

The World According to Jim
“I Pinky Swear”
James 5:12

Introduction

- Since 1923, the Thistle public house, a pub in the tiny Scottish village of Daltry, has been home to the Annual Liars' Contest. There have been some whoppers told over the years, as you can well imagine. For instance, 1932, [Gregory Taylor's](#) moving account of a trans-Saharan expedition during which he was rendered mute by a sandstorm. He delivered the tall tale in a clearly audible voice and won the prize.
- But to most devotees of the contest, the title of 'Greatest Liar in the World' belongs to one [Fraser Patrick McInnon](#), who won eight consecutive titles starting with the very first contest. His final title came in 1930 when McInnon both retired from the contest and won it at the same time. He did so with these words. "I regret I cannot enter the contest this year...as I cannot tell a lie."¹
- Most of us, including myself, would believe that on the whole we are truthful people. Our words, for the most part, are accurate representations of how we feel, what we think, what we believe. But if we were to hold the bar as high as absolute truthfulness, how many of us would still qualify? Are we really that truthful?
- In a 2004 *Reader's Digest* survey of 2,624 people²...
 - 63% of people said they called in sick at work when they weren't really ill
 - 18% said they misstated facts on a resume/job application
 - 13% said they shifted blame to a co-worker for something they did
 - 50% had been undercharged on a purchase and failed to notify the cashier
 - 17% reported falsifying information on their tax return
 - 71% had lied to friends or family about their appearance to avoid hurting their feelings
 - 32% had lied to their spouse about the cost of a recent purchase
 - 28% had lied to their spouse about their relationship with another person
- Many of us think that white lies, slight bends of the truth are no big deal. Exaggeration, okay. But no matter what you call it, “Strategic misrepresentation,” “reality augmentation,” “terminological inexactitude,” a lie is still a lie.³ God demands absolute truthfulness from his followers.

Transition

In the World According to Jim God cares very much about our speech. Our words are an indication of our love for God. James 1:26. *If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.* James

¹ The Guide to Life, the Universe and Everything: The Annual Liars' Contest, Daltry, Scotland, www.bbc.co.uk (8-29-05); submitted to www.preachingtoday.com by Clark Cothorn, Tecumseh, Michigan

² "How Honest Are You?" Reader's Digest (January 2004)

³ Copy Editor (Oct/Nov 1996). *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker), from the editors of Leadership.

chapter 3 and the graphic words about the power of the tongue—a restless evil full of deadly poison, set on fire by hell and setting one’s whole world on fire. And now James 5:12. Truthful speech. [Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Religion God cares about is truthful speech**

Transition

We’re going to spend our time this morning looking at one verse. [Slide #3]

Organizational Sentence

- **One form of untruthful speech**
- There are many kinds of untruthful speech. James zeroes in on one kind in particular. Swearing, making oaths.

Transition

Listen. *Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.* [Slide #4] James’s point in [verse 12](#) is that **swearing, making oaths is one form of untruthful speech**. In the World According to Jim your word should be your bond.

Main Points

- Look at the text. [Verse 12](#) begins with the phrase, *above all*. Are James’s words here the most important thing he has to say in the entire letter? *Consider it pure joy, my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds. Do not merely listen to the word. Do what it says. Above all, don’t swear, don’t make oaths?* Is that what James is saying? Probably not. This is James’s way of indicating that we are now rounding third and heading for home. *Above all* marks that turn toward home. We’re in the homestretch of the letter. James starts the homestretch run with a familiar theme. Speech. Religion God cares about is truthful speech. And in particular, swearing, making oaths is one form of untruthful speech.
- Without a doubt James draws his words from the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. You might want to turn to Matthew 5:33-37 and keep a finger there. Listen to Jesus. *"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*
- In Jesus’ day people would swear by things in order to make their words more truthful, more believable. For instance. Joe is conversing with his friend Ben. As they talk a mountain lion comes out of the woods, crosses the street twenty feet behind Ben, and disappears into the forest on the other side of the street. And Joe just stands there drop jawed. And he says to Ben I just saw a mountain lion. And Ben says “nuh uh.” And Joe says, “I swear by heaven, I just saw a mountain lion walk right behind you.” And Ben says, “really?” *Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.*

- We do this all the time, don't we? In order to make our words sound more truthful we add something to them. "I swear." Or, even worse, "I swear to God." Or as in the list in Matthew 5 and James 5:12, "I swear by heaven." "I swear by earth." "I swear by God's throne." James and Jesus agree swearing *by anything* is inappropriate for the follower of Christ. It's a form of untruthful speech. Why?
- Because when we swear, when we need to add something to our words to make them truer, what we're really saying is that sometimes our words aren't truthful. What we're really saying is that we speak with multiple levels of truthfulness. If we were completely truthful all the time we'd never have to swear by something so that people would take what we say seriously. Do you see what James is saying? James says the follower of Christ must be absolutely truthful in everything she says. As [Doug Moo](#) puts it, "Our truthfulness should be so consistent and dependable that we need no oath to support it: a simple yes or no should suffice."⁴
- When I was a kid we used to pinky swear. I don't know if kids still do this? We did it all the time. On any given day, there were dozens of playground pinky swears. For the uninitiated, to pinky swear is when two people hook their pinky fingers to signify that a promise has been made. It's like a handshake. A sealing of the deal. "I promise to never do that again!" "Do you pinky swear?"
- James says don't do it. Not needed. No pinky swears needed. In the World According to Jim, you make an oath, you swear, you make a promise, even if you're swearing on your tiny and inconsequential like your pinky, you've just spoken untruthfully. And what's more if you promise something and fail to keep that promise, you run the risk of being condemned by your words. *Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.* "Our mere word should be as utterly trustworthy as a signed document, legally correct and complete."⁵ Is your word your bond? Are you truthful so that people take you at your word?
- This verse leads to a couple of questions. Can a Christian take an oath—like placing your hand on the Bible in a court of law saying "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"? Yes. Even God makes oaths. Psalm 95:11. *So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."* James has in mind here not the official, legal oath but the unofficial, casual oath. Casual swearing in casual conversation.
- Can a Christian make promises? Yes, as long as they keep their word. Can you make a vow to do something? Yes. As long as you carefully consider what you are vowing and fulfill that vow sooner than later. Proverbs 20:25 warns, *it is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.* In other words, if you say you are going to do something you better do it. No more empty promises. If your word is your bond do what you say you're going to do. If you aren't going to do it keep your mouth closed.
- God cares about your speech. He wants absolute integrity with your words. And anything that infringes on that wholeness, that integrity, any form of untruthful speech is unacceptable. Jesus taught in the Matthew 5 passage that oaths were binding and that the Christian's daily conversation was considered as sacred as an oath. Did you know that? Your everyday conversation is sacred speech to Jesus. As sacred as an oath. *Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made*

⁴ Moo, p. 233.

⁵ Thomas Constable, *Notes on James*, www.soniclight.com.

to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. If, in Christ's Kingdom the King demands our deeds must match our words, then oaths are absolutely unnecessary.⁶ That's the whole point of James 5:12.

Conclusion

- A businessman was late for an important meeting and couldn't find a parking space. As he frantically circled the block, the man got so desperate that he decided to pray. Looking up toward heaven, he said, "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life, and not only that, I'll give up drinking." Miraculously, a parking space appeared. The guy looked up again and said, "Never mind. I found one."⁷
- *Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.* As one wise saint has said, "In silence man can most readily preserve his integrity."⁸
- Earlier this morning we celebrated communion. If you know this area is a problem for you—that you promise things rashly, that your words aren't always completely truthful. I urge you to turn to Christ, who always keeps his promises, who always fulfills his oaths. Matthew 26:62 *Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.* On oath, He is the Christ. He does all that he promises. By his blood, your speech can be made whole. He can give you integrity of words where that integrity has been lost. But you have to come to him. Let's pray.

⁶ DBI, p. 920.

⁷ Submitted to preachingtoday.com by John Beukema, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

⁸ Meister Eckhart in Directions for the Contemplative Life. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 3.