

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:33-37

We have a conundrum. Societies, organizations, communities, families cannot function well if people don't tell the truth. Yet, we cannot count on people to tell the truth. What are we to do?

Or to put it another way, we want to trust people, but we know we can't trust people (or at least not everyone all the time). Of course, we can (and should) turn this back on ourselves: can I/you/we be trusted?

I think we would all agree that a truly good/righteous person is honest, forthright, trustworthy, and full of integrity. How do we become such people? Does Jesus have anything to say about that?

“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.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

If you were to try to find a specific verse that states, “*Do not break your oath...*” that Jesus is alluding to, you would not find it. Rather, this was a distilled amalgamation of a variety of passages in the Old Testament that all have at their heart, “*Tell the truth; be true to your word.*” Jesus’ original hearers, as well as Matthew’s original readers, would have understood this as a summary statement of what the Hebrew Scriptures mentioned on the subject. And as we have come to expect by now, Jesus gets to the heart of the law/rule/command...which is simply (to paraphrase) “*Become the type of people who can be counted on to tell the truth and keep your word.*”

We often think that “*Do not lie*” is one of the Ten Commandments. That’s actually a shorthand version of the ninth commandment, “*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*” (see Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20) This conjures up an image of not perjuring oneself in court. For a society to function properly, there needs to be a system of justice, and a system of justice only works properly if people tell the truth. Otherwise it opens the door to all kinds of corruption. But being honest is also important in other contexts, and many parts of the Old Testament speak to that...for example: Leviticus 19:11-16, 35-36; Deuteronomy 25:13-16; Proverbs 12:22, 14:5; Zechariah 8:16-17...to name a few. Basically, wherever there are relationships, honesty, integrity, and trust are important.

That sounds simple enough...and yet...we know it doesn't seem to work that easily or smoothly. Why do people resort to lying, to not keeping their word, to stretching or bending the truth?

James Bryan Smith’s chapter “Learning to Live Without Lying” in his book *The Good and Beautiful Life* is particularly helpful. In it he observes that there are two main reasons people lie:

“(1) fear of what will happen if we tell the truth, and (2) desire for personal gain if we lie.” (Hmm, fear and desire...we have a consistent pattern going on here.) We fear an unpleasant consequence, or we see an opportunity to get ahead, or fulfilling our word turns out to be harder than we thought...so we cave, we lie, we don't keep our word. Part of the reason this is so tempting is because sometimes (maybe even often times) it “works”...it gets us off the hook or gets us ahead. But who/what do we BECOME in the process? How are others negatively affected? As those who are called to be salt and light, how does lying or not keeping our word reflect upon King Jesus? These are questions and concerns that a truly good/righteous person considers.

Remember, the entire Sermon on the Mount, and really all of Jesus' teaching, is predicated upon the present reality of the Kingdom of God. Because we are safe and secure in the Kingdom of God, we can withstand the consequences of being honest and the cost of keeping our word. This frees us up to consider and do what is best for others (which is the definition of love).

You may be wondering what's with all the swearing that Jesus was prohibiting or speaking against. To “*swear to God*” was a way of saying “*God will hold me accountable if I don't fulfill my word.*” It's a way of adding weight to our statement. But let's face it, does anyone really want God to hold them accountable? So people craftily created “loopholes” by swearing on something less than God, but still God-adjacent. Thereby, if they didn't fulfill their word, it's not as bad. Additionally, to “*swear to God*”, especially if not fulfilled, was awfully close to taking the Lord's name in vain (the Third Commandment—see Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11). So making an oath on something less than God, yet greater than oneself, seems more God-honoring. BUT...the problem is that it's highly manipulative. I'll let Dallas Willard explain...

“The problem with ‘swearing’ or the making of oaths—which was really a huge part of life in Jesus’ world—is not just that it involves taking the name of God in vain, or using it lightly and without love and respect for Him. It does that often, no doubt, but not always. The evil of it that He addresses is that it is an inherently wrong approach to other human beings...It is simply a device of manipulation, designed to override the judgment and will of the ones they are focusing upon...The essence of swearing or making oaths is to try to use something that, though impressive, is irrelevant to the issues at hand to get others to believe you and let you have your way. This is wrong. It is unlike God...We are making use of people, trying to bypass their understanding and judgment to trigger their will and possess them for our purposes. Whatever consent they give to us will be because we have short-circuited their understanding of what is going on...Kingdom rightness respects the soul need of human beings to make their judgments and decisions solely from what they have concluded is best. It is a vital, a biological need. We do not thrive, nor does our character develop well, when this need is not respected, and this thwarts the purpose of God in our creation.”

All that to say, swearing/oath making is often simply a way to cajole, convince, coerce, and persuade people (perhaps even deceive people) that we are of high character, that we can be believed/trusted. It's a way of forcing our will by overriding theirs. While it might be subtle and even socially acceptable, it's not the way of Jesus and His Kingdom. It is not consistent with

having a high view and value of people. (Hmmm, another theme/pattern in the Sermon...having a high view and value of people.)

Consider the process of buying and/or selling a house. If you've done so, then you know that there are "disclosures" involved. The seller is supposed to disclose anything wrong with the home that they are aware of. While this is a tool that is designed to cultivate trust and good will between the buyer and seller, it's also an opportunity to not be open and honest, thereby taking advantage of the situation. Even though disclosures are a signed legal document, it's still nevertheless easy to get away with not being honest. This may be part of the allure of lying, or not disclosing the truth...it's rather easy to get away with. But for followers of Jesus, the issue isn't playing the odds of whether or not we'll get away with it, it's about BEING honest, BEING like Jesus. The consequence we're concerned about is who we are BECOMING, and reflecting Jesus well.

Nearly 26 years ago I distinctly remember going to the city-county building in downtown Indianapolis with Angela to secure our wedding license. I clearly remember the clerk asking us to raise our right hands and swear that we were not related to each other. (Being from California, I also remember thinking to myself, "*Is this an actual problem y'all have around here?*") But that's not where I'm going with this story.) My point is, sometimes in civic life we are asked to swear an oath (jury duty for example). Is Jesus prohibiting His followers from doing that?

While there are certainly pockets within the Christian tradition who believe that to be the case. I don't think that's the case. Why? Because at the end of the day, Jesus wasn't creating new laws for us to legalistically obey. Rather, He was explaining the true heart of the law and the heart of a Kingdom-dweller. The point isn't whether or not we swear or take oaths, but whether or not we are people who naturally tell the truth and who can be trusted.

As Jim Smith says, "*The standard of righteousness in Jesus' day was clear: You can tell lies and not be liable (until you get caught), but if you lie 'under oath' you are guilty. Jesus, as always, is aiming for something higher, for a new kind of person with a new kind of character. He is saying, 'under oath or not, those who live in the kingdom can and should tell the truth'...The radical nature of Jesus' words was not that we should never take an oath but that all of our speech should be honest, genuine, true and trustworthy—a yes that means yes and a no that means no...The kingdom does not run on deception...He is saying, Become the kind of person who naturally tells the truth. Do this often and consistently, and people will not need you to 'swear' because you always tell the truth.*"

I'm going to assume anyone reading this is old enough to remember phone books and Yellow Pages. (Back in the day of landline telephones.) Do you recall how ads in the Yellow Pages, say for a mechanic, or a plumber, or something like that would include a cross or a fish on their ad? Why would they do this? Generally, it was a way to attract a potential customer by using religious imagery in order to communicate "*I'm a Christian, thus I'm honest and trustworthy.*" By appealing to religious imagery it's sort of using God's reputation in order to enhance their own. It's a subtle way of bypassing people's fear of being taken advantage of. Do you know

another way to build a business/customer base? BE honest and trustworthy and do good work. I'm not bringing this up to say that those who did this practice were "wrong". I'm simply trying to show how easy, and even socially acceptable, it is to exploit other people's fears and leverage religion for personal gain.

Letting our "Yes be yes and our No be no" means relating to people with honesty and integrity, and in such a way that honors them, their cares and concerns, that reflects the character of God and the culture of His Kingdom. God is truth. We, as His children, are meant to reflect Him (His truth, goodness, beauty, wisdom, love, etc.) to the world we inhabit. That's what "*His Kingdom come, His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" looks like.

The apostle Paul puts it this way, "...put on the new self, created to be like God, in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speaking truthfully to your neighbor..." (Ephesians 4:24-25, emphasis added) and "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." (Colossians 3:9-10, emphasis added)

In closing, when we find ourselves tempted to lie or not keep our word, or when we feel convicted because we have lied or haven't kept our word, it might be good to spend some time considering/reflecting on WHY? What are we wanting or what are we afraid of? How does the present reality of the Kingdom of God speak to that want/desire, or how does it relieve that fear? What kind of justification (false narrative) is at play in our reasoning/rationale? Is this how I want to relate to people? Is this how I would want them to treat me? Spending time considering these sorts of questions, with Jesus, can go a long way toward healthy spiritual formation.

At the end of the day, this is what Jesus is trying to do...to form us well. Or as Dallas Willard says, "*Jesus is actually looking for people He can trust with His power.*" People who are honest, forthright, full of integrity...these are the type of people who can be entrusted with that kind of power and responsibility. This is the high calling of Kingdom citizens. Our path toward this is discipleship/apprenticeship unto Jesus.

Lastly, here's a short video from our friends at the Bible Project that also explains this passage...

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/matthew-5-33-37-oaths/>

Possible Discussion Questions

- Who is somebody you trust unequivocally? How did that person gain your trust?
- Why should somebody trust you?
- When someone doesn't trust you, or isn't quick to trust you, or is hesitant to trust you, how do you respond? (Trust can go beyond simply our words, but our assessment of things, or our plans, or our intentions.)
- If you are willing to share, when/how has someone violated your trust? When/how have you violated someone's trust?
- Think about the times you have resorted to lying, or didn't keep your word...what was motivating you at that time? Why do you think lying and/or not keeping one's word is such an attractive option?
- What motivates you to be honest and to keep your word? When have you found it difficult or costly to do so?
- In which arenas of life do you feel at the mercy of people's honesty? Or, in what arenas of life are you highly suspicious of people's honesty? (The stereotypical example might be a used car dealer.) Or, who do you tend to grant trust to rather easily, and who do you tend to not trust very easily?
- There is a difference between trusting people's competency and trusting people's character. Can you give an example of either?
- It is tempting to try to go through life without having to put ourselves in positions of having to trust people (or at least to minimize it as much as possible). But, at the end of the day, that's truly impossible. We are designed as relational, interdependent creatures, which is why honesty as integrity are so important. With that in mind, who do you really need to trust, or want to be able to trust? Who really needs to trust you?
- What are some ways you try to add credibility/believability to your words? When and why do you do that?
- What are some ways you/we can foster letting our "Yes" be yes, and our "No" be no?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Watching our Words

Perhaps at some point in time you've tracked your spending so that you could analyze where your money goes. Or maybe you've tracked your calorie intake to see how much, and what kind of, calories you're taking in.

Well, this exercise is sort of like that...we're going to track our words, or more precisely, our conversations. At the end of each day, reflect on the conversations you had throughout the day. (Or, if you're a morning person, you can start your day reflecting on the conversations from the day before.)

As you reflect, here are some questions you can ask yourself...

- What were you trying to accomplish in those conversations?
 - How did you go about trying to accomplish that?
- What sort of influence were you trying to have on those you were in conversation with?
 - Persuade/convince them?
 - Console them?
 - Affect their perception of you?
 - Share thoughts and feelings?
- How did you use, or misuse, truth?
 - Bend or exaggerate it?
 - Hide it or half-truth it?
- How do you view those you were in conversation with?
 - Like and respect them?
 - Trust them (or not)?
 - Desire their approval?
 - Consider them beneath you?
 - Obstacles and interruptions, or gifts and blessings?
 - Need to be able to trust them? Need them to trust you?
- What was encouraging and uplifting or discouraging and frustrating about the conversations?
- How were you affected by the conversation? How were those you were in conversation with affected by the conversation?

As an added wrinkle, if you're interested (credit to Meg for this one), daily look back on your text conversations and ask the same type of questions.

What do our conversations reveal about our hearts (i.e. how we view other people)? Invite God to search your heart through this exercise.