

# HOW TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

by Steve Zeisler

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In recognition of the election coming up shortly in this country, let me ask you, Would you like to see the laws our politicians make and the leadership they give be more and more filled with a commitment to truth and justice? In Psalm 51 David records that God desires truth in the innermost being; he desires us to see ourselves on the inside as we really are, especially to acknowledge the difficult truths that we discover there. Are you also committed to a radical and relentless examination of what truth and justice, or lack thereof, are in your own heart of hearts? Perhaps not—perhaps you're like me. I much prefer establishing righteousness at some distance from myself, getting other people to take that seriously rather than being deeply honest about what I discover if I look hard at my innermost being.

But in the Sermon on the Mount we find Jesus absolutely committed to our seeing ourselves as we really are: We should not deal in the appearances of things, in what is external, but in what is true on the inside, so that truth established in our hearts can lead to truth experienced in our behavior.

I've heard any number of folks, Christian and otherwise, complain about greedy athletes and team owners, whether it's in hockey or baseball or other sports. And it is hard to imagine someone's being dissatisfied with \$10 million a minutes playing some ridiculous game. But Jesus' words beginning the Sermon on the Mount are,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Rather than complaining about someone else's greed, the Lord asks us to look at not just material poverty, but the poverty of our spirit. Without God's presence with us, what kind of people are we? What needs do we really have?

We can complain about the violence of terrorists and the political process in the Middle East. But Jesus reminds us, "Blessed are the peacemakers"—not just those who oppose violence someplace else, but those who are active peacemakers in the community they live in. Are we the kind of people who are touching lives near us, sowing peace and hope in our families, our neighborhoods, and our communities? The focus always returns to the reality of the inner life, and his disciples who listen to him speak find themselves under examination.

The last half of Matthew 5 has six statements that follow a pattern in which Jesus says, "You have heard...." and then corrects what the people had heard previously: "...But I say to you...." We are now going to look at the fourth and fifth of these statements, which concern the issues of truth and justice. We vote for these in the public arena, but now let's examine ourselves and see if we discover them in our hearts: Are we really committed to truth? Do we really long for justice? Matthew 5:33-37:

"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 the 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.

("Evil" is probably a better translation than "the evil one," although Jesus said the devil is "a liar and the father of lies" [John 8:44].)

What Jesus' hearers have heard of old is actually a somewhat accurate rendition of the Old Testament. For instance, the third commandment in Exodus 20:7 says, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...." Leviticus 19:12 says, "You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD." Deuteronomy 23:21 says, "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not be slack to pay it." All of these are reminders that God is concerned about our oaths and we should take them seriously. But these passages were interpreted inaccurately. What the teachers had done over the centuries was to urge people not to live in the stark and powerful searchlight of the word of God, but to learn to live in its shadows; to rationalize, manipulate, introduce exception clauses, and find a way around the hard realities that the Law proclaimed.

For instance, those who had commented on these Old Testament statements and principles said that the key issue was the verbal formula that was used in taking oaths. The Lord meant, If you take a vow, keep it for God's sake. But it had gotten twisted to mean, The only vows or oaths you are responsible for are those that have the phrase "in God's name" attached to them. If you could learn to be slippery with your language and vow something without actually using God's name, you were not really required to keep that vow; for example, swearing by the heavens, the earth, all that was lovely, or some other oath. Ways of learning to effectively lie grow and grow. The human race is marvelously creative in learning how to lie while appearing not to. So Jesus is saying, "Don't swear or take any oaths at all. That is the best calling for us."

I used to think when I first became a Christian that all prayers ought to end with the phrase "in Jesus' name, Amen," sort of like an e-mail address; if you didn't put that in there, God wouldn't receive it and it would bounce back to you because you hadn't addressed it right. That thinking came, of course, from the Lord's words: "Whatever you ask in my name will be done for you" (John 14:14). But what he meant was that to pray in Jesus' name is to pray with full consciousness of who he is-his character, promises, glory, mercy, and love. When we pray in his name, it means that his glory and his personality fill every utterance. It doesn't matter what verbal formula we begin or end with.

The same is true of our other communications. Now, we have not been raised by the teaching of the ancient rabbis. But do we use inflection or body language or adjectives to mislead each other, to orchestrate a response that is not based on truth? Do we give ourselves the right to say one thing and mean something else? All of that was the problem Jesus was addressing in this section. Have you ever gone up to someone and said, "Hey, it's good to see you," and everything about you says that you're enthusiastic, but thirty seconds later you're looking over their shoulder at someone else? Apparently the relationship means something to you, but it's kind of a show, and you don't really care very much one way or the other about the person in front of you. Perhaps it's something that you do as a social custom or as a way of creating a positive reaction in them.

Have you ever been in a setting where you hear a person advocate a position and you say, "That's a great argument; very thoughtful presentation you've made there," but at the next meeting you vote against their proposal? If asked, "Weren't you in favor of it?" you say, "No, I thought the proposal was great, but I just never agreed with it." Yet the impression you left with the person was that you agreed with his point and would support him when the vote came up. We learn to use language to fool and manipulate people, get our way, open doors, and advance our cause. And we do it in such a way that we can't be strictly named as liars, but in fact we are liars.

One of the most consistent problems that comes up in the marriage counseling I do is exactly on this basis. Husbands and wives have learned to not strictly lie to each other, but mislead each other nonetheless. They have learned to say things in such a way that they know very clearly that they are implying something, but when they are called to account for it later they say, "That isn't precisely the language I used." Both sides are destroying each other because they are using language to be evasive. That is what Jesus was facing in the teaching of the rabbis. If you just use language creatively you don't have to mean what you say.

I had a long discussion with a car mechanic the other day as to what he had meant three weeks earlier when he said to me, "You have a six-month guarantee behind this alternator." When I called to say the alternator didn't work, it was clear that he didn't intend to pay to put in a new alternator. I don't know what he had meant to say, but it certainly wasn't that!

On the radio you hear car advertisements that talk about magnificent cars for very low payments—the most amazing cars in the world! And then at the end someone comes on and says something about "tax and license not included," talking so fast you can't understand what he's saying. But he's basically denying everything said by the first person who talked slowly and was getting you to buy the car.

Even the movie *Forrest Gump* is disturbing. It really looks like Forrest Gump and Lyndon Johnson stand in the same room together discussing his war activities. It's very deceptive, powerful imagery. The human capacity to be creative in fooling people, manipulating responses, getting people to think you're one thing when you're another, working your way ahead by lies and evasions, is absolutely remarkable.

The local newspaper literally has gotten to the point of keeping a scorecard of campaign promises: "Here's the campaign promise of Candidate X. It's ninety percent lies. Here's the ten percent that's true." They attempt to unravel the misperceptions that political ads create, deliberately intending to fool us.

The second issue raised in this paragraph is that we lie to ourselves as well. A couple of weeks ago Mary Verschuyel showed our staff a video about spouse abuse. It was striking, powerful, and hard to watch. One of the things that continues to register in my mind is how many times women or others who are battered invite the batterer back into the circle of intimacy. They say, "This time I'll change. I swear on the grave of my sainted grandmother, I promise with every ounce of strength within me, this time it will be different. I'll never do it again." They are crying, speaking poetically, on their knees—until the next time he does it. Then they say, "I know I said it last time, but this time I swear by heaven and earth and Jerusalem, by my white hair/my dark hair. This time it will be different." One of the reasons that is so convincing is that the person is trying to convince themselves. Down inside they think, "If I use the language of religion or intense language, make promises attached to something, repeat what I say over and over again, yell instead of speaking normally, I can become a different person and quit living the way I've lived."

Jesus' words here are a powerful penetration of that fooling of yourself. You are who you are: Either your "yes" means "yes" and your "no" means "no," or they don't. The phraseology you use, the intensity of your language, and the tears with which you make promises are not going to make you more or less likely to keep your word. You are a man or woman of character, or you are not. You are someone whom God is remaking within so that you are trustworthy, or you are not. But we do not have authority over heaven or earth; we can't swear by them. We can't even change the color of our hair (which I know comes as a shock to some). That is, the young person can't make themselves old and wise overnight. Nor can the old person go back to the vitality of youth just because they talk about it longingly. We have no authority whatever over any of these things we are naming in our oaths.

God has all the authority. He is the only one who can make us different than we are. He is everywhere and he owns all things—every oath is made in God's name. Every declaration we make, every opinion we offer, every word that we speak, whether true or false, he takes seriously. So Jesus says no expression of change in your life is going to make you different if you're not different. You can't swear by anything and be more likely to tell the truth. Your only option is to say humbly, "By the grace of God, and only that, I'm going to tell myself the truth, and I'm going to tell you the truth. If I say 'yes,' it's 'yes.' If I say 'no,' it's 'no.' If I offer an opinion, it's my truly felt opinion."

If I make a declaration, I intend it to be honest." The business of using language to mean something we don't mean, either to manipulate other people or to manipulate ourselves, is a great foolishness.

Do you remember the fable of the little boy who cried wolf? He was supposed to take care of the sheep out at some distance from the village. He was given a horn to blow if a wolf came and threatened the sheep. But this little boy was bored and irresponsible and filled with himself, so in the middle of the night he blew the horn when there was no wolf. The people lit the lamps and ran out breathlessly to the sheep, and he laughed, "There's no wolf. I just wanted to see you run out of your houses. I had nothing better to do." A second time he blew the horn and out came the people, and there was no wolf. He did it a third time, and out came the people, and no wolf. Then a wolf came. The boy blew the horn—but no one came, and the boy and the sheep forfeited their lives. And in the same way, everyone who trafficks in lies and manipulation will eventually run out of people who believe him or her.

If we lie to ourselves it comes with a terrible price as well. We spend all our lives trying to deny who we are and assuming that we can summon up character that we have never developed and make changes with strength we have never learned to have. We assume that if we say just the right words it will make us different. But it doesn't work.

I am reminded of the powerful human drama that took place at the end of Jesus' life. He stood accused before Pilate, who was supremely a politician. Pilate had lied to people, manipulated others' perceptions and done it to himself. He had risen through the ranks of Roman authority, but he had nothing on the inside. Jesus offered him a word: "...For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." And Pilate said, "What is truth?" His conscience was so seared, having long since become one who lied to himself, that in the presence of Christ himself he didn't even know the category of truth existed.

Those are the dangers that we run: that no one will come when we blow the horn because we have blown it falsely too many times, and that we will give up the ability to even see ourselves, or know that such a thing is possible or that we have any character worth examining. So Jesus offers an alternative. Instead of using language as something to manipulate others or yourself, don't swear at all. Let your "yes" mean "yes" and your "no" mean "no." Be honest all the time. Be ruthless in your convictions about truth on the inside, not just with politicians. See what need you have for the Lord to make you different. The powerful exhortation here is to stop being deceptive.

The second paragraph we'll consider is in verses 38-42. It speaks of justice:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Again, the quotation from the Old Testament is accurate: "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." That language is given us in Deuteronomy 19:21. It was intended by God to limit vengeance. Given an opportunity to retaliate for hurt done to them, people will over-retaliate. If someone threatens and hurts their child, they will destroy that person's family. If someone takes away their wherewithal, they will take that person's life. Whatever the hurt done, the reaction is always to overdo the response. So the Law provided that if a skirmish took place between clans or villages, and a member of one clan lost an eye in the skirmish, they were not allowed to go and destroy ten or fifteen lives in the offending clan. They were permitted under the law only retribution that was equivalent to the loss.

But of course, the rabbinical teaching and others took the clear teaching of Scripture and found exceptions, manipulations, and ways around it. There is a discussion in the literature about a case in which, say, the eye that was lost in the first case was of a vital young man who had his whole life before him; could the offending village take the eye of one of its old men who was blind anyway, and offer that in exchange? There is much discussion back and forth about beating the system, getting around the essential call for equivalence or justice in these matters.

What Jesus goes on to say is that the Law is useful in limiting the worst kind of overreaction, but in the long run it does not teach us to be just in our heart. Every one of us, given the opportunity, will always evaluate the hurt done to us as greater than the hurt done to someone else. One of the terrible things proliferating in the culture we live in is that everyone is a victim. And everyone's victimhood requires that they be paid back for whatever hurt was done them who knows when, and that their sufferings are all to be attended to immediately; and whatever suffering anyone else feels is not worth the attention. There is a clamoring for rights and justice. We always will pay ourselves more than we will pay someone else. We will always work to our own advantage.

I've been both a coach and an umpire in youth sports over the years. The difference is amazing to me. There have been times when as an umpire I have been completely impartial and yelled at by both sides for favoring the other team. I think, "These people are ridiculous. I'm doing the best I can, and if I'm making mistakes, I'm

making them equally." But when I'm a coach, I think, "Surely the umpires are terrible! They are plainly doing everything they can to disadvantage our team. They ought to start making calls the other way, because they aren't being fair." It's astonishing to me the ability of human beings to favor their own cause and not be able to judge fairly.

Jesus' antidote to that, knowing that we don't really want justice, but revenge or victory, is this: Why don't you yield your rights. Take the situation where your pride is attacked, as being hit on the right cheek was. Most people are right-handed. So if someone is striking you a blow that intends to hurt you with their right hand, they'll hit you on your left cheek. But if they slap you with the back of their hand, intending not to hurt but to deflate, put down, and belittle you, they'll hit you on the right cheek. What if your pride was hurt? What if someone skewered your well-being and made you look like a fool? Why don't you for once not fight back. Why don't you leave yourself open to being hurt again.

What if someone takes you to court in a frivolous lawsuit or attacks you in some setting and denies your rights? The taking of a cloak was forbidden in Exodus 22:26-27. The poorest Jewish person always had the right to a cloak, which was a garment that they would use at night as a basic defense against the elements. Why not leave yourself open to having your rights taken a second time. Why not refuse to fight back against the experience of being taken advantage of.

What if someone takes away your time and your energy when you have something better to do, forces you to bend to their will and get involved in their program? Roman soldiers were allowed to impress those who were under their political control to carry their pack for a mile. If a Roman soldier was tired of carrying his pack and saw you standing there, he could say, "I'm walking a mile down the road. You take my pack and carry it." He could do that just because he was in charge and you weren't. That is what happened when Jesus stumbled with the weight of the cross; they just picked someone out of the crowd and made him carry the cross. Roman soldiers could always put burdens on people whenever it occurred to them. But why not do it twice as long as they demand. Why not serve more than what is being taken from you. If a person wants your money, why don't you give it to them. If an unreliable borrower comes to you and wants a loan, why don't you give it to them.

The reason is not that Jesus wants evil to triumph. He wants us to have the experience of realizing how much, were we to give way to our normal tendencies, we would demand more than our rights in return; we would insist on victory or revenge, not justice. And the best way to learn the lesson is to give up our rights on purpose, with a smile on our face. So we need to learn to yield at times, to have the experience of not fighting back, not claiming victimhood, not insisting on our rights, not advancing our cause above someone else's. It is a journey of self-discovery. And we become the kind of people who are so supported by Christ that we don't have to have our rights. We can give them away. We become the kind of people who discover that if we were left to ourselves, we would lie every time and hurt every time. Here is the love lesson of Jesus to teach us how not to live that way and to help us see what is really in our heart of hearts, the truth in the innermost being, to use David's phrase.

The Lord Jesus spoke often about truth. It was one of his favorite themes. He would say on the night before he was killed, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). One of his most famous statements about truth, which we hear quoted often even in secular settings, is that the truth will set you free. But that is the end of a very important analysis that Jesus gave. The truth won't set you free all by itself. Most people don't want the truth; they fear it rather than assuming it is freedom-producing. But listen to all of what Jesus said on the matter: "If you remain in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Jesus was saying, "If you are the kind of person who remains in daily, conscious, active intimacy with me, and you obey me, becoming true disciples of mine and abiding in my word; then you will know what is really true. And if you know what is true, the truth will set you free." It is the person and work of Christ in our hearts, the changes that he brings, and what intimacy and obedience do for us that let us apprehend the truth. And truth given us with the mercy and grace and presence of Christ is very freeing indeed. We must recognize that apart from him we will be frightened to discover what is inside us. With the mercy of the Lord, the changing power of the Spirit, and the new life that is ours in Christ, we are the kind of people who can give up

our rights, not insist on revenge or victory. We are the kind of people who can be honest.

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