. The U.S. department of Commerce

estimates that at least 1/3rd of all business that fail to survive can be traced to employee crime.

And part of the challenge today in business is hiring people who've actually told the truth on their resumes.

According to one organization, 53% of people being interviewed for jobs nationwide have been caught in at least 1 lie on their resume, lying about their former salary; their education; their past experience, etc.

One rather famous case of lying on a resume was the former football coach of Notre Dame. He was hired in 2001 and served all of 5 days before the truth came out. He had claimed to have a master's degree in education from New York University, even though he actually never graduated from the college program. He had also claimed to have played for the college football team and earned three letters while doing so. The truth was, even though he was on the football team, he never once played in a game.

The Wall Street Journal discovered the CEO of Lotus Corporation exaggerated his military record, never really earned a Ph.D. from Pepperdine University, and although he claimed to be an orphan, his parents were alive and well. He resigned, but was soon hired as the chief executive officer of another corporation, to whom, it evidently didn't matter.

And this stuff happens among Christians too, right?

Only recently, the dean of an evangelical seminary was exposed as having lied about his background and was demoted.

Chuck Swindoll included in one of his books I was surfing through recently the story of a preacher who was going to preach on the subject of honesty on

the following Sunday and he told his congregation to prepare for it by reading Joshua chapter 25. On the next Lord's Day, he began by announcing his theme of honesty and then asked, "Who read Joshua chapter 25 sometime during this past week?" Half the hands in church were raised. He said, "Wonderful, you're the ones I want to preach to today. Joshua only has 24 chapters."ⁱⁱⁱ That's just not fair.

The truth is, your faith does not automatically guarantee the truth.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, you've discovered that this is a lifetime of rejecting the sin nature which is fallen, aligned with Satan who is the father of lies whose native tongue is lying (John 8:44).

This is a lifetime of reinforcing the new nature, redeemed and aligned to the Spirit who is source of truth who calls us to be honest to God . . . and everyone else.

The Apostle James no doubt reflected on his early childhood growing up with 3 other boys and at least 2 sisters born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus was born fulfilling the prophecy and requirement of a virgin birth.

All these kids grew up with their half-brother, Jesus, and only later I imagine, James would have reflected on the fact that his half-brother had always been honest.

Have you ever thought about that? That must have been tough on the other kids. Anything happen while Mary and Joseph were away, all they had to do when they got home was to ask Jesus if anybody disobeyed. They didn't stand a chance.

I remember my 3 brothers and I conspiring together while mom and dad were gone. Okay, here's the story we'll tell them. Everybody got it?

Two of us are in the ministry today . . . I'm not sure what that means. But I really did graduate from Dallas seminary.

I have the bad grades to prove it.

In his closing comments, James, the Apostle is going to issue a radical call to honesty. Your endurance will depend upon it. Dishonesty will sideline you and discredit the testimony of Christ.

Honesty might not make life easier, but it will make you deeper, your conscience cleaner, your testimony more dependable, and your promises more reliable as you honor and please Christ.

In the letter from James, at **chapter 5 and verse 12**, James seems to pull off the cart path for a moment to specifically drive home this necessary ingredient to spiritual endurance—to staying on

course which is being honest to God and everyone else.

He writes in **verse 12, *But above all, my brethren, 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 may not fall into judgment.***

You'll find in this verse something you're not supposed to do and something you're supposed to do followed by a warning.

1. Negative Command

James writes, "My brethren, do not swear . . ." and you might think that James is commanding that Christians not to say bad things such as using foul language or repeating four-letter words as soon as you've learned them.

That's not what James is referring to here, although a Christian certainly shouldn't have a dirty mouth. There are other verses for that, like Ephesians 5:4 where the believer is told not to use filthy language or even to tell dirty jokes called coarse jesting which, Paul wrote, is not fitting for the believer.

What James is referring to here is the making of an oath.

Now, the Jewish audience to whom James was writing would have immediately understood what James meant.

We have to take a few minutes and track back to the Old Testament system of swearing oaths in order to accurately understand what James means.

And let me say up front, the misinterpretation of this verse created an interesting practice among the Anabaptists and later on, the Moravians and Quakers, who interpreted this to mean that you should never make a vow or swear an oath which could include, depending on how they are worded, wedding vows, an oath of commitment at an ordination ceremony or swearing an oath to tell the truth in a court of law.

This text in James 5 along with Jesus' own commands in His Sermon on the mount, a sermon by the way that weaves its way into this letter from James in wonderful ways. James 5 and Matthew 5 are used by some to prohibit making an oath of any kind.

An oath is simply a promise whereby someone calls God to witness to the truthfulness of one's promise.^{iv}

A brief look at scripture reveals that making oaths were not only acceptable but prescribed by God.

And the Bible records believers taking oaths;

- Both Abraham and Isaac took oaths in business transactions with unbelievers, swearing their fidelity to keep their promise and calling on God as their witness (Genesis 21 and 26);
- Joshua records an oath given to Rahab by the two Israelite spies as they vowed to protect her (Joshua 2)
- David swore an oath to Jonathan (1 Samuel 20);
- The Apostle Paul made a vow to God (Acts 18:18);
- He also adopted the language of an oath of truthfulness when he wrote to the Corinthians and called on God as his witness that he was telling the church in Corinth the truth (2 Corinthians 11:31);
- There were even occasions in the Old Testament when God required people to take an oath; such as in the case of a man who must swear before God that the animal under his care (which had died) had not been killed and eaten by himself (Exodus 22);
- Or the oath of a married woman suspected of marital infidelity was required to take an oath of her faithfulness to her husband before God as her witness (Numbers 5);
- In Luke 1:73 we read that God Himself swore an oath to Abraham;
- God also swore by Himself a promise to David as well as to the people of Israel.

The truth is, God not only endorsed vows, but He expected vows to be kept when they are aligned to His will and purpose.

He doesn't want us making or keeping a sinful promise or oath.

The classic illustration of that was in the life of Jephthah who made a vow to give to the Lord the first thing that ran out of his house to meet him when he returned home victorious in battle (*Judges 11*).

However, when he returned home, the first thing to run out the front door wasn't one of his dogs, but his daughter which he then kept unmarried and virgin for the rest of her life, a passage we still refer to as the foolish vow of Jephthah.

I say all that to say that James is not forbidding the making of promises; the swearing of oaths or vows in the name of God.

In fact, you'll notice that your English translation correctly has a comma after this phrase and not a

period. Notice, ***My brethren, do not swear (comma) by heaven or by earth, or with another other oath.***

That's a helpful clue to what James is after.

You see, by the time of the New Testament the giving of an oath or vow had actually developed into the fine art of deceit and dishonesty.

Rabbis had begun teaching that an oath or a vow was not binding *if* it omitted the name of God. In other words, if you made an oath or vow by your own life or someone else's life then you weren't bound to keep it.

Kind of like making a promise with your hand behind your back and your fingers crossed.

You're really not telling the truth and you really don't have to keep the promise as long as your fingers are crossed you're okay.

Now if you did a pinky swear then that's serious. I mean, you'd better keep the pinky swear.

Well, for the Jews they had developed a system almost as silly.

As long as you made the vow in the name of heaven, or earth, or the city of Jerusalem or they would swear by their beard or on the comfort of Jerusalem then they were okay to break that promise.

The Mishnah, a Jewish commentary on customs dating back to the 3rd century covering Jewish traditions dating back hundreds of years even earlier than that has an entire section on making oaths.

Elaborate instructions were given on when oaths were binding and when they were not and it basically developed a system that indicated when a person could lie and when he couldn't. Evasive swearing had become a fine art.^v

What mattered most of all was that you didn't mention the name of God.

You see, they were taught that if God's name wasn't used in the oath or in the vow, then God had nothing to do with the transaction.

But James writes, ***do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.***

In other words, don't fall into that custom of swearing an oath by heaven or earth which you then don't think you have to keep? Why not?

Because of what the believer knew to be true whether you bring God's name into your promise or not, if you swear by heaven that happens to be His throne room; if you swear by earth that's God's footstool; if you swear by Jerusalem, that's His future kingdom; you swear by anything on earth that's God's too!

In other words, you can't keep God out of any transaction or any promise, whether you mention His name or not.^{vi}

And by the way, the older I get, the more suspicious I get around people who have to add an oath or two to the conversation. Like someone who says to me, "I swear to God I'm telling you the truth." That makes me suspicious. Why'd he have to swear to God?

Or, "It's the truth, I swear it on my mother's grave." That one really worries me.

Why add those words or any words for that matter.

I always wonder when someone says to me, "Now I'm going to be totally honest with you." What were you before? Partially honest? Which part was true?

Honesty isn't a formula. It isn't a clever addition of an oath or vow.

That's exactly what Peter did outside in the courtyard as Jesus was being interrogated in the middle of the night, recorded in Matthew 26.

Peter had made a promise earlier to the Lord that he would never deny Him. And he'd repeated the promise with great passion in front of all the other disciples in the upper room. "I mean, Lord, all these other guys will probably abandon you, but not me."

And now Jesus has been arrested in the Garden and taken to the home of the High Priest to be interrogated.

That classic scene takes place between Peter and the others. By the way, we have to give Peter some credit. He's the only one who made it as far as the courtyard.

And he's spotted by a servant girl who says, "Didn't I see you with Jesus?" Peter denied it and said, "I do not know what you're talking about."

Peter even moved to the gate of the courtyard—no doubt fighting the battle between his promise to stay with the Lord and the urge to run for his life.

Then another servant girl came over and sort of makes an announcement, "***This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.***" Now listen to what Matthew records, "***And again Peter denied it with an oath.***" (Matthew 26:72)

A little later on bystanders confront him and he then begins to *swear saying*, "***I do not know the man.***"

And then a rooster somewhere in the neighborhood decided to get up early.

The words for oath and swear in Matthew 26 are the same Greek words used by James in chapter 5 and verse 12.

Peter is making an oath to try and masquerade a lie. I'm lying, but I swear I'm telling you the truth! The heavens are my witness.

Let me add all kinds of sincere, even religious language to cover my tracks as I run away from the truth.

If you are a person of honesty, you don't need to add anything to give your words more weight.^{vii} And that's exactly what James is calling the believer to adopt; the simplicity of honesty.

2. Positive Command:

Notice the next phrase of *verse 12* (here's how simple it is); ***your yes is to be yes and your no, no.*** It is simple, straightforward speech.^{viii}

The original construction here—it is to be—your yes is to be—is a present imperative another exclamation point.

One Greek scholar said that James language here in this phrase indicates that this is to be a mark of every believer's duty.^{ix}

In other words the world out there lies like a rug. It's their native language being bound by the Devil who speaks fluently in the language of lies. Don't be like them.

Let your speech reflect the simplicity of honesty. Don't let your yes mean, 'maybe if the weather's nice' . . . 'if I feel like it I'll follow through.' No, let yes mean yes and your no mean no.

1. Challenging Warning:

Then James ends with this challenging warning, notice the last phrase "***so that you may not fall under judgment.***"

That's a nice way of saying, "don't get in trouble with God."

James isn't saying vows and oaths are sinful and you're condemned if you make them.

He's saying if you add an oath to your yes or no in order to hide your lying, you are effectively in double trouble.

You've added piety to your hypocrisy. You've added weighty words to dishonest living.

Perhaps even today religious things are being said by people in here. Amen and let's sing a little louder; all the while knowing that this worship service is an attempt to masquerade a growing pattern of dishonesty. Your latest tax return is only the latest example. Your latest term paper wasn't yours. Maybe your resume includes things that aren't true. You're

wondering if those marriage vows were all that binding or that business contract.

Listen to the warning of James. To cover your tracks is to walk into the discipline of the Lord, to waste a life . . . to live an un-rewardable life.

That's why James delivers this warning, not to the world if you noticed, but to the brethren—don't live under the displeasure of God.

The majority text reads here, "that you not fall into hypocrisy".

James is delivering nothing less than a radical call to honesty.

It's a challenge to back up what we say by what we are and what we do.^x

A few years ago I asked a business owner in our church how he was doing. He told me his business was struggling. He had one major competitor in the field, a larger company that produced the same product, and he seemed to always come in second place.

One particular company however wanted him to sign a large contract and the president of a company even called him to tell him that he wanted him to get the job.

In the course of the conversation the president told him that they really had to receive a shipment of materials by a certain date—would he promise to meet that deadline?

This Christian businessman knew that with his smaller staff of employees he would need another two weeks to fill the order.

He told me that the temptation was there to say he could pull it off, and then he could always make an excuse or two about why it was being delayed.

In other words, he could make the promise, but he could have his fingers crossed behind his back.

He told the president of this company the truth and his competitor got the contract.

You think . . . isn't that great though. I'll bet this man's business began to take off after that! No, he

ended up struggling for a few more years before going bankrupt and losing it all.

But let me tell you that brother in Christ has since passed away and don't think for a moment that he now regrets that display of the character of Jesus Christ!

Can you imagine his joy at Christ's approval over his honesty in just that one event?

Why tell the truth?

- Because it is the character of God whose son is the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6)
- Because God cannot tell a lie (Hebrews 6:18).

His fingers are never crossed behind His back.

How important is that? Consider the fact the Bible is not so much a Book of explanations as it is a Book of promises.

How many of promises from God do we expect God to keep? How many of them do we hope He keeps? All of them!

John Phillips, the British expositor and author, in his commentary on James wrote, "There was a time in English history when honor was prized as the highest virtue. A man who broke his word was the lowest form of man. A common saying in lands where the flag of the empire was displayed was, "It is the word of an Englishman." Phillips went on to refer to David Livingstone, the British missionary pioneer to Africa in the 1800's and early 1900's a fearless evangelist who took the gospel into the interior of Africa where mission's teams or missionaries had ever gone before. He wrote in his diary how at every great crisis, he retreated back to the promise of Jesus Christ, which happened to be his favorite text of scripture, which read, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Matthew 28:20. He wrote in his diary "And this is the word of a gentleman of the most sacred honor and that's an end of it!" He will keep His promise.

So as His children . . . so should we.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 05/29/2011 by Stephen Davey.

-
- i R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith that Works, (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 243
- ii Robert J. Morgan, Stories, Illustrations and Quotes (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 443
- iii Charles R. Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word, 1998), p. 272
- iv John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 265.
- v Hughes, p. 246
- vi William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1 (Westminster, 1975), p. 159
- vii Tony Evans, The Perfect Christian (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 219
- viii MacArthur, p. 270
- ix D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 285
- x Spiros Zodhiates, The Patience of Hope: An Exposition of James 4:13-5:20 (AMG Publishers, 1985), p. 113