

TO TELL THE TRUTH

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

Danny Hall

As I have been studying the Sermon on the Mount, I have been amazed at how absolutely applicable it is to our contemporary society. It is as if Jesus were looking down the corridor of time right to where we live when he was speaking about these things. As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Cultures and circumstances may change, but the sinfulness of the human heart has never changed.

All kinds of things point to the fact that dishonesty is rampant in our society. Here are a few examples:

- Last week four men connected with BALCO Laboratories here in the Bay Area were indicted for designing and distributing performance-enhancing steroids to athletes. The most famous of their alleged clients was Barry Bonds, although nothing has been proven about him personally. Performance-enhancing drugs are intended for one thing: to enable athletes to cheat, to give them an edge over their competitors. There is much money to be made both by those selling the steroids and by the athletes who use them, as their statistics go up and their value increases.
- We are in the middle of the Martha Stewart trial, which is again about cheating the system.
- Recently there was a huge scandal at Saratoga High School about some students' breaking in using some high-tech gizmos to steal answers to tests.
- As we approach tax season it is a standard joke that people are not always exactly honest on their income tax returns.
- This is an election year, so we will be bombarded by promises and accusations, a lot of truths and half-truths and no truth at all, all mixed together in a frenzy of campaigning by candidates to get elected.
- Besides all these big examples, there is the proverbial little white lie that all of us every now and then reserve the right to use. Many times across my career as a pastor, the question has come up, particularly with other pastors, "How many people attend your church?" We pastors use "ministerial math" and evangelistic crusade estimates to answer that question. Somehow we are driven to present our church as being a little better than the other guy's. And sometimes you are trapped; you don't even know how to avoid the little white lie. Any of us who are husbands know what it is like to have to answer the question, "Does this make me look fat?"

Part of our problem is that we have grown very comfortable with the shading of the truth. We assume that everyone has an agenda through which they filter truth. We call it spinning the truth in order to make it suit their purposes, and that is somehow supposed to make it acceptable. We live in a culture that really is characterized by dishonesty.

But this is nothing new. We're going to look at a passage that focuses on similar issues that Jesus confronted in his day. Matthew 5:33-37:

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." But I say to you, make no oath at all, either

by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil.

God values honesty

In order to understand what Jesus is talking about, we need to look at the Old-Testament antecedents. The term “false vows” means perjury, deliberately lying when others expect you to fulfill an oath. The term “fulfill your vows” literally means to fence or box yourself in, to put a boundary around yourself. So when you make an oath, you fence yourself in to tell the truth.

Oath-making has a lot of background in the Old-Testament Law. 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.” Numbers 30:2 says, “If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” Deuteronomy 23:21-23 says, “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised.” These Old-Testament antecedents to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day all point to the fact that God puts value on telling the truth.

The author of Hebrews reflects back on some of the Old-Testament oaths and gives us some more insight into this matter. “For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.’ And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath....” (Hebrews 6:13-17.)

To summarize, because of the human propensity to lie, God allowed oaths in his name to add weight to a person’s word in grave situations, to give a sense of greater accountability for their word. Even God himself sometimes made oaths, not because he ever lied, but to accentuate the gravity of the situation. There are some things that need to transcend the normal human tendency to deceive or to fudge the truth, and so oath-taking in the name of the Lord was allowed among the people of Israel. Underneath that was God’s desire for us to be people of integrity, to fulfill our word.

But there was a problem that Jesus addresses in Matthew 5.

Jesus challenges cultural dishonesty

The Old-Testament instructions had been stretched into an elaborate system of loopholes in the requirement to keep one’s word. Notice this little series of oaths he refers to: by heaven, by earth, by the city of Jerusalem, even by their own head. A series of gradations of oaths had developed. They could be more serious with some oaths and less serious with others. They had taken the Old Testament allowances about swearing by God and his word and twisted them. For instance, Leviticus 19:12 says not to swear falsely by the Lord’s name, but they took that to mean that they could swear falsely by something other than the Lord’s name. Numbers 30:2 says that if someone makes an oath to God they

must keep it, but they took that to mean that they could renege on those made to anyone other than God. They could leave themselves an out.

So people were managing the truth, if you will, coloring their relationships with one another with varying levels of commitment to fulfill their promises and vows. The result was a culture of deceit. Peter himself fell victim to this temptation later in the gospel of Matthew. Having walked with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, Peter was fearful as Jesus was taken to trial. Matthew 26:69-74 tells the story of Peter's denials of Jesus:

“Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, ‘You too were with Jesus the Galilean.’ But he denied it before them all, saying, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’ When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ And again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’ A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away.’ Then he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know the man!’”

The word “swear” here is not the word for profanity; it is a strong word for oath-taking. Reflecting the spirit of his culture, Peter invoked the regular habit of swearing by something other than the name of God to try to lend weight to his words, even in the moment when he knew in his heart that he was deceiving. And of course, immediately after that, the rooster crowed and Peter went and wept bitterly, for the prophecy that Jesus had given him came true. He realized the deceitfulness in his heart and how he had abandoned his Lord.

So what is Jesus' command in the midst of this elaborate system of deceit? “I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.” What he is saying is, whatever you swear on, everything in this creation is connected to God, and it is silly to think that somehow you can make an oath by something less than the name of God and then not keep it. So his command is simply to stop it.

Now, how far do we take this? Based on the whole teaching of Scripture, it seems unlikely that Jesus means to prohibit ever making any sort of oath or vow in any place at any time, the way some have applied it. The Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to take an oath when they testify in court and refuse to say the Pledge of Allegiance, interpreting those things as violations of this command. In Matthew 23:16 Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes and takes up this same subject up again: “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’” He doesn't say, “Never make an oath.” He just says, “Let your words represent the truth.”

What he is basically telling us is to break free from a system that cultivates dishonesty and hypocrisy, to practice integrity in all things. Notice the final way he says it: “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’” This is an emphatic way of saying, “Whatever comes out of your mouth, let it be truthful. Do not hide behind even culturally accepted ways of shading the truth.” As followers of God, we are to step out of that normal tendency. We are to be men and women of integrity who speak the truth clearly to one another.

“Anything beyond these is of evil.” This can also be translated, “of the evil one.” Satan is the father of lies, and from the very beginning, it has been his strategy to deceive people, to distort God's word. The initial temptation of Adam and Eve was based on a distortion of God's word, and out of that he has continued to lie, twist the truth, and promote lying and twisting of the truth. It is in this satanic stream of

deception that you and I live, but God calls us as his people to be committed to integrity, through his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

What does it mean to be people of integrity? Let me share three implications.

Dishonesty assaults community

First, we must value what God values. This same point has come up in each of the practical examples that Jesus has been giving us. First he dealt with the issue of murder in 5:21-26 and told us that the whole idea is that God values each and every human life, body and soul and spirit, and when we speak cruelly or angrily or in a demeaning way, we are assaulting the soul of one for whom Christ died and whom he loves unconditionally (Discovery Paper 4905). Then in 5:27-32 we saw that adultery is an assault on something else God values: marriage, and the picture of intimacy with God that it represents (Discovery Paper 4906).

Now we see that dishonesty is assaulting community, which God values greatly. Relationships cannot grow in a climate of dishonesty. Imagine living in Jesus' day, in that highly regulated religious society. The scribes and Pharisees had laid down these layers of minute applications of the Law, exhorted people to follow them, and condemned those who did not. This was supposed to be a unified culture of the people of God, distinguished by love and forgiveness and glory and worship of God. Yet they had evolved into this system of rules and regulations that permitted the shading of the truth. Where is the sense of community in that? A lack of openness and honesty is a direct assault on community. Community cannot flourish where dishonesty reigns. Nothing hinders relationships more. So the major implication of this passage is that you and I cannot live in fellowship with one another as the people of God in a society or a group or a church body that is characterized by shading of the truth, something less than full openness in our relationships with each other.

A second implication of being people of integrity is that it falls to us to demonstrate to this world the heart of God for community. Living in the fractured society that ours is, part of being salt and light in this world is to demonstrate that there is a better way than living for ourselves. One of the ways we can demonstrate to our world the beauty of who Christ is and his heart for people is learning to openly and honestly live with one another, loving each other unconditionally, being vulnerable with each other, cultivating honesty in our relationships with each other. The world is hungry for this kind of community, and that is our calling as the followers of Jesus.

A third implication is that nurturing honesty in the body of Christ requires four things: grace, humility, vulnerability, and forgiveness.

It is unfortunate that churches throughout the history of Christianity have been characterized less by a spirit of grace toward one another than by a spirit of condemnation. When we come together with other Christians, there are huge areas of our experience that we hide, because we are afraid that if we are open and honest, what we reveal will somehow be used against us. The lack of grace in the church continues to cultivate the felt need for dishonesty.

To encourage honesty requires humility. I cannot walk into the fellowship of this body or any group of people with a sense of arrogance or pride that somehow I am better than the rest, or a sense that I have to present myself that way.

We have to let ourselves become vulnerable. As long as I walk into this community covered with layers of self-protection, wearing a mask of strength that I don't really have, I contribute to the spirit of

dishonesty and detract from community. Now the reason we don't let ourselves become vulnerable, as I said, is fear. Is it not tragic that one of the places in our society where people feel least free to be totally honest is the church? We can't open ourselves up and say, "These are all the things that are wrong with me. I need the grace and love and strength of the community of faith."

Finally, we're going to hurt each other and fail each other. Even through God's grace and the power of his Spirit, we are still in the process of growing. We have not arrived. So we have to humbly and graciously forgive one another.

There are a couple of superficial ways that we Christians consistently fail to be honest. One is the way that we answer a common question, and the other is a flippant statement that we often make. When we are asked, "How are you doing?" we answer, "Fine." Perhaps with somebody we really trust we will crack open a little bit: "It's been a tough week. You know how it goes." The flippant statement we consistently make when we hear someone share a problem is, "I'll pray for you." These are subtle ways of lying, but they permeate the community. What would happen if we shared with each other how we are really doing? What would happen if, when we said we would pray for each other, we really did that? These are just two very simple things that are part of the everyday course of relationships even in the body of Christ. If we could alter these two things, maybe it would be a step toward true community--true honesty, true vulnerability, taking off the masks, being open with each other, demonstrating the beauty of the truth to a world that is plagued by dishonesty. It is time for us as the people of God to absolutely commit ourselves to each other.

Now, certainly people come from different backgrounds and have different needs and preferences. There is not a simple solution to this. But to follow Christ, to have his heart, we have to be committed to honesty in all things, and we need to pray for God's healing, for the grace through his Spirit to move toward that kind of honesty and vulnerability.

I invite you to join with me in prayer and reflection on God's call to us to be a community of honest people who love each other unconditionally. Here are some areas in our own community that we need to open up to the Lord about:

- To begin, what are the ways that you yourself shade the truth? How could you be hindering relationships and growth because of your lack of honesty and openness?
- The last few months have been hard at our church. A lot of difficult decisions have been made, and as a result people have been hurt, accusations have been made, and there has been some real strain on the fellowship here. Pray about your own attitude toward the body, toward our leaders, toward those who might see things differently from you. How have we violated the spirit of community? How would God bring healing, repentance, and forgiveness into our body?
- There are people in our body who are hurting in a lot of different ways. A number of our people have been out of work for some time. Some of our people are homeless. These are things that just rattle right down to the core of a person's sense of dignity. How have we as a church created a climate in which people who are hurting can't be honest about their struggles? Pray that God would give you an open heart to hear, or if you are one who is hurting, to share the burdens of your heart.
- There are people all around us in our community who need to know of the Lord Jesus. How are we as a community of faith demonstrating God's love by the way we are living in love with each other as we are in love with the Lord?

- With the opening of the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, we are coming into a season in which many predict the name of Jesus is really going to be debated in our society. With each passing day the controversy surrounding it rises. People all around us are going to be thinking about Jesus. Are we prepared to talk about who he is? Are we prepared to demonstrate the power of his sacrificial love through the way we love each other? Spend a few moments praying about the impact of our church and the kind of people we are, that we would lift up the name of Jesus and be able to answer the questions about him that people are going to be asking.
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