

**“Integrity” – James 5:12**  
**August 9, 2020 –Morning Services**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA**  
**8:45am Indoor, 11:00am Outdoor**  
*Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez*

**James 5:12**

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.

This is the word of the Lord.

*Thanks be to God.*

**Let’s pray.****Introduction**

As part of our family vacation we drove around the Northwest part of Washington. As we drove to the shore, we passed two massive towers in Satsop, WA. We didn’t know it at the time, but apparently it is the site of the failed nuclear reactors – a project that began in 1977. It was a major multi-billion dollar project that never took off. To add to the sad story, in its parking lot are thousands of newer recalled VW diesel cars that were recalled due to their efforts to cheat on emissions tests. It has been described as “an accidental museum of high profile, large-scale energy failures.”<sup>1</sup>

While there were great aspirations for that plant and for those cars, some key components were missing from the initial equation: funding for one, and integrity for the other. In that parking lot, thousands of beautiful cars with their powerful engines sit, with nowhere to go. They are completely useless. It goes to show you that you can have a good idea, a beautiful one, but if it isn’t complete, often times the entire endeavor is useless.

As a whole, James’ letter is focused on making sure that the rubber meets the road. He is connecting the outward with the inward. He is not interested in his audience merely learning about Jesus and believing that he is the Son of God in theory. He wants his readers to follow Jesus in practice - in word and in deed. He wants our faith to have traction. To be complete. He doesn’t want our faith to be like a Boeing 747 jet that just looks down at the world from 30,000 ft high. He wants us to touch down and bring all the pieces of our faith together in practice (Krabbendam).

We see that throughout his letter. James talks about the suffering and trials in life because living out faith is full of suffering. Living out our faith requires diligence and sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/aerial-images-reveal-thousands-emissions-cheating-diesel-vws-awaiting-fate-shadow-defunct-nuclear-plant/>

In theory, it is easy to be loving and sacrificial to our neighbors. But in practice, it can be a very different and messy process. In theory, we believe it is important to help the orphan and the widow, the foreigner and the disenfranchised. But in practice, it takes real effort, real sacrifice and time, and can be a very difficult endeavor. Living out our faith is no small matter.

And I think that is one of the reasons I love the book of James and the Sermon on the Mount so much – they push us to really consider how all these doctrines and belief systems work out in our day-to-day lives. They push us into gospel living. They push us past the theory, and they force us to touch down, to integrate our faith and practice, because faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

### **From General to Specific: Integrity in speech**

And one area of gospel living and holy living that James zeros in on is the use of our words. You may remember that a large section is dedicated to demonstrating the power of the tongue and how incredibly difficult it is to tame it. James addresses the fact that the tongue is like a fire that sets a great forest ablaze. He reminds us that our tongue (or our words) can be like a deadly poison.

As he expands on the subject of the tongue, he writes against speaking evil against one another, and against boasting, and then he reminds his readers that they should not grumble against each other. But then he concludes the subject in the verse we are studying today. He says, “**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 do not fall under condemnation.”

Commentators disagree on why he says this here. After all, it doesn’t seem like swearing oaths should be a subject of such great importance, so great a point that he would say that it is *above all the other subjects he has addressed* in this section. But the truth is that this verse and this idea does carry a lot of weight.

In many ways, it carries more weight than the previous statements on the use of our words, because what James addresses here is not just an additional teaching on how we should speak, but the *overall principle that should govern all Christians*. As followers of Jesus, **we must be people of integrity**.

As one commentator puts it, “Truth belongs to the integrity of a godly man – truth not only in speech or in fidelity to a word given **but in his whole character and deportment**. Hypocrisy is a living lie.”<sup>2</sup>

Here what James is focusing in on is not just the way we *conduct* ourselves in our speech, but **who we are**. Borrowing from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), he is focusing in on the issue of integrity.

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<sup>2</sup> Moore, G.F. (*Judaism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, vols 1-2, 1927; vol 3, 1930], II, p.191).

When we say “yes,” does it really mean “yes,” or is there room for doubt? Are we honest people? Do we speak the truth?

### Deceitful Speech Practices

In the cultural context of James’ day, surrounding cultures recognized the importance of the truth. William R. Baker, who authored a book on personal speech ethics in the Epistle of James, notes that in the Jewish, Greek, Christian, Egyptian and Babylonian cultures, truth was of paramount importance. He writes, Egyptians saw “falsehood....as something which cut away the very fabric of the world order.”<sup>3</sup>

We know this to be true even as we think of Abram’s life. In Genesis 12 we read the account of him going into Egypt during the time of famine. Fearing that the Pharaoh would take his wife and kill him because she was beautiful, he lied to the Egyptian Pharaoh, saying that his wife Sarai was actually his sister. Pharaoh took Sarai and suddenly God brought plagues on Pharaoh and his household because of her. Pharaoh, realizing the trouble he was in, reprimanded Abram, saying, “*why have you done this to me?*”

Later we read that Abraham lied to save himself once again, but this time to Abimelech, the king of Gerar. When the king took Sarah thinking she was Abraham’s sister, God visited the king in a dream and let him know that he was a dead man for having taken Sarah. Abimelech quickly restored her to Abraham then rebuked him, saying, “*You have done things to me that should never be done.*” (Gen. 20:9)

Even pagan cultures were shocked at Abraham’s lying and falsehood. He did things that even pagan cultures knew “ought not to be done!”

The main point here is that lying, even among many pagan cultures, was **not** an acceptable practice. *That said*, it was still practiced – even by God-fearing men like Abraham. Throughout Scripture we find many who would lie, and many who would protect themselves through deceit.

While lying and betrayal was condemned, it appears a way around feeling bad about lying and justifying deceitful practice was by making a distinction between *binding* oaths and *non-binding* oaths (Keddie, 172).

In Matthew 23 we see how easily religious people would slide into this practice of deceit by using non-binding oaths. One commentator explains it like this:

“An unsuspecting person would enter into an agreement on the basis, e.g., of an oath sworn by the temple, or by the altar, or by heaven. However, eventually he would find out that this agreement would not be honored because the oath was not sworn by the gold of the temple, by the offering upon the altar, or by the God of heaven (Mt. 23:16-22)....[It would be no worse than] crossing one’s fingers behind one’s back with the full

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<sup>3</sup> Baker, W.R., ‘Above All Else’: Contexts of the Call for Verbal Integrity in James 5.12: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 54 (1994) 57-71, p. 58.

intention not to make good on one's promises. It could be called childish, if it were not so wicked" (Krabbendam, 798).

Commentators agree that the prevailing practice of the day was deeply bankrupt of truth. One writes, "Distrust had reached such proportions, that oaths had to be used to shore up one's words artificially in order to be believed. The irony is that any such special invocation to buttress one's own speech becomes, paradoxically, an admission that (it) is untrustworthy without such warrant. The more towering the oath...the more suspect my innate truthfulness appears" (Johnson, 341).

Such was the corruption in their day, that it appears oaths had become a part of everyday language, even among Christians. Christians who were invoking God as their witness, or who sidestepped using God's name and instead swore by heaven or earth or other oaths, to avoid using his name in vain, were still dishonoring his name by being deceitful people.

They were just doing it in ways that seemed justifiable. Like kids crossing their fingers behind their back, they were engaging in premeditated and calculated deceit.

### **Christians are to be known by the truth**

And James confronts this by laying out his instructions. Do not swear by heaven, earth or any other oath, but let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no," "no."

James' takes his exhortation to a whole new level. He isn't saying that swearing oaths is wrong. There are plenty of examples in scripture that point to acceptable oaths. God, himself even takes oaths (*Ex. 13:5, 22:10-11, Num. 14:16, Deut. 6:13, Psalm 89:35, Isaiah 65:16, Heb. 6:17*). That is not the issue. The issue was that oaths were being abused and misused.

The issue was that Christians had become so untrustworthy, so two-faced and hypocritical, that in order to have someone believe them, they were having to swear by something greater than themselves.

So unreliable and false was their testimony, that in order for people to give credence to their words, they had to swear oaths.

How could that be possible? How could Christians who were pulled out of darkness and deceit and into the light of the truth allow themselves to be dragged back into the life of deceit?

The Bible describes those who are liars as those who are associated with evil. Satan is the greatest enemy to the truth. He is a liar and the father of lies, who hates the truth (Jn. 8.44). How could Christians fall into such evil, such deceit?

Christians are supposed to be known for preaching the gospel of truth, the word of truth. They are the ones who are supposed to know the truth and be established in the truth.

They are to live by it, walk in it and obey it. They are the ones who were supposed to be free from false speech and speak only the truth. (Baker, 66).

It was Jesus who said...“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Truth is the only way to be free of condemnation and sin. Truth is the only way to the Father.

But instead of speaking and being known for truth, they were so untrustworthy that they backslid into swearing oaths in order to be trusted by society.

The gut of James’ message for us is that he is not just calling people to change a behavior. He is calling us **to change our character**. He is calling believers **to a life of integrity** – where their words and lives coincide. As one author explained, “a man should be inwardly what he is outwardly” (Baker, 64).

Another writes, that as Christians, “our truthfulness should be so consistent and dependable that we need no oath to support it. A simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ should suffice.”<sup>4</sup> “Our mere word should be as utterly trustworthy as a signed document...”<sup>5</sup>

And this is the call of James throughout his book. He is consistently calling Christians everywhere to work out their salvation, to produce fruit in accordance to who they are – for true faith will produce works.

So, when it comes to speech, it is no different. Speech is not some inconsequential matter of life; it is the fruit of the heart. It is what flows out of the abundance of our soul.

For that reason, when James tells us to make sure we are truthful people, it is because true faith in Jesus requires true obedience and true speech. If we are truly unified with Jesus, we will live our lives out in integrity. Our walk and our talk will match.

This of course, was exactly how Jesus lived. Jesus demonstrated in his life on earth a perfect obedience to God’s law and he spoke with authority because he was a man of integrity. His word and his life coincided. He spoke truth, and people knew that he was practicing it.

And this is what Jesus saved us for, so that we too could walk in the truth of the gospel, that we could be lights of truth in a world of lies and darkness.

### **Our Witness**

A few years back we purchased about 15 small white stone chests in Arequipa, Peru to give as gifts to churches that supported our mission work. At these different churches we would pull out one of the handcrafted little stone chests as a gift to give the pastor as a very small

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<sup>4</sup> Moo, Douglas, *The Letter of James*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 233.

<sup>5</sup> Mitton, C.L., *The Epistle of James*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 193.

thank you for their support. We would take care to explain the origin of the rock, and where and how it was made. We wanted them to know it was special. Well, apparently our kids has been paying attention the whole time, because after about the eighth time we patiently explained to a pastor where the rock was from and its handcrafted value, one of our sweet kids blurted out in front of the pastor, "Daddy, how many of those things did you buy!?"

I didn't even notice that our kids were paying attention. I didn't think they cared. But we were making such a big deal about these little chests, which they probably considered very common (having grown up in Peru), and they were going to say what they were thinking. Kids pick up on a lot more than we realize.

But it isn't just kids who pick up on who we are. The world is always watching and observing us and our witness. The world watches us more than we realize. I read a quote recently that said, "the world doesn't take the church seriously, because the church isn't serious" (Paul C. Payne).

And that quote stings a little. It stings because there is some truth to it. The church is serious about many things. Our faith, our doctrine, our worship and preaching. But in many other more practical ways the world sees us as hypocritical. They don't see our walk and our talk matching up.

They see us going to church, but then they see us exploding at our kids. They see us preach kindness and gentleness, and then they see how we treat our co-workers. They see you talk about trusting in God and enduring hardship and then they see you exploding when your rights are infringed upon.

The big disconnect for non-Christians is that when they look at the church expecting integrity, what they often find instead is hypocrisy. Much like my children, they see past the show, and call it as they see it. They pick up our inconsistencies very quickly, whether we realize we have them or not.

While we might not struggle in the area of swearing oaths, there are other areas of life where we might not have as much integrity as we would hope. It is far too easy to fall into the patterns of this world and the culture around us. It is easy to slip into autopilot and just go with the flow, to stretch the truth to help us live more comfortably.

But what God is calling us to here, is to **live in** the truth of the gospel even when it has consequences. To trust in him, as we live out his commandments in obedience.

I believe that one of the reasons that oaths became so prevalent among Christians, was because it offered them an easy way out of the difficulties they faced.

And if we are honest, we get it. We know the challenges that being a Christian can bring. It can be tempting to relax certain aspects of our convictions. We are tempted to do this all the time.

We know the truths of Scripture, we know what God commands, but they are difficult to practice, and we relax those laws. We act one way at church, and a very different way when our guard is down.

But when we give into temptation and live two different lives, for two different audiences, the world sees through us, and it damages our witness and dishonors our Lord and Savior.

One of the most uncomfortable and frustrating conversations I had when we first moved back to the USA was with a used car salesman. The stereotype proved true in this case. I don't know about you, but I know that I don't enjoy talking to used car salesmen. I feel like they are trying to sell me something that they don't even believe in.

And in a very similar way, I think when the world sees us living our lives like non-Christians, our entire "sales pitch" discredits us. It is like they see us as used car salesmen. They see us trying to sell them something that we don't seem to even believe in, and rather than our lives endorsing the message we are preaching, it is our lives and our testimony to a watching world that discredits our message.

Jesus, in Matt. 5:14 says, "You are the light of the world. ....let your light shine before others, **so that they may see your good works** and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Our integrity not only honors God, but it brings glory to the Father when others see our good works. That is why James is so insistent on us being people of truth and integrity. Living out our faith is a tremendous witness to those in our homes, in our workplaces and in the world around us, AND it brings honor and glory to God.

### **Shame**

If you are like me, you might be feeling pretty discouraged right now. We all fail miserably at living lives of integrity. To be honest, it was very difficult to write on the subject of integrity, because every time you write a word and try to preach it, you consider all of the ways in which you have failed and need to grow and change, all the ways in which even your kids have picked up on your many inconsistencies and failures, all of the ways in which you are hypocritical and where you missed the mark. You think of all the ways in which you have failed, and it can bring a lot of shame.

But, brothers and sisters, Jesus and James did not give us these messages so we would just beat ourselves up and feel guilt and shame. Jesus commands this of us, so that we repent and change, **AND** the encouraging this is that he also promises to be with us as we seek to do so, as we seek to live in integrity, to move our theology into day-to-day practice.

He does not leave us in our helpless estate of failure but brings us out of the pit of despair and sets our feet on solid ground. He strengthens us and encourages us.

He not only takes away our shame and guilt, but he clothes us with his righteousness and gives us the strength and guidance to live in integrity.

When the world sees us, just like my children were, they will always be able to quickly identify our failures. They will see the many ways in which we fall short.

But it is my hope and prayer that as the world sees us fail over and over again in our attempts to be holy in our speech and conduct, that it would also see that we get back up again. Not because we pick ourselves up, but because Jesus does.

He is the source of integrity and truth, and it is for that very reason that we are here today: to learn more from him, to ask for his help, to ask him to forgive our many inadequacies.

While our witness in this world is important and honors God, what is even more important is that those around us, would see that our pattern, our life is all about returning to Jesus. Repenting and turning to Jesus. Every single day.

If there is one lesson that you can leave for those around you, may it be that while you have failed to live your whole life in true integrity, you have been faithful to turn to Jesus in repentance.

May people know you as a person who might have messed up life, but who turned to Jesus repeatedly in all their struggles. Have you failed in life? Of course you have. We all have. Show the world that Jesus still receives you, and that your integrity before the Father is pure and righteous because you are hidden in Him.

For who is it that frees us from condemnation in this world and for eternity?  
Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father, except through him.

This is the greatest witness that we can give to the world: to show that while we fight to be different than the world, and seek to be holy, when we fail – and fail we will - we still rely on and rest in our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

### **In conclusion,**

In this passage the Lord has called us to integrity in speech and in practice. We are to be consistent in our words and deeds, giving the world a faithful light and witness that we are servants of the truth, united with Jesus, on whom we live and depend and have our being. And as we do so, let us remember that as we fail repeatedly, may we remember that Jesus came for this very reason: to save us from our sins and our lack of integrity. It is Jesus who cleanses all who trust in him. This is our great hope and he is our great Savior. Amen.