



James

Oaths

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

In the midst of James' teaching on the importance of being doers of the word, he reminds his readers not to swear an oath. By telling us not to swear, James is not saying that we should avoid bad language, although this is implicit in his teaching. James warns against the practice of making statements then guaranteeing it by making an appeal to God as a witness that the statement is true. Many people, in an attempt to bolster their credibility will rashly say, "Really, I swear to God it is true."

During James' day people made a distinction between oaths that were binding and oaths which were not. If the name of God was used in swearing an oath, then the oath was definitely binding, but if God's name was not used, such as in the case of swearing by earth or Jerusalem, then it was considered less binding. James echoes Matthew 5:34-35, which points out that everything is in one way or another connected to God.

When God's name is used in an oath, He becomes an active partner in the transaction. As Christians we are already covenant partners with God, therefore James is encouraging us to demonstrate complete integrity in our speech by letting our yes be yes and our no be no. While there is a place for oaths in society, our word should in most cases be enough.



James 5:12

James 5:12 "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation."



Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. Have you ever backed up your statements with the words "The Lord is my witness," or "I swear?"
2. Have you ever had to "swear to tell the truth" in court?
3. Have you ever raised your hand as you said to someone, "Believe me, really?"





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions on the Text (cont.)

Homework

1. What do you think most people mean when they say, “I swear” to something?
2. Walking in integrity may even hurt at times. The Psalmist said that among those who shall sojourn in thy tent is the one “who swears to his own hurt” (Psalm 15:4) Have you ever had a time when you told the truth, even when it hurt?
3. Do you know anyone who when they say something you know they are telling the truth? How does their relationship with God influence their integrity?
4. When you hear of perjury among national leaders, how does it affect you?
5. In the marriage ceremony, how is God brought into the covenant as a witness?
6. How does integrity in speech contribute to the strength of your family, work, and relationship with neighbors?



Questions for Reflection

1. The Latin word *sacramentum*, from which we get the word “sacrament”, means “oath.” What are you swearing to when you receive a sacrament?
2. The *Catechism* No. 2150 says, “taking an oath or swearing is to take God as witness to what one affirms.” What institutions in society require us to swear concerning a thing? What does this say about what our society really thinks is important?
3. James 5:12 and Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33-37) lays great stress on plain, honest speech. What are typical ways in which you find your willingness to speak plainly compromised? How do you square the need to speak plainly with the need to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)?
4. In James’ and Jesus vocabulary, “swearing” refers, not so much to profanity (though this is also undesirable since it can scandalize people) as to “using God’s name in vain.” That is, it refers to making God a sort of lackey for our own failure of integrity. If we are constantly calling on God to witness what we say, it generally means we are not trustworthy. If we are honest, then our word is good enough. What concrete ways can you think of to act with integrity of speech in daily situations? Are you given to false flattery? Do you over-commit and then find yourself having to bail out of commitments? Do you “fib” frequently? What are ways to let your yes be yes and your no be no?





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions for Reflection (cont.)

5. When is an oath legitimate? (see *Catechism* No. 2154 & 2155)
6. The Catechism teaches (No. 2151) that “rejection of false oaths is a duty toward God. As Creator and Lord, God is the norm of all truth. Human speech is either in accord with or in opposition to God who is Truth itself. When it is truthful and legitimate, an oath highlights the relationship of human speech with God’s truth. A false oath calls on God to be witness to a lie.” How does knowledge of the Bible and Catechism provide a guide in our speech?
7. What is a practical thing we can do if we have already gotten ourselves in a bind by “swearing” to do or think something we really can’t do or think?
8. When people swear an oath by including the name of God they are making God a partner to the transaction. How does breaking the sworn oath violate the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11)?
9. In receiving sacraments we are exercising a legitimate form of “oath-swearing” (since the word “sacrament” means “oath”). How can we approach each sacrament with a clearer and more purposeful sense of what we are swearing to? How can we more deeply enter into and accept what God is “swearing” to us in the sacraments?
10. It is often easier to let your yes be yes than to let your no be no, especially when people are pleading with you. What practical steps can you take to have a clear-headed idea of what you are capable of so that you don’t end up promising more than you can give?
11. How can we teach our children about the importance of integrity in speech?



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Biblical Perspective on Oaths

The epistle of James draws toward a close in verse 12 saying, “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation.” Why such an emphasis on swearing oaths? To understand this, we must return to the Sermon on the Mount and recall Jesus’ words: “Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matthew 5:33-37).





Catholic Scripture Study



Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

In both of these passages, James and our Lord warn against rash and private oaths: that is, the misuse of oath swearing. The swearing of oaths has a specific purpose in God's Law and that purpose is *public*, *official*, and *juridical*. That is, oath swearing, like the infliction of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" punishment, was intended to take place only in the context of a properly constituted authority. And so, just as private citizens were never expected to privately try a thieving neighbor in the living room and imprison him in the hall closet, so private citizens were never expected to lightly invoke the name of God in an oath or to privately usurp this essentially *public* act reserved to proper authorities. Both imprisoning our neighbors without proper authority to do so and swearing oaths without proper authority to do so are a kind of arrogant vigilantism. For the true purpose of oaths is to solemnly invoke the aid of God when a person is called upon to perform some sacred task for the common good which they are not, in fact, capable of doing in their own strength. One of the central meanings of such public, official, and juridical oaths in the Old Testament was to openly declare a real dependence on God's help.

And the same applies today even in secular culture. This is why witnesses, soldiers, judges, politicians, and priests come under oath: they are performing a vital and indispensable sacred public task that they are not, in fact, capable of doing without God's help. Society says, in effect, "we can't trust you, but we have to. So we're putting you under oath." In contrast, the corruption of oath-swearing by private usurpation tends to turn this on its head. When people say they "swear to God" they will do something, they are calling God as a kind of lackey or witness to their own integrity and will power, rather than confessing weakness and asking God's help. Therefore, both Jesus and James insist that we simply avoid all oath-swearing and become men and women of our words by "letting our 'yes' be 'yes' and 'no' be 'no'".

Oaths & Divine Covenants

James 5:12 is notable for several reasons. Besides being another instance of a kind of commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, it continues James' pattern of referring us to Old Testament exemplars of faith that works such as Abraham, Rahab, Elijah and, in the verse immediately preceding this one, Job. Job is particularly remarkable in this lineup because James makes use of Job to reinforce Jesus' teaching in the Sermon concerning oath-swearing. Specifically, Jesus abolishes, not oath-swearing, but the *misuse* of oaths. Oaths are a sign of covenant and covenant establishes sacred kinship, not a business contract, or a magic spell. Oaths are to be invoked, not by private individuals calling on God like a lap dog, but in the context of covenant relationship with God — particularly when that covenant demands of us more than we have. Job (whom James cites) is a classic example. In Job 31, Job swears his famous "oath of innocence", a prayer in a strictly juridical form which protests his innocence and invokes the justice of God if he has done any wrong. It begins with an appeal to God's justice in Job 31:3-4: ("Does not calamity befall the unrighteous, and disaster the workers of iniquity? Does not he see my ways, and number all my steps?") Then the "oath of innocence" continues with a long slew of conditional curses in the form of "if I did X, then let God feel free to visit Y on me in his justice."





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

Job's oath, so far from being defiant, is a reverent oath, and is also one born of desperation. Job is calling on God to bear witness to his innocence and trusting God's own justice to do so. James, interestingly, refers us to Job's example to show us that the proper use of oath-swearing is therefore a *prayer*. In fact, the Latin word *sacramentum* means "oath". An oath is more than a promise (that's when I give you my word) and it's more than a vow (that's when I give God my word). An oath is where we call upon God's Holy Name for help in a situation that is beyond our strength and we are in the over our heads. Given that, it makes perfect sense that James establishes the proper use of oaths in the verses immediately following verse 12. He asks, "Is anyone sick?" That is, is anyone in over his head physically? If so, James refers us to the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick which, like all sacraments, is an oath by which we call upon God's Holy Name and is the means by which God's grace of sacred kinship through the covenant of Christ is renewed in us. Moreover, the sacrament also helps us if we are in over our heads spiritually as well, for as James 5:15 tells us, "the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, *he will be forgiven*." Anointing saves the whole person. Not just the body but the soul is healed by this means of grace as well.

Catechism Connection

Referenced from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

No. 706 "God commits himself by his own solemn oath to giving his beloved Son and 'the promised Holy Spirit.'"

No. 2151 "A false oath call on God to be witness to a lie."

No. 2154 "An oath, that is the invocation of the divine name as a witness to truth, cannot be taken unless in truth, in judgment, and in justice."

No. 2476 "False witness and perjury. When it is made publicly, a statement contrary to the truth takes on a particular gravity."

Family Devotions

One of the greatest ways for society to witness the power and stability of an oath is in a Christian marriage. The marriage becomes a stage on which the world views an oath in action. "The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church...Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant" (*Catechism* No. 1617).

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"People can even run from the truth as soon as they glimpse it because they are afraid of its demands. Yet, for all that they may evade it, the truth still influences life. Life in fact can never be grounded upon doubt, uncertainty or deceit; such an existence would be threatened constantly by fear and anxiety. One may define the human being, therefore, as the one who seeks the truth." (*Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II #28)





In this lesson, we observed that:

In looking at society today, it is amazing to see how much of our communication systems are designed with the assumption that people can't be taken at their word. From passwords on the Internet to cosigning a loan, people want extra authentication from us, authentication that goes beyond our word. The truth is, the world is longing for honesty in communications, but sin makes us both less than honest and suspicious of others. When integrity of speech is lacking in politics, the people grow weary. When people bear false witness, the innocent suffer. When husband and wife fail to keep their vows, children become confused and distrustful.

As Christians we can be a light that shines in darkness when it comes to our speech. Make it a daily point to speak the truth in love. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Solomon once said, "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment" (Proverbs 12:18).

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

