

JAMES 5:12
“DO NOT SWEAR”

Several weeks ago, my second son sat down to watch the season premiere of “Mythbusters.” If you have never seen it, it’s a show where odd people do odd things to test odd theories. Sometimes I watch more and sometimes I watch less, but I was pretty impressed by the theme of this show: duct tape. I especially enjoyed when they used duct tape as the casing for a potato gun. They loaded up that sucker and launched several potatoes over the length of a football field. That is great stuff!

Duct tape is very useful. But you use duct tape because you have a problem. Something is leaking. Something is sagging. Something is unsightly. In a perfect world, we would not need duct tape.

We are almost finished with our journey through James. Our theme has been “Real Life. Real Faith.” For James, real faith in Christ will lead to a real life for Christ. We do not need to duct tape over our lives. We are real. This “reality” includes the way we speak. Our lives should be real, and our words should be real. We want to make ourselves and our lives seem different than they are, but we cannot and must not do this. Let’s use these few words to discover what we may do, what God will do, and what we must do, in a world where we are tempted to duct tape over the truth before God and people.

James begins with **WHAT WE MAY DO**. He says, “Above all, my brothers, do not swear.” He is not writing about cursing. Sometimes we say, “Don’t swear,” and we are telling people not to use “bad words.” This is not that kind of “swearing.” This is the “swearing” of taking an oath - the act of making a solemn promise about your life.

Is James saying that we can never do this in any situation? I don’t think so. We have to read this part of the Bible in the context of the rest of the Bible, and we see lots of oath-taking in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God commands oaths. In the New Testament, people like Paul take oaths. We take oaths for our government and in the church. James is not speaking against every kind of serious promise. He is thinking of a certain kind of oath - what we might call a “duct tape oath” - where we do not want to speak the truth, but want to avoid the truth. How do we do this? We do this when we try to fool people, and when we try to fix God.

WE WANT TO FOOL PEOPLE. James’ words sound much like his brother Jesus’ words in Matthew 5. Jesus is speaking to people who take oaths and make promises in the name of things other than God. Instead of swearing by the name of God, they swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or even their own heads. They may say, “In the name of Jerusalem, the holy city, I promise I will do this.”

But because they do not swear by God’s name, they feel no obligation to keep their promise. So they are using oaths to appear to be sincere, when they are not sincere at all. They are trying to fool people into believing they are honest, trustworthy truth tellers, when they are not.

We want to fool people. Do we do this? I believe we can. Let’s be honest about honesty. No one wants to appear to be a liar. No one wants to seem to be a promise-breaker. So we do whatever we can to appear to be sincere. We may not say the exact words, “I swear.” But by the way we speak, we can seem honest, when we are not.

Here is an example. Let’s say my wife wants me to be home at four o’clock. We have to be somewhere at five, and it is a half-hour drive, and I need to clean up and change before I go. I tell her I will be there at four. But is that the truth? Maybe I don’t really want to go to this event, so I don’t really care if we arrive by five. Or maybe I know I have a lot to do, and it would take a minor or major miracle for me to be home by four. Or maybe I am overly optimistic about what I can do before four, so I say I will be home, when if I think carefully about it, I will realize there is no way I can be home before four. I have fooled her. I do not make it home until 4:45. Then I am full of excuses for why it did not happen, when I knew it would not happen when I made the promise.

We want to fool people. Maybe we want to fool our employers or teachers into thinking we are working really hard. Maybe we want to fool our parents into thinking we are listening to them. Maybe we

want to fool our pastor into thinking we care about spiritual things. Maybe we want to fool our friends into thinking we care about them. Maybe we want to fool our brothers or sisters in Christ into thinking we are not struggling with the sin that is obvious to them. So we say what we say, and promise what we promise, hoping to “duct tape” our way through life.

We want to fool people. *WE WANT TO FIX GOD*. What is James’ concern in James 5? He is urging his readers to patience in the face of suffering. What do we tend to do when we suffer? We turn to God, and we ask God to get us out of it. We want the suffering to end. So maybe we try to “swear” something before God to get God to do what we want him to do. We think we can bargain with God. We think we can manipulate God. We want to fix his plans, so we can have what we want.

We don’t want to trust in God’s sovereign control over everything. We don’t want to wait for God’s providence in this situation. We want to be God. If we can’t be God, we want to find a way to get God to do our will. So we try to fix him with untrue words.

For example, let’s say you have a chronic health problem. You have this problem because you have pursued bad habits all your life. Now they are catching up with you. You don’t like it. You want to be free of this. So you promise God that if he will just help you feel better, you will take better care of yourself.

What is the truth? You will take care of yourself for a day or a week or a month, but your habits are your habits, and when you feel less guilt and feel more strength, you will go back to those habits. You say all that to God, but you know in your heart that you will not do what you say. Yet you say it anyway, hoping he will like what you say and give you what you want.

We want to fix God. Maybe we want to fix God by promising to give more to church or charity. Maybe we want to fix God by promising to pay more attention to our spouses or children. Maybe we want to fix God by promising not to rip off any more customers. Maybe we want to fix God by promising to respect our parents. Maybe we want to fix God by promising to read our Bibles and pray every day. I will do this, God, so you will do that.

Fooling people and fixing God. We may not even think we are doing it. We may sound sincere. But we are lying to ourselves, others, and God.

After James mentions what we may do, he describes **WHAT GOD WILL DO**. Listen again to the end of the verse: “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No,’ no, or you will be condemned.” We have seen this word several times in James. Most often, it is translated “judge.” So what kind of judgment is this?

Is it *CONDEMNATION*? Is James saying that if you ever lie or fail to keep a promise, you will be sent straight to hell? Let’s hope not! We all sin in these ways, which reminds us why we are saved by what God does for us in Jesus, not by what we do for God.

But let’s remember James’ concern in this book. He wants professing believers to express that faith in real life. He knows that people will try to lie to God about their faith, and lie to other people about their faith. If that is you, God declares your faith to be dead, and he commands your soul to be lost.

Is this judgment a judgment of *EVALUATION*? As we have seen in James, God does promise a certain form of judgment for Christians. If we are truly one with Jesus by faith, we are free from God’s condemning judgment. But God is concerned with how we live for Jesus, and we will face some sort of “evaluation” for our lives.

If you profess faith in Jesus, but you express that faith with a life of lies before God and others, even if that profession is genuine, God pledges his displeasure at the way you are living. When we swear falsely, we are poor disciples of Jesus.

Yet as I think about this question of God’s judgment, I wonder if there is a third kind of judgment. Could this be a judgment of *RESULTS*? In other words, if you are lying about your faith, you will be condemned eternally. If your faith is real but you are filled with lies, you will be evaluated poorly. But all of that is later. What about now? Isn’t it true that God allows us to suffer the consequences of our sin and foolishness? Even if we are his children through Jesus, don’t we see bad results from our bad decisions?

I believe this is one of the main themes of the book of Proverbs. They are filled with this sort of reasoning. If you do this, then that will happen to you. In his sovereignty and providence, and even in his compassion and mercy, God ordains that wrong decisions lead to bad results.

So which is it? Is James thinking here of condemnation, evaluation, or results? We cannot be sure, because the word he uses is used in several different ways. But we can be sure of this: God is serious about this. He is a God of truth, and he will respond to the false promises of those who do not know him, and to the false promises of those who do know him.

As a young man, William Wilberforce had nothing but time and money on his hands. He used his time to spend his money. But he had a friend who showed him the truths of the Christian faith. He told William about how sinful we are, and how we have no hope of ever being united with God unless Jesus Christ turns our hearts to faith in him.

William Wilberforce understood all of this. He wrote that he was “persuaded that if I died at any time I should perish everlastingly.” So what did he do? Did he turn from his sin and turn in faith to Jesus Christ? No. “I went on,” he said, “cheerful and (happy).”

Only later did William Wilberforce break beneath the weight of his lies and come in faith to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. James’ words about judgment should turn us from such a cheerful, happy, contented walk through a life of sin, and they should lead us to a new way, for James testifies of a God who judges people who lie to him about their faith and lie to others in their lives.

We may swear, and so try to fool people and fix God. God will judge this - either through eternal condemnation, painful evaluation, or real results. But James packs more into these few words. He not only shows us what we may do, and what God will do. He reveals **WHAT WE MUST DO**. He writes, “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No,’ no....” You don’t need to take a lot of oaths and make a lot of promises. You don’t need to make a show of your honesty. Simply be true with people, and be true with God.

BE TRUE WITH PEOPLE. Why do we find this so hard? I believe it is mostly because of a combination of pride and fear. Pride says, “I want people to think well of me.” Fear says, “I don’t want people to think badly of me.” So we say what we think will lead people to think well of us, instead of badly of us.

How do we grow in becoming true before people? How do we break through those barriers of pride and fear, and become free to be honest with people in our dealings with them? We will only do this, as we grow in our trust in God.

We trust in his greatness, which purges our pride. He is great, and I am not, and I don’t need to be great before people, because he is the great One, and I worship him and love him and follow him. What will people think of me? How will people respond to me? Will they see how great I am? I don’t care anymore. I trust in a great God, and that is enough for me. So I am true before people. I am true about my sin. I am true about my weakness. I am true about my failures. I am true about myself.

We trust in his goodness, which purges our fear. Because of Jesus, I know my Father is good to me. People may not be good to me. People may be cruel or harsh or unkind or unfair. But I know the goodness of God in Jesus, so I can take all of that. I can accept criticism. I can face opposition. I can handle hatred. I don’t like it. I don’t want it. I don’t go looking for it. But I need not fear it, because I know my good God is above me, behind me, before me, and for me. I have no fear of people, so I speak the truth.

Think of this past week, or this past month, or this past year, or even think of major events in your life, when you have tried to fool people. What was happening in your heart? What was going on in your mind? Somewhere, I bet there was pride, and I guess there was fear.

I am reminded of a woman named Leanne. I read her story many years ago. She worked at a utility company, and layoffs were on the way. Each day, she would look at the bulletin board to see if she was on the list of layoffs.

Some people were laid off, but Leanne was not. Yet through this process, she learned that she not only

loved her job. She lived for it. She just about worshipped it. While she was right to be thankful for it, she was wrong to gain all of her hope from it. She learned to pray, "Help me remember, Lord, that my only real security is You."

As I trust the One who is my only real security, I am not proud or fearful. I can be true with people, as I trust in him to sovereignly provide through the joys and sorrows of this life.

We must be true with people. As well, we must *BE TRUE WITH GOD*. Do we really think we can "fix" God? Do we really think we can bargain with him and manipulate him into doing what we want him to do? As we will learn again next week, we are to pray to him. But do we think we can "fix" him?

Think of life forever. We are tempted to believe we can "fix" God through bargaining or manipulation. I will go to church. I will do nice things. I will be a respectable citizen.

But where is your heart? Is your trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation? Do you know in the depths of your soul that you are not good, and you need Jesus' goodness to give you peace with the good and great God? Or are you even here this morning, in a pathetic attempt to "fix" God and get him to give you grace? Be true with him.

Think of this life. James is writing to people who are struggling with real faith in a real world of real trial and trouble. Real faith is faith. Real faith is trusting God in daily life.

Do you? Or are you trying to "fix" him by getting him to do what you want him to do? Think of how you think of him. Think of how you pray to him. How might you be trying to manipulate him or bargain with him, because you want to be God or fix God? Be true with him.

Be true with him, because of Jesus, and through Jesus. God's Son always spoke the truth to his Father, and to the people around him. Why? Because he trusted his Father completely. We will never do that in this life, but his grace frees us to walk this road of faith. By his grace, I know God is my Father, and I am learning to trust him. By his grace, I am free to let my "Yes" be yes, and my "No" be no.

One of the most popular uses of duct tape is to treat warts. People have actually studied whether duct tape helps warts. I really don't know, but I do know this: you cannot duct tape the truth about your heart and your life. Use duct tape to cure warts. Use duct tape to launch potatoes. Use duct tape to seal leaks, reinforce sags, and cover ugly sights.

But do not duct tape the truth. Do not try to fool people or fix God. He will judge this. In Jesus Christ, he calls his people to live with honesty and integrity, before the people in our lives, and before the God who rules our lives.

How are you using duct tape today with your heart or life? You don't need to trust it. You need to trust the One who sent his Son to live, die, and rise. May he set you free to simply be true.