



Thought for the Week 2nd May 2021

READING James 5: 7 - 12

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹² 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.

A Life of Integrity

So, who paid for it? The make-over by designer Lulu Lytle to the flat at 10 Downing Street with the £840 a roll wallpaper, the £9,800 Baby Bear sofa and the £3,000 Lily Drum table, that is. We will probably never know the full truth. Who was it said that there would only be a border down the Irish Sea, “over my dead body?”

But that’s hardly surprising as we live in a culture that regards truth as relative and, of course, you don’t have to be rich and famous or in politics to lack integrity – it’s endemic in our society.

Someone has suggested that the top ten lies told today are:

1. I’m almost there (it’ll probably take me about half an hour)
2. My phone died (I forgot to reply)
3. One size fits all (it won’t!)
4. It wasn’t that expensive (expensive relative to what?)
5. I’ll start the diet tomorrow (or at some less inconvenient time)
6. I just need a minute of your time (No, you don’t you’re trying to scam me out of some money on this phonecall)
7. It’s great to see you (but it’s a shame I can’t remember who you are)
8. That makes sense (no I don’t have a clue what you mean)
9. Your table will be ready in a minute (a minute is an elastic measurement of time in most restaurants)
10. I’m almost finished (but just the first point of my sermon!)

Our culture may not place much value on integrity, but scripture certainly does. James helps us sort out what characterises a life of integrity in the final chapter of his epistle, which is all about avoiding worldliness – in verses 7-12 worldliness as expressed by our tongues. He says, “¹² *But above all, my brothers and sisters, 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.*”

Eugene Peterson’s bible paraphrase “The Message” clarifies this further for us:

¹¹....God cares, cares right down to the last detail. ¹² And since you know that he cares, let your language show it. Don't add words like "I swear to God" to your own words. Don't show your impatience by concocting oaths to hurry up God. Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can't be used against you.

The Use of Fine Print

If James was writing in a modern context, he might well use the term "avoid the use of fine print" here. He is referring to the use and the abuse of oaths in his day. We need to understand the importance of taking an oath before the days of written contracts. In a time when the vast majority of people could not read or write, an oath – a spoken affirmation – sealed a deal or made binding a contract. When an independent person witnessed the taking of an oath then it was legally binding. I suppose it was similar to the spit and handshake that sealed many a deal over a bullock or the letting of a piece of land around here.

An oath in itself was useful and was even encouraged in the Old Testament Mosaic law. It's not this type of oath taking that James is condemning. The problem was by the time James was writing the biblical teaching on oaths had suffered some abuse. The scribes and pharisees divided oaths into two classes, those which were absolutely binding and those which were not. They taught that any oath which contained the name of God was absolutely binding; any oath which did not include the name of God was not binding. In that way, they found a way to side-step the truth. If they swore by the name of God, they had to keep their oath. But if they swore by something other than the name of God by they felt no obligation to follow through on their commitment.

So they would swear by heaven or by earth. Or they would swear by Jerusalem or by their own heads to make their promises sound good especially if they were unsure about keeping their promises. That way if they couldn't keep a promise, they could claim they were safe from God's judgment, because they did not swear by God Himself. This is what Jesus condemned in Matthew 5:34-36 *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.*

Some religious groups, such as the Quakers refuse to take an oath in court, but this type of oath is not condemned by scripture. In fact, Jesus himself subjected himself to an oath at his trial (see Matthew 26:63-64). The abuse of oaths today is still in the form of fine print. Have you been the victim of a hike in interest rate hidden in the fine print? Do you do the same thing – making a promise with your fingers crossed behind your back? Have you ever called in sick, when you're only just sick of working? Making excuses based on half-truths may well be normal in society, but scripture call us to a life of integrity.

The Practice of Plain Speaking

James exhorts us to be so truthful in our speech that we don't need to use an oath when he says "... let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no." We should be people who say what we mean and mean what we say because deception is dangerous. "Speak truthfully in case what you say gets you into trouble," James says. The word of a Christian should be so trustworthy, so beyond question that his or her "yes" always means "yes" and their "no" always means "no." If Christians were always known for their complete honesty in all things – what a testimony that would be in our "fine print" deceptive culture.

In the days before supermarkets it was common practice for farmer's wives to make their own butter and trade it with the local shopkeeper for some other commodity they needed. A certain farmer's wife always dealt with a shopkeeper in the town who was a prominent member of her local church. One day when she left her butter into the shop, he took her to the side for a quiet word. "I'm disappointed to

have to say that for the past two weeks the pounds of butter you've brought me have been about an ounce short of the usual pound. Could you explain why that is?" "Oh yes," she replied, "that's easy to explain. A couple of weeks ago one of the children lost the one pound weight for my scales, so since then I've been using two half-pound packets of your tea to weigh my butter."

It's dangerous to play games with the truth, because it will come back bite you in the end. It has been said that integrity is "what you are when no-one is watching." But actually the key to living a life of integrity is to understand that there is never such a time. Integrity is what you are when ONLY God is watching, for we are never beyond the Lord's presence.

Integrity – it's what being a part of God's Kingdom is all about. So how are you doing with this? How are you doing with scripture's insistence on absolute truth all the time? Not so well? If so, well, you're in good company. The prophet Jeremiah comments on the condition of every human heart. He says, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*" (Jeremiah 17:9)

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that our own heart is naturally deceitful. We know that we fall far short of Jesus' standard of integrity. So what can we do? Well, we can go back to Jesus' first words in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

We need to admit that we fall far short of what Jesus requires and throw ourselves on His mercy, and trust Him to turn our lying, deceitful hearts into a heart of integrity. Submit to Christ and rely on Him to change you from the inside out. Depend on Jesus to make you a real person of integrity. We can't do it on our own, in our own strength - the only way we can live the life Jesus requires is to invite Him into our lives and to let Him live His life in and through us by the power of his indwelling holy Spirit. If we let Jesus have full and complete control of every area of our life, our thinking, our relationships, yes and even our tongue, then, and only then, will we experience genuine integrity - a oneness of heart, speech, and action without any duplicity or hypocrisy.

If we live in Christ's way, avoiding deception and speaking truthfully and plainly then surely we will stand out boldly in the midst of the fine print of our deceptive culture.

Amen

PCI Let's Pray

Sunday 2 May

Worshipping God with gladness

'Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.' Psalm 100:2.

Today as we worship in person, online or on our own, ask God to gladden your heart and bring you joy in him.

Moderator

Give thanks for the over third of a million pounds raised by the Moderator's Special Christmas Appeal which will be used by PCI's relief and development partners to help and support some of the most vulnerable people on the planet who, with the onslaught of Covid-19, find themselves in fragile and precarious conditions. Pray that this much needed financial support will be a blessing to many.

Monday 3 May

Peter & Valerie Lockwood (global mission workers in Nepal)

Pray for Peter and Valerie as they work remotely from Northern Ireland which is challenging due to the time difference. Pray for a resolution to the visa issue.

Indonesia

Pray for the people of Timor, Sumba and others islands which were hit by Tropical Cyclone Seroja at Easter. Pray for all affected, especially those who lost homes and livelihoods. Pray for the ongoing recovery and rebuilding efforts, and for our partner churches as they help with this and give pastoral support and care to many.

Tuesday 4 May

Leslie & Mabel Brush (community outreach workers in Tartaraghan)

Pray for Leslie and Mabel to have fresh vision to see the mission field on their doorstep. Pray for wisdom and for God's love to shine through as they communicate the gospel and seek ways to connect with local people.

Irvinestown, Pettigo & Tempo

Give thanks for the Good Shepherd's care of the congregations over the past year. Pray for the congregations, that the Lord will guide them in restarting in-person ministry again.

Wednesday 5 May

Stephen & Angelina Cowan (global mission workers in Kenya)

Pray for the young people who attended the April youth camps in Tuum. Pray that many of them will put their trust in Christ and fully commit their lives to him.

Myanmar

Pray for a just and peaceful resolution to the ongoing civil unrest following the military coup earlier this year. Pray for the leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar at this difficult time.

Thursday 6 May

Rachel Cubitt (deaconess in Whiteabbey)

Pray for Rachel as she continues to work in the congregation despite the ongoing restrictions. Pray for her as she offers pastoral support to members of the congregation.

Kells (Co Meath)

Pray for the work and witness of this home mission congregation. Pray for wisdom and guidance for Rev Alan McQuade (stated supply minister), the kirk session and leaders within the congregation.

Friday 7 May

Social Witness

Pray for families and friends who have been prevented from visiting their loved ones due to Covid-19. Pray for their continued patience as we await new guidelines on the new visiting regimes. Give thanks for the technology that has facilitated 'Virtual Visiting', enabling those important contacts to be retained.

Health and Social Care

Give thanks for those who work in the health and social care sector including cleaners, carers, nurses, allied health professionals, doctors, administrative staff and others. Pray for their own health and wellbeing as they work to care for others.

Saturday 8 May

General Council

Pray for the Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson, current President of the Irish Council of Churches, and Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches, as they engage with other Church Leaders in discussions with both the NI Executive and the Government of Ireland. Give thanks for what has been achieved so far in terms of co-operation.

Council for Training in Ministry

Ministers in the first five years of ministry are due to have a post-ordination conference next Tuesday and Wednesday, online, with Zach Eswine and Frank Sellar speaking on the importance of ministers walking closely with God. Pray for Zach and Frank, and pray for the post-ords, that they will be blessed and refreshed by God as they minister in very testing times.