

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

VII. "To Tell the Truth"

10-22-06

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Mtt. 5:33-37

TEXT: *Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No';
anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* – Matt 5:37

INTRODUCTION

The story is told of a pastor who faced quite a dilemma. There were two brothers who had been the scoundrels around a small town for decades. They were unfaithful to their wives, abusive to their children and dishonest in business. The younger brother died suddenly and unexpectedly. The surviving brother went to the pastor and said,

"I'd like you to do the funeral. But it's important to me that during the service you tell everyone my brother was a saint."

"But, he was far from that," the minister countered.

The wealthy brother pulled out his checkbook.

"Reverend, I'm prepared to give the church \$100,000. All I'm asking is that you publicly state that my brother was a saint."

On the day of the funeral, the pastor began his eulogy this way:

"Everyone here knows that the deceased was a wicked man, a womanizer, and a drunk. He terrorized his employees and cheated on his taxes."

Then he paused,

"BUT as evil and sinful as this man was, compared to his older brother, he was a saint!"

Honesty— speaking truthfully to one another is the commandment Jesus is focusing on in our Scripture this morning in The Sermon on the Mount. This text is timely in the midst of political campaigns for the upcoming election. We know truth is being twisted by both sides. Promises are made that won't be kept. Wouldn't it be helpful to know what is in the heart of a person— their core beliefs and values— and know if they had the character to stand for them no matter what the pressure was to do otherwise?

We live in a time when I think we can say telling the truth is almost being trivialized. We had the debacle this last winter over James Frey's memoir, A Million Little Pieces, which when selected for the Oprah Winfrey book club, quickly sold 3.5 million copies. It turns out much of the tale of Frey's struggle with drug addiction was just simply not true. He had exaggerated greatly, altered facts, and embellished his story to make it all sound more dramatic and exciting. At first Oprah came to his defense saying, even if some of the facts were wrong, "the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me." Finally, after a storm of protest, Oprah reversed herself saying, "I made a mistake and I left the impression that the truth does not matter."

In our text this morning, *Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one*, Jesus cuts through all the double-speak and deceptive verbiage of our day. He offers us a new way of relating to one another in honesty and integrity. It is simple, pure, and refreshing—say what you mean and do what you say you will do.

We're in a subsection of the Sermon on the Mount that begins with 5:17, where Jesus tells us He did not come to abolish law, but to fulfill it. And I like what Dr. Bruner does in his commentary in interpreting "fulfill" as "filling it full." Jesus then highlights six Old Testaments commands, and with His "But I tell you," defining them in light of their essence— what this "filling them full" really entails. First, I'll read the introduction that precedes these six commands, Mtt. 5:17-20.

Jesus has talked about the wrong use of anger being like murder, lust as the equivalent of adultery, and upholds the sanctity of marriage in the two verses on divorce. Now, He focuses upon telling the truth clearly and unambiguously. The main Old Testament command Jesus is referring to here is, Lev 19:11c-12—

"Do not deceive one another.

"Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

And, of course, the ninth of the Ten Commandments about not bearing false testimony against your neighbor is not far from His mind either.

READ Mtt. 5:32-37

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The point of each of these commands is, that people were content to merely observe the outward actions, while their inner hearts were sinful. Thus wrongful use of anger becomes equivalent to murder and lust to adultery. Here, with oaths, we have a similar problem. The religious leaders of that day had quite an elaborate system of oaths. Some were more binding than others. For example:

- An oath by the temple was not binding, but an oath by the gold of temple was;
- An oath by the altar was not binding, but an oath by the gift on the altar was;
- Any oath invoking the name of God was binding, but if you managed to avoid invoking the name of God, it wasn't. Thus, if you were to swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by your head, it was not absolutely binding.

All this is akin to what I remember as child when we made promises to one another. One tricky maneuver was to have your fingers crossed behind your back (or your toes crossed if you could). Crossed fingers or toes made the promise invalid. But then, if you wanted to convince someone you really are making a promise you plan to keep, you'd say, "Cross my heart and hope to die, if I ever tell a lie." Actually, that's a terrible oath if you think about it. There are other tricky ways we are dishonest in our speech. Perhaps your child has agreed to clean their room. At the end of the day, the room still is not cleaned. So, you say, "You told me you would clean your room."

And the child innocently responds, "Yes, but I didn't say when!" And, even as adults, if we *really* want to be believed, we have little reinforcements we offer like:

- "I'll swear on the Bible or a stack of Bibles;"
- or, "I'll swear on my mother's grave," (if she's dead).

Jesus cuts through all the deception by saying, don't swear at all but, *Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'*. He says, the whole idea of swearing and oath is based upon a false premise— that we can somehow call God in on our promise-keeping. We do not control Him, nor do we control our own destinies. Jesus points out that we can't make one hair black or white. Of course hair dye today can cover up what is really there. And it is quite presumptuous to think we can enlist ourselves as warrantee for our promises. God is in control of everything in heaven and earth. So, by swearing by anything in heaven or earth, we are really swearing by God. Jesus is pointing out that the whole idea of oaths is flawed. It implies there are times when you don't tell the truth and that should not be. There should never be any reason for saying anything more than "yes" or "no."

The Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers have taken this text very literally, in "Do not swear at all..." Thus throughout history, members of the Society of Friends have refused to be sworn in in a court of law. I believe, some went to jail on that account. Now, provision is made in courts for this. I had a professor of philosophy in seminary who was a member of the Society of Friends, Dr. Kuhn. I remember Dr. Kuhn telling us one day in class that he had been called to give testimony in court. At the traditional swearing in before could take the stand, he said with great dignity: "As a member of the Society of Friends, I cannot take an oath. I will affirm that I always tell the truth." That was accepted by the court.

Recently, Polly and I were in a court session (not for ourselves). Polly notice in the swearing in of witnesses, the words were now, "Do you swear or affirm to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" The "swear or affirm" I suspect is a concession to the Quakers.

While the Quaker position seems a bit beyond the intention of Jesus in the passage, and it almost strikes me as of the same legalism He is speaking against), it is eloquent witness to the fact that a Christian should always speak the truth. Any other assurances should be irrelevant.

THE CURRENT CLIMATE

The title of an article several years ago in "U.S. News and World Report" asked the question: A Nation of Liars? It devoted seven pages to this problem. If we didn't know it, we face a crisis in dealing with truth in America. Genuine honesty is in short supply. A poll says, more than half of the American people say they are less honest than they were ten years ago. Our public leaders don't keep their word. Presidents lie. Only 30% if America feel that Congressional leaders almost always tell the truth. We've had numerous cases in recent years of scientists falsifying their results. A couple of years ago, 47 scientists at Harvard and Emory medical schools admitted to producing misleading papers. In the area of business, a survey of students majoring in business judged the climate of American business as essentially unethical by 2:1. A group of 800 managers were polled in two major corporations and 59% in one and 70% in the other said they felt pressured to compromise personal ethics for company goals. And, we all have our own

stories of being lied to.

This year, a massive study involving 70,000 U.S. college and high school students found that 70% admitted to cheating. And another poll of 25,000 high school students found that nearly half agreed with the statement, “A person has to lie or cheat sometimes to succeed.”

Honesty, trust, keeping our promises to one another is the glue that holds society together. How do you know that can of food you buy contains what it says or that it is safe to eat? Every time you drive, you count on the implied promise of the other driver to obey rules: to stay on their side of the road; to stop at stop signs and lights, etc. Buildings, roads, and bridges are safe only if promises are kept.

A community cannot be healthy when words cannot be trusted. Here’s a wonderful quote from St. Augustine:

Speech was given to man, not that men therewith deceive one another, but that one man might make known his thoughts to another. To use speech, then, for the purpose of deception, and not for its appointed end, is a sin.

There was a day when a man’s word was his bond. A man in a former church in Ohio, in the midst of a large Amish population, was a retired banker. He said during his first 25 years in the bank, when it was just a small local operation, loans were made by a simple promise and handshake. And only one loan was ever defaulted on— and that was due to some horrendous circumstances totally out of the borrower’s control.

Dr. Earl Palmer, now Senior pastor at University Presbyterian in Seattle, says when he was just a young pastor starting on staff at that church, the chief custodian was a man by the name of Bernie Olson. Bernie had been working at the church for about six years. One day, Bernie brought in a big cake for the staff for lunch to celebrate a major milestone in his life. Fifteen years earlier, Bernie explained, he was been a general contractor and went bankrupt. But, he and his wife both went to work, determined to pay back everyone they owed money to. Bernie said he had just paid off the last creditor. Now, you know that you don’t have to pay back creditors when you go bankrupt. Yet, in spite of the relief the legal system allowed, Bernie felt a moral obligation to all those suppliers. He’d made a promise to pay them. And, at great personal sacrifice, he paid back every nickel he owed.

Now I know there are some who go bankrupt who in no way can ever do something like that. I don’t share a story like that to create a legalism or guilt, or even to suggest everyone should do what Bernie did. However, if there is any way possible, we must keep our word. And Bernie is a powerful witness to integrity in our age. What kind of testimony was Bernie to all those to whom he owed money?

TELLING THE TRUTH

There is objective, unchanging truth, to which all our words and integrity must be measured. The

source of all truth is God. God is described as "*emeth*," a rich Hebrew word often translated "true" and "faithful." God is true to His word, and His promises are always fulfilled. Jesus defined himself as "the Truth." All truth is to be measured against Him. So, the ultimate reason we must not lie is because it violates God's clear command. This God who is true, and fulfills every promise calls us to be true and fulfill our promises. In Mtt. 12:36, Jesus says,

"But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken."

Those who keep promises are being "God-like."

Why do we lie and deceive one another in our speech? Think of some of the pressures you face in speaking honestly and the things that cause us to compromise in our speech— to be less than totally honest. Let me just list a few motivating factors I've thought of:

- **The desire to succeed.** Deceptive advertising, and dishonest words may seem "necessary" to get ahead, to gain advantage over others. As someone once said, "Nothing tests your ethics like selling a used car!"
- **Fear** is another motivator. If we've done something wrong or not fulfilled a commitment, the truth can take a backseat to our self-protective mode.
- There is **peer pressure**— the need to fit-in, to be popular, to go along with crowd. We don't want to stand out and be different. So we say the same things as everyone else, even if it is less than totally honest. We make promises and commitments we know we probably won't keep.
- Then there is **people pleasing**. We don't want to displease people, so we say what we think they want to hear. We are asked to do something and it is so much easier to say "yes" than argue or explain why we can't, or why we feel we shouldn't. "Sure, I'm glad to come to that meeting. It sounds really good." Then, we just forget or not get around to it or wiggle out with a white lie. Maybe one of the most common, accepted lies in Christian circles is, "I'll pray for you!" Then we promptly forget. It is easy to make commitments to gain favor, advantage or impress others or to get the job, or to be accepted by others. We may mean them at the moment. But, we fail to follow through when it is inconvenient or costly.

The way The Message paraphrases this command emphasizes some of this:

"And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong."

I've read that Albert Einstein was the featured speaker at a dinner given at at Swarthmore College, an Ivy League school. When it came time for him to speak, he astonished everyone by standing up and announcing, "I have nothing to say." Then he sat down. A few moments later he stood again and added, "In case I have something to say, I will come back and say it." Six months later he sent a message to the president of the college saying, "Now I have something to say." Another dinner was held and Einstein gave his speech.

Isn't that refreshing? If everyone could be so honest— if those who have nothing to say would

just shut up— what a blessing it would be!

CONCLUSION

Jesus gives a clear challenge to us to let integrity seep down into core of our beings, so we are truth-filled. Then, we will always speak the truth. Our "yes" will be "yes" and our "no" will be "no." What we say we will do and our word will indeed be our bond. We can be trusted and counted on no matter what. In our truthful speech, we honor and give witness to the God who never lies. How our world needs this witness! We live in world filled with devalued words and commitments. We badly need the restoration Jesus offers!

Jesus warns us that words are the fruit of what's inside. In Mtt. 12:34 He says, *Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*. So, we must begin with the heart. There is a wonderful freedom when our hearts are pure and we feel no need to portray anything but what we are through our speech. When our speech is deceptive, trying to impress others, it is a clue that something is amiss in our hearts.

One of my favorite children's stories is Dr. Suess', Horton Hatches the Egg. Remember the flaky mother duck who left her egg with Horton, the elephant, and asked him, "Will you watch this egg please?" Though she promises to return, she leaves her egg and never comes back— not willing to fulfill the commitment of being a mother duck. While she is off in the sunny south enjoying herself, Horton cares for the egg, keeping it warm, at great cost and ridicule. Looking absolutely ridiculous, Horton stays with the egg until it hatches. He becomes a wonderful, committed parent. The classic line, thematically repeated throughout the story, is Horton saying:

"I meant what I said, and I said what I meant.
An elephant's faithful 100 percent."

How about you? Do you say what you mean and mean what you say? A Christian is faithful and truthful 100 percent.

As we close, join me in praying this prayer of David from Psalm 141 (vs. 1 & 3):

O LORD, I call to you; come quickly to me.

Hear my voice...

Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;

Keep watch over the door of my lips.