

August 6, 2017 - "Yes and No"

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: James 5:12

Above all, my beloved, 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.

Now, I know Brethren are not supposed to take oaths but comedian Steve Martin had this great oath for non-conformists and we Brethren are very good non-conformists, so humor me for a moment and repeat this Non-conformist Oath: "I promise to be different! (*audience repeats*) I promise to be unique! (*audience repeats*) I promise not to repeat things other people say! (*audience repeats, laughs*)." Uh oh, I think we broke the oath.

The Church of the Brethren has a long history of taking very seriously the scriptures advising Christians to avoid swearing and oath taking. This has led us to avoid swearing truthfulness on the Bible in a courtroom by simply stating, "I affirm" instead of "I swear." It has led us to deter our membership from taking part in secret oathbound societies because according to our 1954 Annual Conference Statement, "We believe that where such association with secret orders affects the loyalty of members to their church it constitutes enough of a problem that the church should again state its conviction that membership in secret, oath-bound orders represent a compromise with secular standards that is unworthy of a consecrated Christian." The subject of oath swearing certainly puts us at odds with culture as most Americans don't bat an eye at swearing an oath, but we take those simple words "I swear" very seriously.

And, I believe the scriptures support us mightily in our avoidance. In addition, to our scripture this morning from James which says clearly, "do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath," Jesus also says in Matthew during the Sermon on the Mount a very similar thing, "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' 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."

There is also this sad story in the Old Testament book of Judges when a rash vow or oath made by a great warrior Jephthah ends with the sacrifice of Jephthah's only daughter. Swearing oaths can get us in trouble; they can set us up for failure as clearly is modeled in these scriptures.

With all of this good scriptural advice then, why does the world insist upon oath swearing. Well, it seems the main reason is to guarantee a person's truthfulness and commitment, so we swear by God or by members of our family and that must mean we are telling the truth. And, of course, we've also by association connected swearing and the use of foul language because of using those words in anger while connecting them with God. The world seems to like using foul language, too; just turn on the television to anything but the Disney Channel. Because of the world's lackadaisical stance on language and swearing truthfulness, the church's witness to these things has gotten simplified and we feel like the old-fashioned folks that are being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn. We just don't say things like that...

The reality is if we read this text from James or Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount and only hear the message that we shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain or swear on the Bible, then we've missed their larger purposes. It's as if we've taken the words of James and

Jesus and made them into some easy rules that we *can* follow rather than a complete lifestyle overhaul that forces us to be genuine and honest people at our core.

For that is what these texts are really about, being genuine and honest. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. You won't need to swear on the Bible then because you live a life that is truthful and honest. You don't need to take the Lord's name in vain because this Christianity thing is a genuine commitment of yours and you feel no need to fake allegiance to the world's ways. Let your yes be yes and your no be no is a riddle-like form of saying, be real and really be a Christian with your whole life; genuine and honest is your natural state, not just when you swear to them.

Being "real" though, being honest, isn't as easy as it should be. You see, instead of truthfulness, we use this thing called manipulation and we use manipulation both consciously and subconsciously. Our inclination is often for ourselves, our own gain. And so, we work at systems to manipulate outcomes that work best for us. These manipulation games very clearly happen on the large scale, just think political manipulation, but they also happen one on one. The child trying to manipulate his parents so that he can stay up a little later. Siblings manipulating circumstances so that one can be noticed, acknowledged, and praised by a parent. Co-workers manipulating work agendas so that someone else gets the more difficult projects. Or maybe even church members manipulating others to overwhelm a certain perspective. And your pastor manipulates you when he makes you recite the Non-conformists Oath. Consciously and subconsciously we play manipulation games so that we can get our selfish ways. But God sees right through these games that we play.

A man climbs to the top of Mount Sinai to get close enough to talk to God. Looking up, he says, "God, what does a million years mean to you?" God replies, "A minute." The man asks, "And what does a million dollars mean to you?" God says, "A penny." The man asks, "Can I have a penny?" God says, "In a minute."

God sees right through our manipulative maneuvers for self-gain and he tells us plainly in scripture, quit the games and "let your yes be yes and your no be no." What you say matters and it reveals a lot about what your true motivation is. Earlier in the Book of James, chapter 3, James reminds hearers of the dangers of the tongue, how it can be used to praise God and curse God's children, how what we say can reveal who we are truly serving.

Biblical scholar Sharyn Dowd writes that the emphasis of the book of James is placed on wholeness and integrity. And she draws attention to James' use of the word "double-mindedness" which is our attempt to both live by worldly standards and claim a Christian identity. James is insistent that we cannot have both. That which we say and claim with our yes's and no's must cohere with our lifestyle.¹ Anything short of this genuine disciple living is what Jesus chastised as hypocritical.

We cannot be genuine, honest, truthful disciples if we have two minds. One mind wanting to follow Jesus and the other chasing our worldly gains and pleasures. One mind seeking to love all of God's people and the other seeking ways to manipulate people so that we can get what we want. Double-minded people are the kind of people that need to swear an oath because you truly do not know when they are being truthful and when they are not. But you people of God, you don't need oaths. You don't need swearing because you live with a single mind focused on Jesus Christ and his ways. When you say yes, you truly mean yes.

As James builds up in chapter 5 to give us this famous advice on yes and no, he urges the people to be as patient and persistent with their message and lifestyle as the Old Testament

¹ Dowd, Sharyn. *Women's Bible Commentary*. "James." Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. p. 368.

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prophets were. These remarkable men like Jeremiah and Isaiah are excellent examples of single-mindedness, genuineness, and honesty. Sometimes their honesty was even downright annoying and pesky. These men had a one-track mind for speaking the truth as God had passed it on to them. Even though these truths could cause them great harm because of their unpopularity, even if these truths left them lowly and not exalted. The *prophets* stand as lasting example of faithfulness and not the kings of Israel who although "successful" in terms of wealth and standing were also masters of manipulating their people for self-gain and manipulating their God for popularity and favor.

May you live such a single-minded life that like the prophets, no one need ask you to swear an oath to guarantee your truthfulness and no one need question your truest allegiance that is to Jesus Christ. Amen.