



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

## Faith That Works

### *An Exposition of the Book of James*

<sup>12</sup>But above all<sup>a</sup>, my brethren, do not swear<sup>b</sup>, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath<sup>a</sup>; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no<sup>b</sup>, so that you may not fall under judgment<sup>c,d</sup>.

<sup>a</sup> 5:12 **But above all.** This phrase translated “above all” is used two other times in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:17 Paul says the Lord Jesus is “before all things.” Peter (1 Peter 4:8) told his readers, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another.” You can see that James is not simply saying, “Oh, and here is one more related thought.” What he is about to say sums up the call to demonstrating personal faith in this letter.

Most people asked to choose a primary command from the epistle of James would not choose this one. Letting your “yes be yes and you no, no,” however, does demonstrate the kind of faith for which James argues in this letter. It can be persuasively argued that it is the double-minded person one whose “yes” is not necessarily yes and whose “no” is not necessarily no. Consider how letting your “yes be yes and your no, no” affects the way you keep the other commands of this letter:

- You claim to be a follower of the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ so you find joy in a time of trial (1:2-7).
- You confess in a time of trial that God does not waver on his word and his gifts (1:17).
- You speak what you believe with your good works (1:19-27).
- You sincerely welcome all kinds of people into the assembly (2:1-13).
- You say you have faith and back it up with your works (2:14-17).
- You bless men like you bless their Maker (3:1-12).
- You speak wisdom that is “unwavering and without hypocrisy” (3:13-18).
- You say you are a friend of God and so cannot maintain a friendship with the world (4:1-10).
- You say you will pay your employees and you do it (5:1-6).
- You claim to believe God is compassionate and you patiently wait to observe it (5:7-11).

<sup>b</sup> 5:12 **do not swear.** Our culture has largely forgotten what “swearing” is. Vulgarity or restroom wall language is not swearing. That kind of talk is bad, but it falls into the category of an “unwholesome word” (Ephesians 4:29). I have heard preachers say that when the Matthew 26:74 says Peter began to “curse and swear” during his three denials of Christ that he was resorting to using trashy language. This is not so. He was putting himself under oath as if to say, “May God strike me down if I know that man.” You see the seriousness of Peter’s denial. Even children understand swearing when they say, “Cross my heart and hope to die...”

The Hebrew Scriptures do not forbid oath-taking, only oath-breaking.

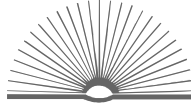
You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:11-12

When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised. Deuteronomy 23:21-23

James 5:12  
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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Swearing is kind of like getting a co-signer on a loan. You put your own instability under the umbrella of one who is stable and say, "With God as my witness..." or "...so help me God."

To clear up the biggest controversy about this text and its source text in Matthew 5, this command does not forbid ceremonial oaths. Oaths of office or the swearing in of court witnesses are not in view here any more than marriage vows. Caiaphas put Jesus under oath at his trial:

I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God. Matthew 26:63

The Master did not object to the oath, but answered the question in a way Caiaphas considered blasphemy.

The problem is the flippant way people invoke God's name (take in vain) to add credibility to their words. The real issue is integrity. Your word should not need a stack of Bibles to make it trustworthy. You should not have to say, "I promise" to bind you to keep your word.

<sup>a</sup> 5:12 **either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.** The Lord Jesus said this in Matthew 5:33-36, when he combined the oath commands from Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 23:

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD." But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

Hebrews 6:16 says that when you swear you swear by someone (or something) greater than yourself.

<sup>b</sup> 5:12 **but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no.** The idea is that your word should be good enough. The Lord Jesus concluded the previous thought:

But let your statement be, "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; anything beyond these is of evil. Matthew 5:36

<sup>c</sup> 5:12 **so that you may not fall under judgment.** You are accountable for the words you use. James just told us that we should not grumble since the Judge is standing at the door. We live before his face and he sees the intents of our hearts.

<sup>d</sup> 5:12 We give our word in marriage vows, business agreements, financial loans and simple statements of intent. James gives us some good motivation to say what we mean and mean what we say. Here are some good reasons why you should keep your word:

1. The way you value the truth will affect every area of your life. Some people become so good at cover-ups that they begin to believe their own lies.
2. Your word is not valuable if it has to be propped up.
3. You will give an account for the way you esteem truth.

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