

## It's True, Cross My Heart

### James 5:12

As a wealthy oil tycoon lay on his deathbed, his pastor talked about God's healing power. He said, "Pastor, if God heals me, I'll give the church a million dollars." Miraculously, the man revived and within a few weeks was out of the hospital. Several months later he and the Pastor were chatting on the sidewalk and the pastor reminded him of the promise the oil tycoon had made in the hospital to give the church a million dollars if he got well and that they hadn't received it yet. The tycoon asked out loud "did I say that? I guess that goes to show you how sick I really was."

Before James closes his letter to these believers, he has one more point to make about the tongue. This time it is on the topic of making vows. From this verse, there is a debate among Christians about whether or not it is appropriate to make a vow. I hope we can provide an answer to that question from this passage.

I have been called on to give a testimony both in court and during a deposition. I have been asked to tell the truth, the whole, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. When the President or members of Congress and other elected officials are sworn into office, they place their hand on a Bible and take the oath of office. Unless, like Kelli Dunaway who was elected as a district councilwoman in St. Louis, MO, you decide it's appropriate to be sworn into office placing your hand on the Dr. Seuss book Oh the Places You'll Go. She said she wanted to try something different and go against tradition.

Even doctors take an oath of practice. According to Wikipedia, "the Hippocratic Oath is an oath of ethics taken by physicians. It is one of the most widely known of Greek medical texts. In its original form, it requires a new physician to swear, by a number of healing gods, to uphold specific ethical standards. The oath is the earliest expression of medical ethics in the Western world, establishing several principles of medical ethics which remain of paramount significance today. These include the principles of medical confidentiality and non-

maleficence. Swearing a modified form of the oath remains a rite of passage for medical graduates in many countries, and is a requirement enshrined in legal statutes of various jurisdictions, such that violations of the oath may carry criminal or other liability beyond the oath's symbolic nature."

Some argue that making any kind of vow, even as an elected official or doctor, is a violation of the principle James is calling for in **James 5:12**.

Our text repeats the teaching of Jesus on the subject back in **Matthew 5:33-37**. Consider that the teaching of both Jesus and James goes beyond the issue of whether taking an oath is appropriate for a believer and deals more readily with the issue of truthfulness in our speech.

I think we would all agree that if there is one thing that is abundantly clear today in our culture, it is in regard to a crisis of truth.

One scientist says this, another scientist says that.  
One doctor says this, one doctor says that.  
One teacher says this, one teacher says that.  
One politician says this, one politician says that.  
One neighbor says this, one neighbor says that.  
And they all claim to speak from facts.  
Who's right? Is anyone telling the truth?

Add to that the notion that is being purported that truth is relative, it changes with the times, you can change it based on what you believe today, which most likely will change tomorrow. They say that there is no absolute truth, to which you want to ask them "are you sure about that?"

James is calling on believers to be truthful in our conversation with others, even when it has to do with vows, so that we don't fall under God's judgement. Let's take a look at **James 5:12**.

Let's first discuss a word about vows.

## I. A WORD ABOUT VOWS

A good place to begin is to talk about whether vows are right or wrong. **What do you think? Are they okay? Should we avoid them at all cost? Does Scripture teach that they are taboo?**

**Galatians 1:20**

Before we go any further, a simple definition might be in order. An oath or vow is a solemn promise, often invoking a divine witness, regarding one's future action or behavior. Let's call it a binding promise, something you say you will do, often using God as a witness.

**Is there such a thing then, as a correct vow according to the Bible?**

**A. Is There A Correct Vow?**

When James uses the term **"to swear"**, he is not referring to profanity. Elsewhere in Scripture that is dealt with. For example:

**"Let no filthy communication come out of your mouth." Colossians 3:8**

**"Do not take the Lord's name in vain." Ex. 20:7**

Those are clear indictments against the use of wrong language, especially using God's name loosely or as profanity. Instead, we are to revere God's name. When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them about prayer, he begins by saying **"Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed or holy is Your name."** I'm taken aback when I hear Christians say "Oh, my God" or use the letters OMG in a text or on Facebook. I don't even like to use gosh or Gol or gee or geez because of their close resemblance to God and Jesus. But I digress.

**Is there an occasion when a correct vow is in order?**

To that I say that yes, the Bible does teach that there are certain times when it is proper to take an oath or make a vow before God.

**Deuteronomy 10:20**

**Jeremiah 12:16** (speaking of pagan nations)

**Numbers 6:1-21** (the Nazarite vow)

**Acts 21:23-24**

At His trial before the Council, Jesus answered under oath. (**Matthew 26:63-64**)

On different occasions, the Apostle Paul stated, **"As God is my witness"**.

**Romans 1:9**

**\*II Corinthians 1:23**

**Philippians 1:8**

**I Thessalonians 2:5, 10**

Of even greater significance is that at times God swore by Himself either by His words or by enacting a covenant in His name.

**Acts 2:29-30** (God swore that a descendant of David would sit on the throne)

**Hebrews 6:13-14, 17-18** (God swore to Abraham that He would bless and multiply him)

These passages confirm for us that the Bible does not prohibit making a vow. **So what does James mean when he says we should not swear, in essence not make an oath? Is there, then, a censured vow?**

**B. Is There A Censured Vow?**

James is saying that when someone swears or makes a vow or an oath or a promise and he invokes the name of God with that vow in everyday speech where it is commonplace, as if that assured the truthfulness of what they said, that is wrong.

James begins by saying **"Above all"**. There are two main lines of thinking here. One thought is that this is a standalone verse and James wants to emphasize the subject so he says **"above all."**

The other line of thinking about the phrase is that James is referring to the previous verses that have to do with suffering. In the heat of the moment, particularly when one is going through suffering, to make an oath that if God would remove the situation from us, we vow to do this or that for God. It's like making a bargain with God. I swear that if you get me out of this mess, I'll do...

That was the case for Olympian, Louis Zamperini. After a near-fatal plane crash in WWII, he and two fellow crewmen spent 47 days in a life raft before being captured by the Japanese navy and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. While floating aimlessly in his raft one night he made a vow that if he was rescued, he would serve God. He was rescued, but he never kept his oath until years later.

We someone is oppressing us, causing us hardship we can make a vow to them that if they lift the hardship, we vow to do something in return.

To grasp what James is saying here we need to understand how the Jews were using oaths. Oaths should promote truthful communication. Instead, they had become a pretense for lying. The Jews said that if you swore using God's name, that was binding, but if you swore by anything else, like the temple, Jerusalem, or, as in our verse, by anything in heaven or on earth or by anything else, that wasn't binding. Let me give you some examples of what I mean. It was a loophole.

How many of you when you were a kid might remember saying "cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye."

You might hear people say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles."

"I swear on my mother's grave."

"I swear to God I'm not lying."

"As God is my witness, this will never happen."

"My word is my bond."

Your word used to count for something. One author suggested that if someone used a term like that or something similar as if to emphasize the vow making it sound like they are being truthful, they aren't being truthful. When people invoke God in the oath, it's trying to use Him to validate your vow.

There are two kinds of oaths or vows that should be avoided. The first is a frivolous oath.

### 1. A frivolous oath

That refers to an oath that has no serious purpose or value. A frivolous oath stems from pride. Several examples come to mind.

#### Joshua 9:15

This is the story of when Joshua and the Israelite leaders were made to believe that the Gibeonites had traveled from a distant country to make a peace treaty. After looking over the false evidence of moldy bread and raggedy clothes, they believed and then made a vow with them, rather than seek the Lord's will in the matter.

#### Judges 11:30-40

This is the story of Jephthah who was used by God as one of the judges to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Ammonites. Before the battle he

promised God that when he returned home safely, he would offer the first thing that came out of the tent as a burnt offering. He made a vow he should have never made in the first place because God had promised to bring victory through him. He didn't need to make a vow.

#### I Samuel 14:24-30

Saul made a rash vow and cursed anyone to death who ate food before the Philistines were routed. If you read the rest of the account, Saul intended to put Johnathan to death for not obeying the command, but the men defended him for his brave actions in battle that brought a victory.

In the New Testament, we find another example of a frivolous vow.

#### Matthew 14:1-12

It was King Herod's birthday. He invited a lot of notable guests. The wine flowed and he got drunk. His stepdaughter was called on to dance. She pleased Herod who then made a rash vow in which she could ask for anything she wanted. At the instruction of her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. To save face with his guests for the sake of the vow he had made he beheaded John.

Pride can cause us to make a rash vow, to be flippant and frivolous without thinking through the ramifications. We can make them because we want to impress our friends with a spiritual commitment.

You may attend a conference or seminar or retreat where the speaker challenges you to make a vow to read your Bible every day for at least five minutes. He might even have you raise your hand or come down front to show your commitment. Now there's nothing wrong with making a vow to read your Bible. I strongly encourage you to do that all the time. The danger in the vow I just mentioned is in vowing to do it every day. What if you miss a day? When I was in the hospital with COVID, I missed two days reading my Bible. Had I made such a vow, I would have been guilty of not keeping my oath. I may have you raise your hand in commitment to some area of spiritual growth, but I won't put a constraint on it. Doing that can make you feel guilty

for not keeping the vow. I'd rather have you miss a day and come back to it the next day than to give you a guilt complex for messing up your vow.

Think for a moment how you might feel if you made a vow to read your Bible every day and you keep that vow and you never miss a day. The risk or danger is in becoming prideful. In that case, reading your Bible can be all about keeping your vow rather than doing it as a discipline for spiritual growth in drawing closer to God. It should never be just another box to check off.

Don't make a frivolous oath.

The second kind of oath to avoid is a false oath.

## 2. A false oath

**When you were a kid growing up, do any of you remember crossing your fingers?** We did it as a way of somehow negating the vow we just made.

A false oath is one that you make but don't intend to keep. It is made for one of two reasons. The person either wants to impress others or he wants to deceive others. Either way, a false oath is wrong because it is based on a lie.

Both Jesus and James said false vows shouldn't be made on the temple or Jerusalem or by heaven or by earth or anything else. It's just playing games.

**A pastor made this comment about false oaths: "If people said what they meant and meant what they said, there wouldn't be a need for any such oaths at all!"**

GotQuestions adds this "The religious leaders of the day advocated keeping a vow *if* it was a public vow using God's name; however, if the vow was made in the course of everyday conversation, referencing only "heaven" or "earth" or "Jerusalem," it was not really binding. People had a loophole. They could lie or exaggerate in their conversations and lend themselves an air of credibility by saying, 'I swear by heaven that this is true!' They could not be held accountable because they did not specifically swear by God's name and the vow was private. Jesus countered that idea. If you swear something, it had

**better be true, He says. In fact, all you need to say is 'yes' or 'no.' Your word should be good."**

**What are some ways people can fall into the trap of being deceptive when making a vow that is false?**

### a. The half-truth

This is telling the truth, but not telling all the truth. That's what Abraham did when he said that Sarah was his half-sister, which was true but conveniently he forgot to mention, for the sake of his own life, that she was also his wife.

### b. The white lie

These are the little "innocent" lies we think won't hurt anyone.

You tell the boss that the reason for being late is due to a flat tire or being stuck in traffic. What happens if you really have a flat tire the next day? You call in sick when you're not really sick.

### c. The lie to cover for someone else

They were with me all evening.

They aren't here right now.

They were sick.

They weren't around when that happened.

### d. The exaggeration

That's stretching the truth to make yourself look better. **I had a friend who played football for the University of Michigan. One game he played against Mean Joe Greene Who went on to play for the Pittsburg Stealers. Both played on the front line. My friend was on the offensive side of the ball and Mean Joe Greene was on the defensive side. My friend would say he lined up across from Mean Joe Greene, but that was an exaggeration. My friend lined up on this side of the ball and Mean Joe Greene lined up on the other side of the ball on the opposite corner. They never directly faced each other, but my friend wanted to look good so he exaggerated.**

### e. The silent lie

Someone else makes a statement about you that you know to be false, but you don't say anything to correct what was said.

### f. The cover-up lie

That's where you hide your own wrongdoing, rationalizing that it would hurt someone else if they knew the truth.

### g. The evasive lie

That's when you conveniently change the subject in order to avoid telling the truth.

We are prone to each of these and James is probably suggesting in the present context having to do with suffering. Making an oath might minimize the suffering in some way, so we lie in some way.

On the other hand, the soon return of Jesus should motivate us to an even greater degree of honesty and integrity in what we say when making a vow.

A boy was on the witness stand in an important lawsuit. The prosecuting attorney cross-examined him and delivered what he thought, would be a crushing blow to the boy's testimony.

"Your father has been telling you how to testify, hasn't he?"

"Yes," the boy answered without hesitation.

"Now," said the lawyer triumphantly, "just tell us how your father told you to testify."

"Well," said the boy 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."

Some vows are okay. There are times when it is the correct thing to do to make them. When you testify in court. When you get married. But James has a word to say about the kinds of oaths we should avoid, oaths that are frivolous or false, oaths that should be censured, oaths that we shouldn't make.

But James doesn't stop there. In the second half of the verse, he has a word to say about virtue.

## II. A WORD ABOUT VIRTUE

**"Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned."**

In other words, be known for your integrity in what you say. Be honest, truthful, forthright.

Warren Wiersbe states: "The basic principle is that true Christian character requires few words. The person who must use many words to convince us has something wrong with his character and must bolster this weakness by using words. If you are a true Christian with integrity, then all you have to say is yes or no and people will believe you...If words are a test of character, then oaths would indicate that there is yet work to be done."

We see that evident when Peter denied knowing the Lord with an oath at His trial (**Matthew 26:71-72**) after which he went and wept bitterly.

James shows us first, correct words.

### A. Correct Words

If we have integrity in our character, a simple yes or no should suffice. Our yes or no should make vows unnecessary. As Christians, we should have truthfulness in what we say without the need to make oaths we cannot keep or don't intend to keep. When we make those kinds of vows, we only cheapen our word to the point where others can't trust what we say. Our word, our yes or no ought to be enough if we are people of integrity.

Say what you'll do and do what you say, because here's the thing: what we say reveals what is in the heart. Our speech is to be honest.

**Ephesians 4:25**

**Colossians 3:9**

John MacArthur puts it this way: "The prohibition against false swearing in **verse 12** reflects the truth that a Spirit-transformed heart will reveal itself in honest speech. How people speak is the most revealing test of their true spiritual state."

**Matthew 12:34-36 "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted,**

### and by your words you will be condemned.”

God expects vows to be kept when His holy name is invoked. Failing to keep your vow is the same as taking God’s name in vain.

**Leviticus 19:12** “Do not swear falsely by My name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.”

John Phillips writes “If you give your word, never go back on it.”

**Ecclesiastes 5:4-6**

**Zechariah 8:17**

As Christians we are to be people of integrity when it comes to our words. James talks about correct words, let your yes and no be truthful. He concludes with condemnation for our words.

### B. Condemnation For Our Words

He offers an if/then proposition. **If** your words are not true, if you don’t keep your oaths, if your yes is not yes and your no is not no, **then** you will be condemned.

Scripture tells us that there isn’t any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Scripture tells us that if we know Christ as Savior, we will not suffer eternal death and separation from God.

But there is a judgment we will encounter for every idle word, for every vow we don’t keep.

**I Corinthians 3:15** says that our works will be judged.

**I Corinthians 11:32** says that every believer ought to judge themselves before taking communion or we would be judged.

There ought to be a trustworthiness to our words so that we don’t fall under judgement. “My word is my bond” shouldn’t be just some trite saying but a testimony to the integrity of our character that we keep our word. Our speech is a test of genuine faith. When we don’t keep our word, when our words have no credibility, James says we will fall under the Lord’s judgment, undergoing His discipline.

We need to heed the advice of James when it comes to vows so that we don’t bring undue judgment on ourselves. Yes, there is a time and place for appropriate vows, otherwise let our words simply be yes or no, to be men and women of integrity. If we speak the truth, there is no need to make a vow. In what we say, our communication should foster truthfulness. When we are undergoing suffering, don’t make rash vows. Instead, be patient because the Lord’s coming is near.

In a culture that has a shortage of honesty, let’s be people of integrity.