

Yes and No

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[0 : 00] This morning, either online or in person, we welcome you to our ongoing study of the book of James, a sermon series entitled Faith Plus Works.

! This morning we are in the middle of the final chapter where James is giving his concluding remarks of what is a letter filled with practical instruction concerning what is living a genuine faith.

Before we go any further, let us pause for prayer. Our Lord and Father, we thank you that you have spoken and that you have chosen to reveal yourself to us through the prophets of old and through the apostles like James and through our dear and through your dear Son and our Lord Jesus.

We realize that in all things you are forming your people to be like Jesus, your one and only Son who became flesh and lived here on earth among us.

May we believe and may we live in such obedience as to bring you all the honor and all the glory that is due unto your name. In your high priestly prayer, as recorded by the Apostle John, you said, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but you keep them from the evil one.

[1 : 25] They are not of the world just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so have I sent them into the world.

And for their sake, I consecrate myself. That they may be sanctified in truth. So, Father, we ask you as our Lord prayed on our behalf that you keep us from the evil one.

And that our lives would truly be sanctified by you, who is the way, the truth, and the life. So, Lord, help us, O Lord, that when, as we speak, we speak as those who speak the very words of God.

Help us that as we live, that we will live in such a manner that you will receive all the glory forever and ever. These things we pray.

Amen. I have titled today's sermon, Yes and No. Today's sermon text is from James chapter 5, as mentioned earlier, and is but a single verse.

[2 : 34] It's succinct and to the point. James 5, 12 reads, 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.

At this juncture, I am tempted to say amen, unless that's all I'll go home. I cannot imagine how it could be clearer than that.

While I believe that this to be one of those texts that is very clear, the fact is that many people, and particularly the legalists, wish to suggest that the emphasis of this text is that it's an absolute prohibition of taking oaths or about not making any sworn testimony, as is in the case of the court of law.

One can be easily tempted to think in such a manner, given our propensity to become legalists. However, that view is clearly problematic, given the many times that God himself swore by himself.

For example, Genesis 24, 7 reads, Abraham is speaking to his servant when he says, The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, To your offspring I will give this land.

[4 : 12] He will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son there. In Revelation 10, 5-6, the Apostle John speaks of an angel given a sworn declaration, And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven, and swore by him who lives on the throne forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and all what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there be no more delay.

Revelation 10, 5-6. So in the first book of the Bible, and in the very last, we see sworn testimony. Oaths given by God himself and angels.

In the scriptures, we not only find God making oaths swearing by himself countless times, we find persons like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon, along with many other, even groups of people, taking oaths and making sworn testimonies.

Even during his trial, Jesus responds to an oath placed on him. Here's the account in the Gospel of Matthew. But Jesus remained silent. I'm reading from Matthew 26, 63-64.

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, I adore you by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said to him, You have said so, but I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power, coming in the clouds of heaven.

[5 : 47] James is clearly, James clearly cannot be saying that taking oaths and giving sworn testimony is now a prohibition. So what then is the thrust of this text?

Aren't we left with the obvious? That we are simply to let our yes be yes, let our no be no, so that we may not fall under condemnation?

In other words, and I put it to you, what James is saying is that, in our everyday language, we are being called to trustworthiness.

Speaking the truth, living by the truth, and being about the business of keeping our word. When we become trustworthy amongst ourselves, there will be no need to swear at all.

For we will be known as people of character, and we will be known as people who speak the truth and live by the truth. What we say can be taken at face value.

[6 : 50] What we can be trusted. As such, we will mean what we say and say what we mean. Further, we will live in accordance to what we say.

It is important to note that James, in this passage, is recalling the words of Jesus, likely spoken to his disciples on many occasions, but in particular, as recorded for us in Matthew chapter 5.

Here are the words of Jesus. Again, you have heard, I'm reading from Matthew 5, 33 to 37. Again, you have heard that it was said, to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say simply be yes or no. Anything more than that comes from the evil one.

[8 : 00] In Jesus' day, and it's important to understand it, in Jesus' day, the scribes and the Pharisees held to the idea that as long as you did not swear by God himself, that is, by invoking the name of God, that you were not bound to keep your word.

The idea was that, if you swore by heaven, or by the earth, or by the great city, such swearing could be excusable, if circumstances presented themselves where it became difficult to keep your word.

To swear by God himself, however, was to mean that no matter what happened, you were to keep your word. That's what the Pharisees perpetrated.

Jesus puts this entire narrative and thought pattern to rest. Jesus indicates that all swearing and all oaths are spoken, that are spoken, are done in the presence of God.

If anything, Jesus raises the bar. He expands on this by saying that a simple yes and a simple no are sufficient to bind you and your word.

[9 : 21] So in terms of everyday language, your words are to be the truth, and to be God-honoring at all times, and without exception.

Pause for a moment of reflection. How recent did you say to your spouse, your children, a fellow believer, a friend, a colleague, I will do this or that.

Or perhaps to the negative, I will not do this or that. Only to violate those words within a week, within a day, or even less than an hour.

For Jesus, a simple yes and no, are sufficient to bind you to your word. Now back to the book of James. It's important again, that we understand the context of the entire book of James.

James' entire emphasis is how faith, how works relates to faith. This is his recurring theme. And he suckles back to this time and time again.

[10 : 32] Faith without works is dead. Here's one example. In chapter 2, verse 26, he says, For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James 2, verse 26. A yes is not a yes, unless it is followed by action. A no is not a no, unless it is followed up in action.

James tells us, to let a yes be yes, and a no be no, and to let that be genuine. Both yes and no, are to mean precisely that.

Yes and no. No ambivalence, no forked tongue, no misdirection, no obscurity.

In an attempt to overemphasize the obvious. I think we would all agree that it is extremely important, and goes without saying, that we ought to be about the business of knowing the things that we should say yes or no to.

[11 : 42] There are two main points that I wish to make concerning what James is getting at in today's text. If we are to be trustworthy, credible, or known to be people of character, consider the following that are a must.

Both of which require, listen, both of which require tremendous amounts of time and energy. Number one, meaning what we say.

The scriptures themselves, are God's revelation to us. God has chosen, to make himself known. Condescending to us, so that we can understand, who he is.

Who we are, and how we are, to live in response to the revelation. The scriptures, and all of it, were written to teach us, reprove us, correct us, and train us in righteousness.

To complete us, and equip us to do, every good work, as Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3, 16 to 17. Hence, meaning what we say, will require two things.

[12 : 56] So I have two sub-points. One, knowing the word. Saying yes, and no, is more than simply affirming things, that we will do or not do.

We need to know, the truth, the things that we ought to affirm, and not affirm. So before we get to the matter, of working and living out our faith, we must know, the word itself.

Sadly, few of us spend, any time in the word, relegating the Bible to the shelf, to collect dust. Knowing the word, goes a very long way, in guarding us, against affirming things, that are not true, which helps us to guard, against making promises, involving ourselves, in things we ought, to stay away from.

Knowing the word, helps us to discern, and distinguish, between things, that are sound, and fine, and sound, that sound fine, and innocent. But upon further examination, are in fact not.

There are many, fine sounding, positive, encouraging, and uplifting, memes, sound bites, cliches, messages, and teachings, that are swirling around, in Christian circles.

[14 : 15] And they go, largely undetected. Some of which, have no biblical support, whatsoever. Some are even, diametrically opposed, to the scriptures themselves.

I'm sure you've heard, some of them. Who of us, has never heard, the following? God loves, everyone unconditionally. Or, in order to love someone, you must first learn, to love yourself.

Or, it's okay to be okay. It's okay, to not be okay. Do any of them, sound familiar? In each of this, in each of those statements, there is a hint, of the truth.

But a hint, of the truth, is not the truth. Let's examine, each, for a moment. God loves, everyone unconditionally. God is love, no doubt.

God is benevolent, towards all people. Sending the rain, on the just, and the unjust, alike. The people of the earth, are able to see, and benefit, from the beauty, of all that God, has created.

[15 : 22] To be, to be in sheer awe, of such order, and beauty. As such, God's benevolent love, is on all people.

And yes, God, does love, unconditionally. But, that unconditional love, is only for those, whom he chose.

the same, the same being, those whom he has, directed his steadfast love, towards, is elect. David, in the Psalms, speaks often, of God's steadfast love, to his chosen people.

God's saving, and unconditional love, is directed, to those, who are his own. Listen to Jesus' words, in his high priestly prayer. John 17, starting with verses 9, and 10.

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those, whom you have given me. This is Jesus praying to the Father.

[16 : 20] For they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified them. And continuing in his prayer, verses 22 to 24, Jesus prays, the glory, that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may, them, meaning his disciples, his chosen ones, and they may be one, even, and they may be one, even as we are one.

I in them, and you in me, that they may become, perfectly one, so that the world, may know, that you sent me, and love them, even as you, loved me.

Father, I desire, that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me, where I am, to see my glory, and that you have given me, because you have loved me, before the foundation, of the world.

Let's examine the second. In order to love someone, you must first learn, to love yourself. We all heard that one, right? All right.

As for loving yourself, you will not find, a single verse, in the scripture, where you are told, you ought to love yourself. Such a verse, does not exist.

[17 : 39] In fact, the very message, of the gospel, is a message, that asserts, that man loves himself, too much, already. For that, is the essence, of sin itself.

Thus, the warning of Paul, when he says, in the last days, people will be, lovers of themselves. Second Timothy 3, 1. In today's culture, there is an enormous, thrust, and push, towards self, towards self.

Self fulfillment, self actualization, self empowerment, self, self, self. And we, in the church, have unwittingly, embraced some of this, as if the church exists.

Listen to this. As if the church exists, for its members, own glory. Each person's fulfillment, actualization, and empowerment.

Get the idea, from some churches, that's what they're about. Is that why, the church exists? Isn't it, for the glory of God? The giving of our self, to God, and to our neighbor.

[18 : 49] The apostle Paul, reminds us, where our focus, ought to be. And he says, sorry, the apostle Peter. Above all, keep loving one another, earnestly, since love covers over, a multitude of sins.

Show hospitality, to one another, without grumbling, as each, has received a gift. Use it to serve one another, as God's stewards, as good stewards, of God's grace, buried grace.

Whoever speaks, is one who speaks, the oracles of God. That's 1 Peter 4, 8 to 11. And what about the same? It's okay, to not be okay.

Listen, living in sin, is not okay. Thinking ourselves, okay, when we are sick, is not okay. Believing the wrong things, is not okay.

And in fact, may be perilous. For instance, thinking yourself, a believer, because you said, a prayer of confession, is not okay. that's an illusion, perpetrated by many.

[19 : 56] There is so much, there is no such prayer, in the scriptures, anywhere. Genuine faith, is one that produces, repentance.

A turning away, from sin, and living in such a manner, that God is honoring. God is being honored, where Christ is Lord. brothers and sisters, Jesus is the truth.

And so, whenever we reference Jesus, we are called upon, to affirm the truth, about who he is, and what he said. Meaning, what we say, will, as said earlier, require two things.

The first being, knowing the word, and now, the second, wisdom. Wisdom, wisdom is the ability, to use good judgment, which very often, is in short supply.

And it is so much so, that James himself, in this book, addresses the matter, directly, and very early, in his letter. Very, very early. Verse 5, of chapter 1, reads, if any of you, lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously, to all, without reproach.

[21 : 08] And it will be given, to him. Wisdom is very important, for all of us. Having a, having a relatively, good grasp, an understanding, of reality, goes a long way, in helping us, avoid, many pitfalls, in life.

God provides wisdom, to those, who seek him, for it. I must admit, there were, there were many times, that I moved forward, when I should have, paused, to ask God, for wisdom.

But, thinking myself capable, I forced ahead, instead, to my own chagrin. I made commitments, that proved, exceedingly difficult, to keep.

And gave my word, when it was, virtually impossible, to live by it. Of course, I wouldn't have realized, it at the time. Fortunately, and at some other times, there were those, around me, that insisted, that I not move forward, with things, that I wanted to do.

And their wisdom, advice, and counsel, helped, keep me, out of harm's way. Wisdom, has a stabilizing factor, of realism.

[22 : 25] It does not, get carried away, by emotion, or by coercion. It restrains, and limits, it limits us, in such a manner, that we are able, to live, by the truth.

Wisdom, results further, in the continuing, wisdom, results further, in, and continuing on, chapter 1, verse 26, the bridling, of the tongue.

In moments, of extreme emotion, we can say things, that are most ridiculous. Committing ourselves, to things, that we ought not, be it moments, of elation, or despair.

Herod, and high spirits, made the mistake, of promising his daughter, anything up to, half his kingdom, after she done, so well, before his guests.

After consulting, her mother, she requested, the John, the head, of John the Baptist, on a silver platter. The mouth, often gets us, into, all manner, of trouble.

[23 : 35] Do I hear, amen? Be very careful, with the things, you say, during times, of heightened emotion. Be it good, or bad emotions.

Careful attention, may be the thing, that preserves, your character, character, and reputation. The mouth, which speaks for the heart, is capable, of grandgiant, size, boast.

Things unrealistic, and even preposterous. The prophet Isaiah, speaks of an occasion, when he saw the Lord, Isaiah 6, and his immediate response, was one of confession.

Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man, of unclean lips, and I dwell, in the midst, of people, of unclean lips, for my eyes, have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.

Isaiah 6, 5. As we come to know, and grow in the grace, of the Lord, the more we become aware, of how much, we lie. Listen to that again.

[24 : 41] As we come to know, and grow in the Lord, the grace of the Lord, the more we become, aware, of how much we lie. Lying, is what the flesh does.

Yes, in reality, is no. And no, a yes. The mouth, distorts, maligns, misconstrues, concocts, slanders, flatters, deceives, and misleads.

It creates, false images of self, that wants, that it wants, others to believe. And it's in that very context, that James says, that you are yes, be yes, and you are no, be no, so that you may, not fall, under condemnation.

Which leads me, to my second, main point. Living by, what we say. Living by, what we say, can be encapsulated, by two main, sub points.

The first being, living according, to the word. Given the overall, theme of James, the emphasis here, is that we are, to be doers of the word, what the word says.

[25 : 57] And he does not, leave this doing, up to our own, machinations. Okay, you don't leave that, up to us, about what those things are. Apart from, all the things, already mentioned, that I already mentioned, let's review, some of the things, that James says, that we ought, or, ought not, do.

To be joyously, set by us, under trial. Persevere. Chapter 1, 2 to 4. To cease, with being double-minded. 1, 6 to 8.

To put away, all filthiness, and wickedness. 1, 21. To care for those, in need. 1, 27. In chapter 2, we are told, not to be partial. To give to the need, in chapter 3, we are told, to tame our tongues, to live, in meekness.

In chapter 4, do not be friends, of the world, with its covetousness. Continuing, in chapter 4, to submit to God, to not speak evil, of one another. To be mindful, of God's sovereignty.

To be patient. These are some, of the specific things, that James mentions, that we are to be about, doing, or not doing. But sadly, most people merely, Sunday after Sunday, Bible study, after Bible study, seminar after seminar, continue to be hearers, and not doers of the word.

[27 : 18] We come, we listen, we leave, and we forget, what we heard. Brothers and sisters, this ought not be.

But there is yet another, aspect to living, by what we say. And that is, second job point, living according, to your own word, to our own word, to my own word.

Again, I remind you, what James says. Listen to it. But above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven, or earth, or by any, or any other oath, but let your yes, be yes, and your no, no.

So that you may not fall, on the condemnation. Each time we say, that I will be, do this, or that, we do so, in the presence, of God.

Parents, how many times, have you said, to your children, that you will do this, or that, and fail to do it? How many times, have the hearts, of the little ones, of our little ones, been crushed, by the whims, of simply changing, our mind?

[28 : 46] While we may not, have said the words, I promise, inherent in the words, I will, is in fact, a promise.

Instead of, our yes, it was in fact, our no. Husband, how many times, have you told your wife, that you will take care, of fixing that, leaking faucet, or you'll wash the dishes, and yet, fail to do so?

How many times, have you, disregarded, a commitment, because something, came up, at work? All because, you exercised, the prerogative, to change your mind.

Worse, perhaps, you even, felt justified, in changing your mind, because she upset you. So, instead of your yes, remaining a yes, it became a no.

Imagine, what our life, would be like, if God, treated us, in this fashion, retaliating, every time, we sinned, and failed him. Boy, we'll have some trouble, on our hearts.

[30 : 01] Children, by the way, I did have wives, and then I decided, to back out, on that one. I literally did.

I mean, I thought, I said, this would be a good one, but, I'm not going to go there. That one would have hit too deep, it just wasn't going to go there. But anyway, so, ladies, mother's age is fast, you're going to pass, okay?

Children, how many countless times, have you said, that you would do a chore, all your homework, and repeatedly, fail to do so? How many times, have you, mouthed off, the very ones, you were commanded, to honor?

Now, I'm addressing us, we, the Amiens, and I say, we, the Amiens, all, and I mean, every one of us, how many times, have we said, that we would be somewhere, at a particular time, and I mean this, I mean this from the bottom of my heart, how many times, have we said, that we would be somewhere, at a particular time, and fail to do so?

as if, that is not, the breaking, of our word, we even have, an expression, now called, Bahamian time, which means, whenever I show up, we, I speak to the believers, we, Bahamian believers, see no problem, with consistently, failing to show up, one time, we say, yes, I will be there, at 2 p.m., and in reality, we show up, at 2.15, 2.30, 3 o'clock, or even later, and then, wonder why, the other persons, are even upset, imagine that, we fail to do, what we said, we would do, and then we want, to cop out, cop an attitude, wondering, what's their problem, brothers and sisters,

[32 : 31] Bahamians, we are, but that, doesn't, legitimize, us, failing, at our yes, and our no, listen, I'm not picking, on anyone in particular, I don't have, nobody in mind, please, I have, nobody in mind, I used to also, live in the same world, where my flesh, wants to, excuse myself, from keeping my word, that's not a world, we all live, in that world, the point being made here, is that we as believers, are called, to realize, that when we speak, we are speaking, in an ever, the ever presence, of God, who is listening, to every single, word we say, we consistently, fail to do, what we said, that we will do, or not do, in our marriages, with our children, with our brothers, and sisters, in the Lord, with those, who we work with, and with strangers alike, truth be told, we not only, break the word of God, but we break our word, to each and, to each other, over, and repeatedly, and in so, disappointment, mount, and pile up, on top of each other, until we either, live in dismay, listen to this, like, you get to the point, where you like, when somebody says something to you, and you like, well you know, you know that don't mean that, we either live in dismay, and, or with a general sense, of distrust, nobody keeping their word, or until the other, walks away, having been disappointed, once too many times, failure to keep, listen, failure to keep our word, destroys relationships,

God is a promise keeper, his love is steadfast, and never ending, to those whose faith, and trust are in him, listen to what, listen to the words of David, in Psalm 103, verses 8 to 13, the Lord is merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding, into adverse love, he will not, always chide, nor will he keep, his anger forever, he does not deal with us, according to our sins, praise the Lord, nor pay us, according to our iniquities, thank you, for as high as the heavens is above, and the earth, so great is his steadfast love, towards those, who fear him, as far as the east, is from the west, and as far, so far, he does, and as far as the east is from the west, so far, does he remove, our transgressions, our transgressions, from us, as the father, shows compassion, to his children, so the Lord, shows compassion, to those, who fear him, imagine, for a moment, that God, will like us, changing his mind, and altering his plans, for us, at every time, but thanks be to God, his yes, is always yes, and his no, is always no, always, every now and again, we come across persons, who, when they give us their word, it is as good as gold, their yes, is a yes, and their no, is a no,

I was fortunate, to have a father like that, if he said it, you could consider that, a finished deal, and while even he, on the often, most rare occasion, may have been distracted, and forgotten, he always circled back, to keep his word, he did what he said, he did what he said, he was going to do, and if he ever failed, in the moment, he owned up to it, without excuse, and then did that, then did that, that what he said, he would do, and he remained faithful, to my mother, for the entire marriage, without, the slightest hint, of unfaithfulness, that's how the people, of God, are called, to live, by the way, I'm not trying, to brag on my father, I just happen, and have had a very good one, we ought to be able, to trust each other, but that requires, that we are trustworthy, ourselves, and should we fail, we ought to confess, our sins, to the ones, we have failed, we often say, yes, and no, may I yes, be yes, and I know, be no, so that we may not, fall, under condemnation, for those of you, who do not know the Lord, know this,

God, is a word, keeping God, who says, what he means, and means, what he says, he is not like us, who fail, and he has said, that, whoever believes in him, is not condemned, whoever believes in him, is not condemned, but whoever does not believe, in him, is condemned already, because he is not believed, in the name, of the only son of God, John 3, 18, God has spoken, he has commanded, that all, believe, his word is true, he is trustworthy, he does, what he says, he will do, and so I leave you, with these, the words of Jesus, as recorded, in Mark's gospel, chapter 1, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God, is at hand, repent, and believe, in the gospel,

Mark 1, 15, in keeping, with Jesus, I declare unto you, we, declare, unto you, repent, and believe, the gospel, and in so doing, let your yes, be yes, and your no, be no, so that you, as well, may not fall, under condemnation, let us pray, Lord and Father, help us in our weakness, we thank you, that you are yes, and no, are in fact, yes, and no, we confess, that we are nearly, we are not nearly, as like you, as we ought to be, may our yes, and our no, be yes, and no, and may those, who do not know you, come to trust you, and believe in you, and come to understand, that your yes, and no, are indeed that, and that you have promised, that to all who believe, that you will grant, eternal life, these things we pray, in your holy name,

[40 : 12] Amen.