

Nothing but the Truth

Matthew 5:33-37

As children, we had the fool-proof way to guarantee our truthfulness: “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!” Wow! Who would question that? A needle right in the old eyeball; a dire consequence for a fibbing five-year old. We got older, and our guarantees grew more sophisticated, but they were still severe: “If I’m lying, I’m dying.” Were we really inviting some cosmic guardian of truth to slay us where we stood if we were not being fully truthful?

We like to think that we have outgrown such childish ploys, but have we really? Even an adult sometimes uses language as a tool for assuring others that he really, really is telling the truth. Perhaps, he has a pattern of stretching the truth. Perhaps, others think of him as a blow-hard, a name-dropper or a braggart. So, he resorts to phrases like, “I swear” or “really” or “I kid you not!”

When you fill out a job application, there is usually at the bottom of the page some sentence attesting to the fact that what you have written is true. If you do not sign it, the employer will never even consider hiring you. Up to that point, you could have wildly embellished reality. The shift manager at Burger King is no doubt enthralled by your tales of days in the CIA. But, then that signature is demanded. Now, how exactly does that insure truthfulness? I’m not really certain.

Why does there so often seem to be a need for some extra degree of assurance that we are telling the truth beyond the mere fact that we have spoken? It is probably because the history of man’s relationship with truthfulness does not reflect very well on him as a creature of integrity. It’s not just the fact that we are capable of lying. We know how to shape our stories in a fashion that places us in the best light. If a politician is from my party, he is an adept spinner. If he is from the other party, he is a miserable liar. We struggle with this “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” concept.

I. The Foundation of Truth

A. All Truth Descends from the Creator

Truth is that which is absolute, eternal and unchanging. As Christians, we believe that all truth descends from One Creator Who is absolute, eternal and unchanging. The fact of creation, the perfect order of creation, the nature of human sexuality, the foundational aspects of the nuclear family – all of these truths that are currently under attack are revealed in even the most casual observation of what has been made. These things were also breaking down in Israel, compelling David to lament, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3).

The lament is just as poignant today. When foundational, eternal and unchanging truth is dismissed, nothing makes sense anymore. Right and wrong reverse roles. Life becomes cheap. Ethical lines are blurred. Truth which can never be relative is spoken of as though it is. “You have your truth. I have mine.”

This Creator revealed additional truth to Israel. Note that I did not say better truth or new truth, for all truth is perfect and is as old as the creation itself. We believe that after God made some truth known in His creation, He revealed Himself further to the nation of Israel. God called one man to father the nation. After Abraham’s descendants lived as slaves for four centuries in Egypt, God selected a deliverer, Moses. God identified Himself to Moses with a Name that speaks to the truthfulness of His essence, “I Am.” Because God is true, His words and promises can be trusted, and His threats must be heeded, for He “... does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

B. Jesus Is the Final Expression of God's Truth to Man

Christianity claims that God revealed Himself fully in the Person of Jesus. *John* 1 tells how the Word of God (His *logos* or full utterance of Himself) became flesh and made known all the glory, grace and truth of God that any man can take in. Jesus identified Himself as "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (*John* 14:6) and, therefore, the only way any created being can approach God. Before He returned to heaven, Jesus promised to remain present with His people by One He called "the Spirit of Truth" (*John* 14:17). In the power of that Spirit, Jesus' Apostles proclaimed boldly and credibly that the name of Jesus is the only Name under heaven by which men can be saved (*Acts* 4:12).

All of this is to reaffirm that truth is truth and it can never be true for me but not true for you. But, we are sinners, and God's perfect truth in Christ is elusive until He Who is the Truth enters our world and confronts us. This is the unique claim of Christianity. We know the truth, not because we were smart enough to figure it out and not because we are inherently better, more spiritually-wired people. We know the Truth in Christ because He found us, and we embraced Him. If you are a Christian, you cannot even discuss what is true apart from the backdrop of the Creator making Himself known through His creation, through the Law to Israel, through the prophets, and in these last days, in Jesus.

In spite of this, the minds of many Christians today are fashioned more by the world than by God's Word. Statistics suggest that some here today accept the idea of relative truth - that what is true for me might not be true for everyone. You suspect that homosexuality is not a sinful choice, that sexual activity beyond the boundaries of covenant marriage is no big deal and that abortion really is just a simple matter of a woman's rights. Most curiously, you believe that there are many roads to God even though logically, that renders Jesus' words about His exclusivity to save, untruthful.

II. The Corruption of Truth

A. Satan Is the Father of Lies

At the outset, Satan set himself at odds with the truth of God. God placed Adam and Eve in Eden. He gave them one prohibition. They were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Death would enter their world the moment they defied Him. When Satan came to the woman, he said, "You will not surely die." He openly challenged the truthfulness of God. That has been His ploy ever since: to declare what is wrong, "right"; to call darkness, "light"; to call vice, "virtue."

All of this has been to say that truth matters to God. He is the True One. All of God's passion for truth lay behind these words of Jesus. Now, before we finally address our text, let us consider the disdain for truth practiced by those who regarded themselves to be the shepherds of God's people.

B. The "Truthfulness" of the Pharisees Was under Divine Scrutiny

Jesus began this section of His *Sermon on the Mount* with these words: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew* 5:20). Since that point, He has exposed the emptiness of pharisaic righteousness, allegedly the standard for righteousness in all of Judah. But, with all their rituals and rules, the Pharisees had missed God's heart in this matter of righteousness.

They had never murdered anyone. That would violate the law of God. But, they had despised others. In fact, some of them would despise Jesus to the point of actively plotting for His death. They had never committed adultery as the Law defined it, but they had lusted in their hearts. More than that, they had trivialized the narrow concession that the Law had provided for divorcing their wives. For the most frivolous of reasons, they were casting off old wives so as to acquire new wives. This *was* adultery in God's eyes. Now Jesus reveals them as men who had no real love for truth at all.

C. Truth-telling Is Not a Complicated Endeavor

³³"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all; either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

The Law never commanded oaths, but if a man did make a vow, he was obligated to fulfill it. The third commandment said, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ..." (Exodus 20:7). This command was not about what we think of as cursing and swearing. It was about throwing around the sacred Name of God. The most common way for a Jew to break this commandment was to invoke God's name in an oath and then fail to fulfill the oath.

The Pharisees were masters of word games. Remember how as children we could lie through our teeth without ethical compromise? No one could hold us to anything if we had our fingers crossed. The Pharisees had mastered the art of lying convincingly with more sophisticated crossed fingers. They taught that if a man brought God's name into an oath, he was duty-bound to keep it, but he could word other very convincing oaths that were not binding so long as he guarded his language. He could sound serious if he swore by something important like heaven, earth or his own head. He needed only to avoid an overt reference to God. He could swear *by* Jerusalem and break his oath, but if he swore *toward* Jerusalem, he was bound to the oath. He could swear by the temple or the altar and break an oath but not if he swore by the gold in the temple or the sacrifice on the altar.

The effect of Jesus' words was to remind His listeners that God was a party to every promise they made. Everything in this world exists under God's dominion. Even the hairs of your head are governed by His laws, not yours. You don't even have the power to change their color - at least not authentically. And take notice, when you do, the truth - as well as your roots - will find you out.

D. Jesus Issued a Massive Challenge

³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

Don't we all have times when we feel we must state a case with more than a simple "yes" or "no"? Why do we doubt that others will believe us unless we chatter incessantly? We could be dealing with a cynic who trusts no one, but in most instances, we build our cases because we know that at some point - perhaps, at frequent points - we have proven ourselves unworthy of the unqualified trust of others. We bend over backwards to be convincing because we are, by our fallen natures, liars:

Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies. (Psalm 58:3)

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? - Jeremiah 17:9

Jesus' intent here was to help us to see the deceitfulness of our hearts. A remedy for lying hearts that would go much deeper than just providing men with pointers on how to express themselves was on the way. To enter the kingdom of heaven, we must be truthful people, and we are not inherently truthful. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that it would take a miracle to get into heaven, but the Teacher knew something the students did not. The miracle they needed was on the way. Jesus' cross would take our sins away. The *Sermon on the Mount* helped them to see the depth of their need.

III. The Recovery of Truthfulness

A. Jesus Came To Save Liars

Jesus said, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him" (Matthew 12:35). We must grasp those words in light of the reality of sin: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10).

On another occasion, Jesus told a man that there is a hope of heaven for those born into this world of sin. They can be born again. Nicodemus responded, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Jesus taught him that he must be born of the Spirit. Without rebirth into a new nature, no liar will go to heaven, and the natural man is deceitful to the core. Be born again. Yes, you will fall. You may lie or at least shade the truth in your favor. You may make decisions based in anger or fear and try to blame others or invent noble reasons to cover the truth. But God will be working in you, and you will make progress.

B. Is All Oath-Taking Prohibited?

On the basis of this text, some today protest on religious grounds against being placed under oath. They would see vows of marriage or ordination to ministry as inappropriate. Is this what Jesus meant? Jesus was charged under oath by the high priest to answer plainly, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." He did not say, "I refuse to answer on religious grounds." He said, "Yes, it is as you say" (Matthew 26:63, 64). Paul often called God in as a witness to his truthfulness:

"I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth." - 2 Corinthians 1:23

"I assure you before God that what I am writing is no lie." - Galatians 1:20

Did Paul's invoking of God as a witness make his statements more true? No. His oaths bolstered the confidence of his readers to believe him, but his words would have been just as true regardless.

One value of an oath is its power to convince others that we are speaking truthfully by invoking a witness bigger than ourselves. If the judicial system places us under oath, that doesn't magically render us people of integrity. It does remind us that the state is bigger than we are, and if we are caught lying, we will pay for it. If the consequence of perjury is dismissed, as it has been selectively in recent years, the oath is useless, and the state has no means of securing truthful testimony.

There is no presence bigger than God's presence, but He is often silent, so there is no one whose presence is more easily disregarded. As a citizen of God's kingdom, you are obligated to be truthful with or without oaths, but some oaths are useful. Marriage vows in the presence of God are good for you, your spouse and the community of witnesses who will hold you to them. If you're asked to take a formal oath - in court or to hold an office - there is no virtue in "grandstanding in protest." With or without oaths, Christians will be called into account for every idle word, so embrace truthfulness.

C. How Do We Embrace the Truth?

1. Openly confess your need for a new nature. Truth came to men and made Himself known. The first thing any person must do is say, “Yes,” to Jesus and receive the new birth of His Spirit.

2. Embrace a holy fear of the truth. All of life is lived in God’s presence. Children lined up in the cafeteria of a Christian school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The teacher made a note: “Take only one, God is watching.” At the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. A boy wrote a note: “Take all you want, God is watching the apples.” Life cannot be divided into compartments where God is and where God is not.

3. Embrace a new-born love of the truth. The most common ploy for covering up lies is more lies. When a man lives from one lie to the next, he erects a house of cards and lives in fear that it will crumble. Liars live in fear, because they cannot remember who they told what. Just to be known as we are is great freedom. At the end of the calculations, Jesus assures us, “I will give you rest.”

4. Fall on God’s grace often. Because we love God, we will strive to speak the truth in love and not brutally. But we will fall. Our assurance is in knowing that God will lift us up when we do.

To conclude, we turn to the annals of great American literature - not Clemens, Kipling, or Hemingway. In Dr. Seuss’ *Horton Hatches an Egg*, our protagonist, a kindly elephant, promises a bird that he will sit on her egg until it hatches. The tension mounts as numerous antagonists, Horton’s friends, tempt him to abandon his post. Our hero sticks to his word, and his recurring response becomes the signature of his integrity: “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant’s faithful 100 percent.”

It’s a fictional story, and not just because it’s about a talking elephant sitting in a tree. You see, neither the best of elephants nor the best of men are faithful 100 percent. We are flawed. Fellowship with God is beyond our reach. But, it’s not beyond God’s reach. He promises that the atonement He provided in Jesus is enough, and God is faithful 100 percent, for He speaks nothing but the truth.

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