



INTEGRITY UNDER PRESSURE

JAMES 5:7-12

I remember once teaching an Algerian student who had the common Middle Eastern tendency to swear when he wanted to convince me he was telling the truth. By swearing I don't mean bad language but saying "I swear to you that I didn't do this or that". He would swear on the Koran, on the name of God, on the name of Jesus, on the Bible, on his life – he even once swore on his mother's grave: which I'm sure his mother would not have been too pleased about as she was very much alive and well!

It's just a manner of speech used in some parts of the world – they make oaths even though they don't mean it: it's all just words. And when they make those oaths in the name of God; then they take His name in vain. No wonder we call the worst sort of bad language swearing because it so often misuses the name of God.

We still have that remnant in our legal system of people swearing their testimony on the Bible and to perjure oneself is a serious crime – because it is a moral as well as a legal issue.

It's all about truth. We know we should not bear false witness and we know we should not take the Lord's name in vain. I'm sure that we agree entirely with that – it's the Word of God.

The problem is not when everything is going hunky dory, but when personal or church circumstances put Christians under pressure and they become in danger of lacking integrity. This was the situation that faced James' readers. They were facing persecution and difficulty and the temptation to let things slip was great.

It's easy in the comfort of our churches and our society to answer hypothetical questions e.g. if it were illegal for us to meet here to worship, how many of us would still be here on a Sunday evening? If it were illegal for us to try to persuade others to become a Christian, how many of us would stay silent? If it were illegal for us to give a Bible to somebody as a gift – how many of us would just stick to a box of chocolates? If admitting to people that we were a Christian would mean that we would lose our jobs or never get promotion – how many of us would stay silent? If we were threatened with death if it became known we are a Christian – how many of us would admit to it.

I'm sure each of us would say "I hope that when push came to shove that I would stand as a good witness". The truth is that under persecution, people often quite quickly renounce their faith and several of the letters in the NT, including James were aimed at believers who were toying with the idea of giving up.

Someone once said: *if it were illegal to be a Christian and you were accused of the crime; would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

But we are not under persecution as such, but we have all faced times of pressure. What causes pressure?

Persecution
Ill-Health
Stress
Broken Relationships

Frustration

And all these things try our patience. And as patience wears thin, the temptation to do something that we are going to regret later looms larger and larger. James gets underneath the surface of what happens to us when pressure results in loss of integrity:

◆ We turn on one another

9 Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

What happens when our patience and perseverance wanes is that we take it out on other people. In a church context, when the going gets tough it's easy to find fault with others. Maybe it's someone who's not doing things quite as we'd like them to. Maybe it's their integrity in question, or they've not done as they said they would, or they're a bit grumpy, or we disagree with them. It's easy to lose patience and grumble.

There's a saying that when we point the finger, there's three pointing back at us! By criticising someone else's lack of integrity, we fall in danger of lacking integrity ourselves which is why James gives us this stark warning: *Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!* Ouch! But we know he's right. Leave judgement to God – it's not one of the gifts of the Spirit – it's the prerogative of God alone!

And we may sit here thinking to ourselves. But, but, but .. he's awful, she's unreliable. God shows us grace when we are awkward and unreliable – therefore we should show grace too. Pray for them, help them, encourage them, help them. And if you disagree, pray and deal graciously as you may need their help to pull the log out of your eye!

◆ We turn away from God

11 As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

I've always found that when people go through difficult times, it's a Christian's relationship with God that suffers first. It's strange, but the last people we blame for difficult situations is usually the person most responsible – ourselves!

For many years I have hosted a few message boards on AOL. They are for people who have problems of some sort with their computer or internet. Many have connection problems and the first people they blame are AOL. It's a large corporation and even worse, the UK side is run by the Carphone Warehouse – and we've all heard about how bad they are! So when their broadband doesn't connect, or keeps disconnecting, then it must be AOL or CPW. My experience is that it's rarely them. Sometimes there's a line fault – and everyone loves to blame BT don't they – but actually that's quite rare too. But more often than not the fault is in their house or on their own computer. And the only reason they don't know that is that they don't understand enough about computers to realise that. Worse, when you try to help they don't take telling.

Whether we do it consciously or not, when things go wrong, we disconnect ourselves from God. In London the favourite solution to difficulties was to "take time out" of church. The irony is, that THE best antidote to our difficulties is putting things in perspective and worshipping and allowing ourselves to be ministered to in prayer by others. But do we?

There are plenty of examples of OT prophets that had to suffer and wait ages to see what God was promising. Sometimes it was months, sometimes it was years and sometimes it was after their lifetime. But James reminds us that they were faithful to God, they did His will and they hung on to Him faithfully. And we are called like them - to be faithful. Take Job. Everything was stripped away from him. Yet he clung to His God and got double-fold of what he had previously. He suffered for a short while, but despite the comments of his three dodgy friends, his faith was in that which was unseen and God blessed him because of it. So when we think that God has let us down or doesn't seem to be working remember as James says *the Lord is full of compassion and mercy. He is working His purposes out.*

◆ We turn away from our principles

12 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.

One of the biggest problems when we face pressure, is to lose our moral integrity. It's so easy to lose our principles when we are in a difficult corner. Usually stupid things are said out of desperation rather than calculation. We all do it or have done it. Answers to questions that are less than truthful. Telling a "white lie" to cover our mistakes. Telling a fib because we are too embarrassed to tell the truth - or we think that the truth will hurt the other person too much. Or telling an untruth to give us breathing space so that we can do the right thing. However good our intentions, it usually hurts other people more to have found out that they have had the truth withheld from them than to have known bad news in the first place. Both of our children are adopted and they have known that from the year dot – but I have heard so many tales of children that have found out they are adopted later in life: they find the deception so hurtful.

Truth is an important thing. We shouldn't as believers need to ensure others of our good intentions by swearing oaths or making promises. Yes should be yes and no should be no. Our word is our bond – or should be.

When we do business, we have to sign contracts. We do that because the contract ensures we have a comeback if things go wrong or if the other person breaks their word. I'm not saying we shouldn't make contracts – they are part of life: but people do need to know that we are "what is written on the can". People of integrity under all circumstances because it is our reputation that will make a difference in a world of so much mistrust.

In the end, as we said this morning, the way we live should attract rather than repel others and it makes our speaking of Jesus more credible when we open our mouths and share Him with others.