

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, May 22, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:33-37

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.’ 34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #15
TO TELL THE TRUTH**

It happens every election season. Our television sets carry the political advertisements of dozens of candidates promising everything from tax cuts to balanced budgets to health care reform to stadiums, to education reform to you name it. And almost every year our politicians make promises that they cannot deliver on.

Many years ago, UPI reported this prayer by the Chaplain of the Kansas Senate:

“Omniscient Father:

Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing, and the other just the opposite.

And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that, too.

And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.”¹

A busload of politicians were driving down a country road when, all of the sudden, the bus ran off the road and crashed into a tree in an old farmer’s field.

The old farmer, after seeing what happened, went over to investigate. He then proceeded to dig a hole and bury the politicians. A few days later, the local sheriff came out, saw the crashed bus and asked the old farmer where all the politicians had gone. The old farmer said that he had buried them. The sheriff asked the old farmer, “The coroner wasn’t here.

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 123.

Are you sure they were all dead?" The old farmer replied, "Well, some of them said they weren't, but you know how them politicians lie."²

It's not just politicians. In March of 2002, Christianity Today published an article entitled, "Post-Truth Society." The article took a critical look at our institutions of higher education, where it the common held belief is that two strongly held beliefs that are diametrically opposed to each other can both, at the same time, be true.

Lynn Cheney wrote about the absurdity of such a claim in her book, *Telling the Truth*. In it she writes that academics "leaped beyond the commonsense observation that people's descriptions of reality differ to the conclusion that there is no independent reality and thus no basis for making judgments about truth—or falsity."³

Chuck Colson writes, "The good news is that while America's tolerance of lying is greater than ever, Americans retain enough of their Judeo-Christian ethic that they are still scandalized when a public figure lies. We have to help our neighbors understand what's behind the current propensity for lying: A worldview that denies the existence of truth itself, which merely exacerbates our human fallenness in this area. And then we must point them to the Author of truth, the one who said, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'"⁴

Sometimes it is difficult to find where fiction ends and truth begins in the world in which we live. But, the same might be said for followers of Jesus. Just this past week our world was in an uproar over the claims of a false prophet named Harold Camping. Camping incorrectly predicted that Judgment Day would occur last night at 6:00 PM. Waves of earthquakes would begin in New Zealand and spread across the entire globe. His billboards said, "The Bible Guarantees It . . . Judgment Day is May 21, 2011."

There are thousands of disillusioned people today, because instead of taking heed to the words of Jesus, who is the Truth, they took heed to the words of a man who said something diametrically opposed to what Jesus said. It was Christ who said in Matthew 24:36 that, 36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

So, how are we doing when it comes to being people of truth? Would those around you attest to the fact that you are a person of integrity?

There is a story about four high school boys who were late to their morning classes one day. They entered the classroom and solemnly told their teacher that they were detained due to a flat tire. They sympathetic teacher smiled and told them it was too bad they were late because they had missed a test that morning. But she was willing to let them make it up. She gave them each a piece of paper and a pencil and sent them to four corners of

² From the sermon "Jesus on Integrity" by Jeffery Anselmi, p. 1.

³ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/march11/39.112.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*

the room. Then she told them they would pass if they could answer just one question: “Which tire was flat?”⁵

It would be accurate to say that in the day of Jesus there was something of a crisis of integrity amongst the Jewish people. The Jewish people had become masters of misleading others into believing that they were going to do something when they had no intention of doing so. This disturbed Jesus. So, in His Sermon on the Mount, immediately after teaching on divorce and remarriage, Jesus addressed the issue of honesty.

Look at Matthew 5:33.

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.’

This is the fourth time in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus begins a section of teaching by saying, “You have heard that it was said. . .” Christ is about to teach something revolutionary to the Jewish people. Now, over the years there have been well meaning Christians that have assumed that the practice of taking oaths was forbidden in the Bible. Actually oaths were encouraged. In Deuteronomy 10:20 we read, “20 Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name.”

The Children of Israel were encouraged to take oaths and to so in the name of the Lord.

In Jeremiah 12:16, 17 we read, “16 And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, ‘As surely as the LORD lives’—even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal—then they will be established among my people. 17 But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot and destroy it,” declares the LORD.”

It was understood that it was proper to make oaths in the name of the Lord.

The Old Testament prohibited making a vow that you had no intention of keeping. Vows were serious things! To make a vow that you had no intention of following through on was to lie.

Leviticus 19:12 says, 12 “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

Numbers 30:2 says, “2 When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.”

Deuteronomy 23:21 says, “21 If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”

⁵ Anselmi, p. 1.

God takes our promises very seriously. The problem was that the Children of Israel and today many of us do not. Too often we are ready to sacrifice integrity when it comes to keeping our word for that which is easiest or prospers us the most.

Ann Hibbard wrote, “The test of true character comes when being truthful endangers what you want.”⁶

In order to compromise when it came to telling the truth, the Jewish people of Jesus’ day had devised an elaborate system of laws that related to when one was required to keep an oath and when one could break the oath.

Listen to how Kent Hughes describes the time, “Somewhere along the line some rabbis (but not all rabbis) began to teach that an oath was not binding if it did not include God’s name or imply it. Therefore, if you swore by your own or someone else’s life or the life of the king (as Abner did in 1 Samuel 17:55) or by some object, but did not mention or allude to the name of God, you were not bound. The *Mishna* devotes one whole section called *Shebouth* (“Oaths”) to the elaborate discussion of when oaths are binding and when they are not. The swearing of oaths had degenerated into a system of rules as to when you could lie and when you could not. The results were incredible. There was an ongoing epidemic of frivolous swearing, and oaths were continually mingled with everyday speech: ‘By your life,’ ‘by my beard,’ ‘may I never see the comfort of Israel if . . .’ There was an inevitable trivialization of everyday language and integrity. It became common practice to convince another that you were telling the truth (while lying) by bringing some person or eminent object into reference. The deception was very subtle.

For instance, one rabbi taught that if one swore *by* Jerusalem one was not bound, but if one swore *toward* Jerusalem, it was binding – evidently because that in some way implied the Divine Name. All of this produced in its adherents a profound spiritual schizophrenia: ‘I’m not telling the truth, but I’m not really lying.’ Their use of oaths was like children saying, ‘I have my fingers crossed, so I don’t have to tell the truth.’”⁷

Talk about ridiculous! How could you trust anyone? And to think that these were religious leaders who were teaching people how to lie! You’ve got to wonder what the younger students were thinking. Children, after all are quite idealistic, and demand the best in their leaders.

I read the story this week of a rather arrogant Sunday School teacher who taught a group of young boys. While trying to impress upon them the importance of living the Christian life he asked, “Why do people call me a Christian?” After a moment, one of the boys spoke up, “Maybe it’s because they don’t know you!”⁸

⁶ From the sermon, “Keep Your Promises” by Michael Luke, p. 8.

⁷ Hughes, pp. 125-126.

⁸ Anselmi, p. 4.

I've got to believe that is how those who participated in business with those who were trying to not tell the truth, but not lie must have felt. People of integrity are people who keep their word, no matter how hard it is. Jesus continued teaching in verses 34-37.

34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus was essentially telling the people, "Unless you are forced to, don't swear at all. Because when you swear by heaven or earth or anything in between you are swearing by me, because I own it all! I am the Creator of Heaven and earth."

In his marvelous commentary on Matthew, William Barclay wrote, "Here is a great eternal truth. Life cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved and in others of which he is not involved; there cannot be one kind of language in the Church and another kind of language in the shipyard or the factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of standard of conduct in the Church and another kind of standard in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life, and kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life and every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in his name; he hears all words; and there cannot be any such thing as a form of words which evades bringing God into a transaction. We will regard all promises as sacred, if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God."⁹

It's simple when we really think about it. God wants us to keep our word no matter the cost. Christians are people of truth, because we are children of the One who refers to Himself as the Truth, not children of the devil, whom Jesus called, "the father of lies."

I want to give you some practical guidelines for becoming a person of truth.

Becoming People of Truth

1. Commit to Keeping Your Word . . . Even When It Seems Insignificant

If we're honest with ourselves this is an area we all struggle with. Who hasn't been surprised at the words that have come from our mouth from time to time? We make a promise that we never intend on keeping. We tell a story that becomes exaggerated the more and more we tell it. We are tempted to lie about income received when it is time to fill out our IRS paperwork. The list could go on and on.

Jesus expects us to keep our word. Every broken promise that we make hurts someone. Parents often times make promises to children that are broken because of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the tyranny of the urgent. The fishing trip is cancelled. "I can't play catch in the backyard, because something came up at work."

Husbands and wives tell each other that they will be home at a certain time, but don't show up until much later because something else came up.

We tell a customer that we can finish a product by a certain date even when we know that it will be impossible to make it happen by that time because we don't want to lose a sale.

The more we break our word, the more we make God look bad. Christians, above all others should be people of integrity.

The current issue of Christianity Today has an article entitled, "The Seven Levels of Lying." I've put a link to it on the home page of our website and on the sermon based small group notes this week. Take a look at it. Level one is simply that you lie. That is followed by self-protection, where you lie about having lied to protect yourself. Pretty soon you develop a habit of lying. That is followed by self-deception, where you start to believe your own lies. This is followed by rationalization. Rationalization is followed by developing your own technique and finally you begin to see it as your duty to lie.

The article's author, Sarah Sumner says, "We lie more than we think. And that's part of the problem. . . Every person on the planet at times is an Oscar-winning liar. Haven't we all lied without being caught? As the Bible says, "There is no one righteous, not even one . . . Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit" (Rom. 3:10-13). My husband and I, aware of this reality, have made a pact. If either of us lies to the other, we are committed to confessing the lie within three days."¹⁰

Michael Luke, in his sermon, "Keep Your Promises" gives five ways or reasons that Christians commonly lie.

- 1) We lie to cover up our mistakes
- 2) We exaggerate
- 3) We mislead
- 4) We give false flattery
- 5) We deceive or cheat¹¹

I read those and say, "Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty." I've been guilty of all five of those things, and Jesus knows it. If we are going to become people of truth, we need to avoid these common pitfalls. We need to commit to telling the truth, even when it seems insignificant.

2. Keep Your Promises . . . Even When It's Difficult

¹⁰ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/may/7-levelslying.html?start=1>

¹¹ Luke, pp. 3-4.

We've all been there. We've promised something before we understood the real cost of the promise. And now, we wish we hadn't have made the promise.

I've talked with godly Christian businesspeople who have turned down lucrative business deals to keep a promise to a spouse or a child. That's hard.

I have been a part of mission trips where we promised to get a job done in a couple of days, and it looked impossible to get the work done. Rather than quit, we worked harder. We worked longer hours. We worked past the point of exhaustion. And, we accomplished great things.

Keeping our word matters.

C.S. Lewis took keeping his word seriously, even when the cost was high. In his biography he tells the story of a promise he kept to a friend who died during World War I. His friend asked him to care for his wife and small daughter should he die in battle. The friend died in the war, and Lewis kept his end of the bargain. He took care of his friend's family. Despite all that Lewis did for his friend's widow, the woman herself was ungrateful, rude, arrogant and domineering. Through it all, Lewis kept forgiving her. He refused to let her actions become an excuse to renege on his promise.¹²

3. Keep Your Promises . . . Even When You Are The Only One Who Knows

We've all made promises that only God and us know about. But, God knows. Have you made a promise to God? Then keep your word. Have you made a promise to live a life of integrity when you are on the road or alone in front of your computer or television screen? Keep your promises! Even when no one else is looking, God is.

1 Timothy 4:12 says, "12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."

The words were written to a young pastor, but they apply to all Christians. People of God are people of integrity, who recognize our unique calling as His ambassadors in this world.

There is a great story about Elliot Ness and his team of nine men who took down Al Capone's 120 million dollar mob empire. The year was 1929 and Eliot Ness was just a 26-year-old government agent. "At the time, Ness was making \$2800 a year working for the government. One day a young man walked into his office and handed Ness an envelope with 2 one thousand dollar bills and promised this weekly if he would lay off Capone. Ness sent the money and the messenger back. Desiring to make a point, Ness called a press conference. Newspapers and newsreels from various agencies were in attendance. Ness told the story of Capone's attempted bribe and Ness'

¹² Luke, p. 5.

response to it. The next day, headlines read "Ness and his men are 'UNTOUCHABLE.'"¹³

Are you willing to be untouchable when it comes to your integrity, even when no one is watching? If we are going to win this battle with truth we need to recognize our struggle, ask God for help, find an accountability partner, be careful what we promise, and question our motives when we do make a promise.

God loves it when we reflect His character in our lives. May you be a person of truth! May you recognize that even Jesus had to keep a promise that was tough.

Michael Luke writes, "Jesus faced the gut-wrenching choice of keeping a costly promise.

1. God had been promising for thousands of years to send His Son to save the world through His death and resurrection.

a. But when the moment of truth came in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus felt the weight of the difficulty of keeping this promise.

b. In fact, He asked His Father, "If there is any other way, please let this cup pass from me."

--Jesus knows what it's like to face a promise you don't want to keep

2. But in that moment of truth, when He realized there was no other way to save us, Jesus became the ultimate promise-keeper.

--Jesus kept His word to die in our place, to absorb all of our sin, to be cut off from the Father, so that we could live and be forgiven and be reconciled to the Father."¹⁴

I'm glad that Jesus always keeps His promises. He came as our Savior. He died in our place. And, He will come again. No one knows the day or the time, but be sure of this, Jesus always keeps His word. If you'd like to know Him personally today, I want to encourage you to catch me in the hall after the service. I'd love to share how you can begin a relationship with God today.

¹³ Anselmi, p. 4.

¹⁴ Luke, p. 9.