

June 30, 2024 PM – Pastor Kevin Olivier  
**James 5:12**— “A Warning Against Unlawful Oaths”

- A. When facing difficulty in interpreting Scripture, it helps to remember and apply the words of WCF 1, sec 9: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”
- B. James wrote this very Jewish epistle to help a newly established church that was scattered abroad according to **James 1:1**.

Be warned against taking unlawful oaths.	I. THE JEWISH ABUSE OF OATHS II. THE LAWFUL USE OF OATHS
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**I. THE JEWISH ABUSE OF OATHS → v12**

- A. As James began to end his very sermon-like epistle, he gave some short stand-alone admonitions.
- B. This brief admonition is a shortened version of what Jesus taught in **Mat 5:34-37**: “**But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,** <sup>35</sup>**or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.** <sup>36</sup>**Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.** <sup>37</sup>**But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.”**
1. Jesus mentioned the Jewish practice of taking oaths by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or by one’s own head.
  2. This seems peculiar to us, yet this was a somewhat common practice among the Jews to avoid taking the name of the Lord in vain as prohibited by **Ex 20:7** and **Deut 5:11**.
    - a. Dr. Simon Kistemaker wrote how James followed Jesus in rebuking this “...Jewish custom of strengthening statements with nonbinding oaths. . . . the Jews had made a distinction between binding and nonbinding oaths. Instead of using the divine name (which would be binding), they swore ‘by heaven or by earth or by anything else.’”
    - b. Being on the receiving end of this practice would be highly aggravating.
  3. Jesus made arguments that should make us not want to use words in such a flippant manner.
    - a. Do not make an oath “**by heaven for it is the throne of God.**”
      1. This argument fits with what we read in the Larger Catechism #112.

Q. 112. What is required in the third commandment?

A. The third commandment requires, that the name of God, His titles, attributes, ordinances, the Word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, His works, and whatsoever else there is whereby He makes Himself known, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; . . .
      2. Heaven is surely something “whereby He makes Himself known.”
      3. Holiness is one of God’s attributes. To use the word “holy” in such silly exclamations of excitement as “holy moley” or the much older oath, “holy Moses,” is a transgression of the third commandment.
    - b. When giving someone a promise, both Jesus and James said you should be trustworthy so that your “**yes is to be yes, and your no, no**” (**James 5:12**).
- C. Before we point the finger at the Jews and their strange practice, many people in America grew up with a sinful practice of taking oaths in a flippant manner so that people would pay attention to them
- D. By taking the Jewish context into account, there is a strong case from Scripture that both Jesus and James were speaking against the unlawful use of oaths and not against all oaths whatsoever.

## II. THE LAWFUL USE OF OATHS

A. **Deut 6:13** says, “**You shall fear *only* the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.**”

1. Some of you may remember your parents telling you not to swear. Here a verse where God tells you to swear by His name.”
2. “Swearing” in American usage is more like cursing or calling God to curse something or someone.
3. WCF 22, sec 2 says we ought to swear, “The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence.”
  - a. Again don’t swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or by one’s own head.
  - b. It is a strange and sinful practice to swear upon the grave of a loved one as well.

B. Not just in oaths or vows, but at all times, His blessed name “is to be used with all holy fear & reverence.” There is too much modern, flippant use of God’s name for a substitute for “Wow.”

C. WCF 22, sec 2 says that, “an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.”

1. Because they do not let Scripture interpret Scripture, the Quakers oppose taking oaths.
2. Jesus submitted to the Jewish high priest as a lawful authority when he said to our Lord, “**I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God**” (**Mat 26:63**).
  - a. A good, literal translation of this verse is, “**I charge you under oath by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.**”
  - b. **Lev 5:1** speaks of this process of a “**public adjuration to testify when he is a witness, whether he has seen or *otherwise* known, if he does not tell *it* [the truth] , then he will bear his guilt.**”
  - c. This is where our courts get this process of getting adjuring witnesses to tell the truth. “Do you solemnly (swear/affirm) that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”<sup>1</sup>
  - d. Dr. Kistemaker wrote, “If in a court of law defendant, plaintiff, lawyers, jury, and judge could be certain that every spoken word would be absolutely true to fact, oath taking would be superfluous. Because men shade the truth and falsify the facts at hand, the use of the oath is necessary. The person who takes the oath and breaks it faces divine wrath.”<sup>2</sup>

D. When Jesus and James said, “**yes is to be yes, and your no, no.**” This means you ought to be truth tellers even when you are not under oath.

1. **Rev 21:8** warns each of us that “**the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.**”
2. Pray for God’s Holy Spirit to convict you against the sin of telling lies. Ask for the Spirit’s fruit of self-control to stop this sin. God can help you if you ask.
3. God offers you forgiveness for this and the rest of your sins.

Review, conclusion, and further application:

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia, California uses this oath in their courts: “Do you do solemnly state that the testimony you may give in the case now pending before this court shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, Simon. New Testament Commentary: James, p. 172