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A0750 – December 16, 2007 – Jas 5:12 – Do Not Swear

James 5:12 Πρὸ πάντων δέ, ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ὀμνύετε, μήτε τὸν οὐρανόν, μήτε τὴν γῆν, μήτε ἄλλον τινὰ ὄρκον· ἦτις δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ ναί, ναί, καὶ τὸ οὐ, οὐ· ἵνα μὴ εἰς ὑπόκρισιν πέσητε. (BYZ)

James 5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, neither by heaven, nor by earth, nor by any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and no, no; so that you do not fall into hypocrisy. (Author's Translation)

James 5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. (NASB95)

Now, this is a difficult verse. You'll notice that most versions of the Bible set v 12 apart as a separate periscope. You see in your Bible that there are titles to a section, obviously those aren't inspired. Translators or editors break the text up into paragraphs and sometimes different editors break these up differently and then they give that paragraph a title and that's called a periscope. So, when I study, every week I look at Greek and English texts and see how the translators made the paragraph breaks. This one's kind of odd because most (not all) translators put it by itself. It's just kind of hanging there. But it's odd, "Do you write one sentence paragraphs?" This is just one sentence in the Greek. If you write a paper for an English teacher and you had a paragraph consisting of one sentence would they like that? No. So, it's a little more than odd and isolating it all like that makes it difficult to connect with the surrounding context. So, what I think is this sentence goes with verses 7-11. He's given us the command to be patient in suffering and he's given us examples of the prophets and Job, men who endured patiently their trials and saw the mercy and compassion of the Lord. Now, in that context he gives us this command **But above all, my brethren, do not**

swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. So, the point is there is one thing that must take precedence in a suffering situation and that's the control of the tongue. So, this goes with vv 7-11 (see NET Bible). Isn't it true that when we enter a trial "...we become impatient...lose self-control" and "...tend to say things better left unspoken.¹ So he gives us this vital command.

But above all, that preposition **above** is *pro* which usually means "before", "But before all" and it sort of carries the connotation of "first of all". The Greek lexicon's say that in this verse it is "a marker of precedence in importance" as in 1 Pt 4:8. So, we translate it **above all**, that is, in a suffering situation like Job and the prophets went through there is one thing that takes precedence over everything and it relates to our conduct in speech, what we say when we come under trial in a frustrating situation, it may be stress, it may be pain, it may be someone else in pain that we have to watch, but no matter what the trial is above all we have got to watch our speech. Remember, James is very concerned with our speech. He says in the theme of the letter, "be slow to speak" and that's because in a suffering situation it is so easy to get angry and lash out with the tongue. But anger does not produce the righteousness of God (Jas 1:20) and if we just let the tongue go, just lash out in the situation then we're going to commit sins of the tongue. It is so easy to sin with the tongue; we use it to curse God, "Why are you doing this to me God", we use it to curse men, "Oh I wish he were dead", we use it to blame others, "That's so and so's fault, no problem here, I'm just a victim" and so the sins of the tongue are a dime a dozen and we have to be very careful because the tongue tends to slip. We've all slipped and said things we shouldn't have said. Some people argue, "Well, it was true" but just because something is true does not mean its right to be talking about it. Something can be true but inappropriate, something can be true but malicious, something can be true but gossip. The tongue is a sword, it cuts deep, sometimes we remember what someone said for years and years and years because wounds of the tongue go very deep and they can take a long time to heal. The tongue is typically the first thing to sin in a suffering situation because we fly off the handle so that's why James says in chapter 3:2 that if any man does not stumble in what he says he's a mature man, a *teleios* man, he's reached spiritual maturity, he's able to keep his tongue in check. So, James says, **above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any**

other oath. That's the negative command, the negative side, what *not to do* in a suffering situation, **but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.** That's the positive command, the positive side, what *to do* in a suffering situation. You'll see that the verse begins with the word **But** and in the middle another **but**, and those two conjunctions separate the negative command from the positive command.

The negative command is the verb **swear**, "do not swear". It is directed toward the **brethren**, fellow believers in Jesus Christ. James is clearly throughout written to believers, genuine regenerate people. And the command is "do not swear". Whatever the swearing is here it's inappropriate, it's sin. It's the Greek word *omnuo* and it's not talking about saying cuss words, swearing in that sense. Yes, saying cuss words is wrong but that's not what James is talking about. This has to be understood in the 1st century Jewish context and once again it seems James is relying on things Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Turn over to Matt 5. There are several sections in James that I laid out for you in the beginning that harken back to Matt 5. At that time James was not a believer that his half-brother was the Messiah. He didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah until after Jesus' resurrection but he may have been present when Jesus taught these things up on the northern coast of the lake of Galilee. If you're going to Israel with us next year you'll get to stand where Jesus spoke these words. Notice Matt 5:33-37. This seems to be the root of James' teaching, "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' ³⁴"But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. ³⁶"Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷"But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil." Now, Jesus is quoting from the Law isn't He? This is you have heard that the ancients were told. In other words, here's these Jewish people, they are sitting there on the side of this mount listening to Jesus expound on the OT Law and he says, now, "you have heard" this and what he meant was, since your childhood you've gone to the synagogues and you've heard the scribes and the Pharisees talk about this text from Lev 19:12 and they've given you their interpretation of this text which has to do with making vows. Verse 34, but I say to you, in other words this is what's happening, the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching them their

interpretation of the OT Law but it was not the intended interpretation of the OT Law. How does Jesus know? Because Jesus is the lawgiver. He's the author of the Hebrew language. He's got no problems with the meaning of the Law and they shouldn't have either. The 1st century scribes and Pharisees were like lawyers, they were technicians of the law, oh boy were they slick, "We can get around that law, we've got a loophole here, open window for another interpretation." They were experts at doing all these slight distortions of the Law. So, Jesus words "but I say to you" mean "The scribes and Pharisees got it wrong, let me tell you what it really means." Jesus was a stickler for the right interpretation. He wasn't into the little games people play with the text. Those guys were messing with God's word and Jesus was not going to put up with it. To see how they did this turn over to Matt 23. Here's how they dealt with the OT laws on vows. Watch how these guys argued, "I've got this fine technical point here that keeps me from being condemned by the law." It's all this "I'm still righteous, I haven't violated anything, I'm okay." Verse 16, "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, *that* is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' See how they squeaked by on a technicality, or at least they thought they did. Verse 18, "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, *that* is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' Another way to squeak by, so they thought. Does Jesus, the Lawgiver accept this interpretation? No, look at vv 19-22, "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?" Obviously they are equally important. Verse 20, "Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears *both* by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹"And whoever swears by the temple, swears *both* by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²²"And whoever swears by heaven, swears *both* by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it." You can't get by on a technical point. You guys are guilty, you're blind, your hypocrites, your lawbreakers. But see, the human heart is dark, it's sinful, it's desperately wicked, who can know it? It's got to re-interpret, re-interpret, re-interpret to wall off the conscience from absolute authority. We like to think that we're okay. That's what the scribes and Pharisees did. Look at all our righteousness, we don't violate the law because we've got this slick line of reasoning here. We don't like to be guilty so what do we do, we rationalize what we did and accuse everybody else, but we're not guilty, we're okay because of this technicality. But when we've done that what have we done? We've denied absolutes because we've said, "That's wrong for everybody else but not for me." And if it's wrong for everybody else

but me then it ceases to be absolute. Relativism falls quickly out of this. The carnal mind is a breeding ground for relativism. So, Jesus is getting to the point that you can't do that. The law is absolute and you've violated it. You've made vows and not kept them so you're a lawbreaker, you're bankrupt before God. When you make a vow you're obligating yourself to do everything you said you'd do and if you fail at one point you've violated the vow.

Now, let's ask a question. Is it wrong to make an oath? Is there ever a time when it is okay to make an oath? This is a tough question. Clearly Matt 5:33–37 urges believers not to volunteer for oaths, but it does not preclude accepting an oath (as in court). For example, if you go to court is Jesus saying, don't take an oath? No, in fact, when Jesus went to court under Caiaphas He was put under oath (Matthew 26:63). Jesus didn't volunteer to be put under oath but He did accept an oath in a court of law. But outside of a court of law I think the Scriptures are teaching that believers are not to take oaths. This basic teaching is the background for James.

Turn back to Jas 5:12. James is making an application to a suffering situation. Remember, this is a suffering context, the prophets and Job suffered. When you get in a suffering situation the first tendency is to get angry, blast everybody and defend yourself. "I didn't cause this, it's not my fault", often we're on the defensive here. Often we're taking the blame for something. And when that happens what do people do? They say, "I swear to God I did not do that?" "I swear to God I did not say that?" That is so common and that is what James is condemning. Do not say that. The word **swear** means "to affirm the veracity of one's statement by invoking a transcendent entity". What's the implication? If I have to invoke a transcendent being? If I have to "swear to God" or something then what does that imply about my daily speech? That it's not reliable. When I tell my children, "If you do that again I'm going to spank you" and then they do it again and I don't spank them what have I communicated? That I'm a liar. That I can't be trusted to do what I say. You know where this leads in families? "Well, my mommy lied about spanking me, what else is she lying about? Maybe she's lying about the Bible? Maybe she's lying about Jesus dying on the cross for my sin? And so, mommy and daddy aren't reliable sources. I can't get true information from them. That's where this leads on a fundamental level. If you have to say, "This time I really mean it" then the implication is the other times you don't mean it. As Tom Constable says, "James's wisdom amounts to this: we should never

need to use an oath to prove that ‘this time I really mean it!’ Instead we should *always* ‘really mean it.’ⁱⁱ Fruchtenbaum says “The necessity to support a statement with an oath demonstrates a lack of reliability.”ⁱⁱⁱ What James is calling us to do is simply let our yes be yes and our no be no. There’s no need to bolster our speech to affirm that this statement is really true! This time I really mean it. How often do we fail in this?

“These are both Jewish oath formulas, either swearing by something in heaven or by something on earth;”

While vows may be permitted for a New Testament believer, a vow with no termination point becomes a law. Numbers 30:2 reads, *If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.* A person who binds himself with a vow voluntarily gives up some of his freedom in Christ. Keeping the vow can become the focus rather than walking in love and keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. The New Testament does not encourage making vows (Matthew 5:33–37; James 5:12).^{iv}

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ⁱ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003), Jas 5:12.

ⁱⁱ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003), Jas 5:12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles*, 307.

^{iv} Chafer Theological Seminary, *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal Volume 5* (Chafer Theological Seminary, 1999; 2002), 5:57-58.

^v Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003), Jas 5:12.

^{vi} Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles*, 307.

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