

## **James 5:12 - A Theology of Swearing**

Sign Title: A Theology of Swearing

October 16, 2011

Good morning Faith family. This morning, we are talking about lying, cussing, deceiving and cheating. It sounds like it will be a good message. For those of you who are new, we are working our way through the book of James.

This morning we come to James 5:12

**But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. James 5:12 (ESV)**

James is back to his favorite topic, the tongue, that is, our speech. Let us do a quick review of some of the things we learned about sins of the tongue in the book of James.

- Be quick to listen and slow to speak - James 1:19
- Keep a tight rein on our tongue - James 1:26
- Our speech reveals our sinful favoritism - James 2:3-4
- We all stumble in what we say - James 3:2
- The tongue is the hardest part of our body to tame - James 3:6-8
- Verbal slander reveals our pride - James 4:11-12
- Grumblers will be judged - James 5:9

Now James adds to the list when he says, "Do not swear." To begin with, James is not saying what many of us think he is saying when he talks about swearing. To explain what he is saying, we need to begin in the Old Testament.

**There is power behind a name.**

The third commandment of the Ten Commandments pertains to the use of God's name in our speech.

**You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Exodus 20:7 (ESV)**

God is concerned that his name is revered in our speech.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!... Psalm 8:1 (ESV)

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Matthew 6:9 (ESV)

Why does God want us to honor his name in our speech? God's name represents his identity. Since God is holy, his name is holy. Since God is of infinite worth, his name should be treated as having infinite worth. Abusing God's name, speaking it casually or irreverently or turning it into a swear word demeans God's infinite worth.

Let me give you a little example of this in a human way. When Cindy was pregnant with our children, we spent a fair amount of time talking about names for the baby. It was an amazing feeling realizing we would decide the name our children would be known by for life. Finding just the right name feels like a serious parental responsibility. I like unique names. For instance, I named our golden retriever, Sargon, after the Assyrian ruler who lived in 700 B.C. When I started suggesting baby names, most of them were variants of Hebrew or Greek words. Let us just say they didn't fly well with my wife. Cindy looked at naming our children through a different lens. One of her goals was to make sure our children were given names that didn't rhyme with anything insulting. She wanted to make sure our kids were not teased on the playground. I remember sitting in bed suggesting names to her. In the blink of an eye she would shoot my suggestion down saying, "That name rhymes with (something insulting). You don't want our child to be called that on the playground." Time after time she shot down my suggestions like a hunter shooting pheasants.

I was soon thankful for the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in my wife's life. I realized how incredibly skillful she could be when it came to finding something insulting to say. I thanked the Holy Spirit for changing my wife's heart.

If you have a name that rhymes with something insulting, you can still remember the pain of when kids used that rhyme to mock you on the playground. What made their insult hurt was they were not just mocking your name, by mocking your name, they were mocking you, the person behind the name.

It is the same way with God, but on an infinitely greater scale. His name is to be revered because his power and glory stand behind it. The misuse of God's name insults God's identity, which is what stands behind his name.

In fact, the Jews became so cautious about the misuse of God's name that when they read their Old Testament scrolls and "Yahweh," the name of God, was in the text, they would never say it out loud. They added vowels to the consonants of Yahweh to make the name "Jehovah," which was, in theory, a way to avoid misusing God's name because you technically didn't say it. You mispronounced it.

How does this relate to James and our text?

### **Where did swearing in God's name come from?**

James tells us not to swear. We will talk about profanity a little later this morning, but the word James uses for swearing in this passage is not directly addressing profanity. James is talking about the swearing of an oath. This is the kind of swearing that invokes God's name as a witness to the truthfulness of what we are saying. It is saying things like, "I swear on the Bible that I am telling

the truth.” or “I swear to God that I didn’t steal your burrito from the refrigerator.”

When we say things like this, we are invoking a sacred witness to verify the truthfulness of what we said. We are asking God to be the witness to our truthfulness. Since God is our witness and since his name represents his character and worth, this is serious stuff. James simply says, don’t swear those kind of oaths. Simply let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no.

Here is where we come to a problem. James tells us not to swear oaths, but if you go to the Old and New Testament, there are oaths sworn all over the place. In fact, godly people were encouraged to take them, and they were even congratulated by God when they did.

You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. Deuteronomy 10:20 (ESV)

And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, ‘As the Lord lives,’ even as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people. Jeremiah 12:16 (ESV)

How did we get from God commanding us to take oaths in His name in the Old Testament, to James telling us not to take them? Is one part of the Bible conflicting with another? A little extra-biblical history will help.

The Jews understood vows made in God’s name were extremely serious. An oath taken in God’s name must be kept because behind God’s name stood his character. Sometimes rash oaths were taken and they could get you in real trouble.

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”...So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of

Israel. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow."... And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. Judges 11:30–40 (ESV)

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Acts 23:12 (ESV)

Over time, rabbis began thinking of ways you could take oaths but not be bound by them. They developed the idea of taking oaths that were close to swearing by God's name but technically left God's name out of the picture so they were oaths with an escape hatch. People would swear oaths by their own life or by the life of the king or by some sacred object. They reasoned that if they avoided mentioning God directly, they were not bound to keep the oath. The Mishnah (a collection of Jewish Rabbi's oral tradition) has a whole section in it called Shebuoth (oaths). It is an elaborate discussion of when oaths are binding and when they are not.

Jews would say things like, "I swear by my life." or "I swear by my beard." That way they could avoid swearing by God's name, which was an oath they could not break. Evasive swearing became a fine art. The height of accomplishment was to convince someone you were telling the truth because you swore by something sacred but technically not sacred enough to be considered swearing in God's name. The use of oaths was similar to a child saying they didn't have to keep their promise because they had their fingers crossed when they made it.

I know that sounds weird and most of us didn't know about this background. To show you it is true, let's look at what Jesus said to the Pharisees about their fine art of evasive swearing.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ Matthew 23:16–18 (ESV)

You can see how the Jewish leaders developed this into a fine art of trickery. They were trying to convince people their words could be trusted, because others thought they swore in God's name, when they felt they technically hadn't sworn in God's name so their oath could be broken.

As James has done for the rest of the book, he gets most of his teaching on oaths directly from his older half-brother, Jesus. When James says no swearing of these kinds of silly oaths, simply let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” a no, he is pulling this from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. Matthew 5:34–37 (ESV)

Jesus lists four alternatives people used for swearing by God's name: Heaven, Earth, Jerusalem and your head. The way this worked in day-to-day conversations is people would say something like, “I swear by the city of Jerusalem that I will be at work tomorrow on time” or “I swear by heaven above that I was not the man who killed your dog with rat poison.” You get the idea.

Jesus says none of these little evasive moves actually kept a reference to God out of the vow. Heaven is God's throne and the earth is his footstool. Jerusalem is his city and even your head is under his sovereignty. Everything in the world is God's. When we swear by *anything*, either directly or indirectly, we are invoking God's name. So James and Jesus say we simply shouldn't swear. Why should we need to take oaths? What we say should simply be true.

### **What about profanity?**

Profanity comes from the word profane. Profaning something is to treat something that is holy in an unholy way. For example, remember the national outrage when we first heard Muslims were erecting a mosque near Ground Zero? American anger came from the treatment of something that is considered by many to be sacred in an unsacred way. Ground Zero was being profaned. Profanity is speaking God's name or speaking of something he created as holy in an unholy way.

When someone gets angry and screams "Jesus Christ," they aren't speaking his name with respect, but they are using it as a swear word. That is profanity because they spoke something that is holy in an unholy way. It is disrespecting our savior. Another example is when someone says, "Oh my God!" That comes out of people's mouths all the time. We hear it for good things, when people win Publishers Clearing House. We hear it for bad things, when people drop a bowling ball on their foot. It is profanity. It is treating the holy name of God in an unholy way. Another example is "God damn it." It is asking God to damn people in our anger. It is using his name in an unholy way.

Nearly all the other profanities that don't invoke God's name have something to do with the final portion of our digestive system, our sexual body parts or sexual actions, all of which God intended to be treated in a sacred way. Understand that all of our body and the natural acts of our body are good. Our sexuality is good. All parts of our digestive system are good. They are all part of being created in God's image. But not all parts of our body and acts of our body are intended for public viewing. Profanity is referring to those good, but sacred, parts and acts of our body in an unsacred and disrespectful way.

Why do we use the name of God, sacred parts of the human body, or sacred sexual acts in our language when we are really mad? We want others to know we are serious about what we are saying. Even in our fallen state, we know God's name, sacred parts of our body and sacred acts of our body have power connected to them. To empower what we say we attempt to use that power to empower our words.

You don't have to be a Christian to know this. Everyone recognizes, to some degree, what they are doing. After school, a few days a week, I am taking David, my oldest son, to a college wrestling room to get some practice in before the wrestling season. Nobody in the room knows me or what I do for a living. In a college wrestling room, you hear some colorful expressions from the wrestlers. A few weeks ago, somebody finally asked what I did for a living. I told them I am one of the pastors at Faith Church. Their immediate response was, "I better watch my mouth. Sorry for swearing so much." I didn't hear any profanity out of



them for the rest of the practice. For some reason, swearing up a storm around a minister seemed inappropriate. Inherently, we all know profanity is sinful.

### **What about Christian profanity?**

Do you know what Christian profanity is? Christians, mindful of misusing God's name, just like the Jews, play little games with profanity. As long as we don't use God's name directly, we think we are in the clear. For example, instead of saying, "God damn it" Christians will try to free up their conscience by saying, "Gosh darn it." We didn't say God's name exactly, but we were close. Instead of saying, "Jesus" Christians will say, "Jeewhiz." We say "What the heck?" That is just a substitute for saying "What the hell?" "Oh my gosh" is just a substitute for "Oh my God." Are we starting to sound like the Pharisees in Jesus' day? What do you think?

James has a better suggestion.

...let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. James 5:12 (ESV)

### **My word should be my oath and my life the witness of my integrity.**

The Jews thought in two categories in God's name vows, which they had to fulfill and all other vows which they could weasel out of. James and Jesus tell us to simply let our "Yes" be yes and our "No" be no. In other words, the integrity of our life should be at such a high level that we don't need to assure others our words are truthful by swearing on anything! The only people who need to add God, or anything else, as a witness to the truthfulness of what they say are the liars among us. Do you begin sentences with, "I swear to God I am telling you the truth?" Are you implying you are a liar other times when you speak?

Jesus and James both say we are to be people who say what we mean and mean what we say. Our words are to be trustworthy. How often do you begin a sentence by saying, “Let me be honest with you...” Shouldn’t that go without saying? In a sense, all the words we say are under oath because they are uttered before God.

## Conclusion

Living with impeccable verbal integrity is difficult to do in a world that is filled with dishonesty. People say one thing and do another. Our world lacks integrity. Our verbal integrity is a powerful way to show others the difference Christ makes in our lives. After all, were it not for Jesus, we would all be liars, cheats, perjurers and would cuss God out at every opportunity we had, just like everyone else.



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