

“Kingdom Living – Telling the Truth”
Matthew 5:33-37
December 16, 2001
Dr. Jerry Nelson

100 years ago Mark Twain wrote, “I was explaining to a friend recently, how I got out of an embarrassing (situation) in Austria last year by telling a modified lie.

I don’t know what might have become of me if I hadn’t happened to remember to tell the police that I belonged to the same family as the Prince of Wales.

That made everything pleasant, and they let me go; and apologized, too and were ever so kind... and hoped that I would let bygones be bygones and not say anything about it.”

My friend said; “You call it a modified lie? Where is the modification?

I explained that it lay in the form of my statement to the police.

I didn’t say I belonged to the royal family: I only said I belonged to the same family as the Prince of Wales – meaning the human family, of course, and if those people had any (sense) they would have known it.

I can’t go around furnishing brains to the police.”

My friend asked how (I felt) after that performance?

(I said,) “Well, of course I was distressed to find that the police misunderstood me, but as long as I had not told a lie I knew there was no (reason) to sit up nights and worry about it.” (in The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg and other Stories 1902)

Clever! And we do it all the time.

A friend of mine, who I hope is not here this morning, told me this week of a time when a customer gave him several delicious looking steaks for grilling.

But when they were cooked they were so tough they were literally impossible to eat.

When he discussed with his wife what to say when asked about the meat, my friend decided to say, “Steaks like that don’t stay around our house very long.”

Clever and even funny and we do it all the time.

Can you even imagine life without deceit?

Many cannot.

David Nyberg, professor at NY State University in his book The Varnished Truth wrote: “Deception is not merely to be tolerated as an occasionally prudent aberration in a world of truth telling: it is rather an essential component in our ability to organize and shape the world, to resolve problems of coordination among individuals who differ, to cope with uncertainty and pain, to be civil and to achieve privacy as needed, to survive as a species, and to flourish as persons.” (The Varnished Truth P5)

He said telling the truth has been morally overrated. (Nyberg p4)

Jesus said, in 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.'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."

Is Jesus serious? Is life without at least some deceit even possible?

Jesus came announcing the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

That does not mean that he came only to tell people how to get to heaven when they die.

As we have seen over the past several weeks, Jesus came with the great news that by faith in his grace we could become part of his kingdom NOW.

Those who trust in Jesus, asking and by faith receiving his forgiveness and his goodness, are adopted into God’s family, are made citizens of the kingdom of heaven here and now!

Jesus then began to set forth a description of life as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

He does this, in the Sermon on the mount, by giving six practical life situations and showing the difference between the way we used to act in those situations compared to the way we can now act.

He is not setting forth new laws to obey but **new possibilities to become.**

In 5:21-26 he said that formerly when you were severely irritated with someone you felt you were okay as long as you didn't murder them.

But I say to you not even to be angry or hold resentment toward them but instead forgive them and be reconciled to them.

Imagine being a person and living among people who forgive and seek reconciliation.

In 5:27-30 he said that formerly when you were attracted to someone sexually you thought you were okay as long as you didn't commit physical adultery.

But I say to you not even to lust; instead I call you to love them in the way you love your mother or sister.

Imagine being a person and living among people who treat the opposite sex with that kind of respect and love.

In 5:31-32, which we looked at last week, Jesus said that formerly when your marriage wasn't working you would get a divorce.

But I say to you to be committed to your marriage.

Imagine being a person and living among people who all treated their marriages that way.

So what is the issue in verses 33-37?

Jesus says when put in a situation where being totally honest with someone may cost us, "kingdom people" don't lie, we speak the truth!

Imagine being a person and living among people who spoke only the truth.

Frankly we can't quite imagine it – we're so warped, so conditioned by deceit as a lubricant in social life, that we are rather fearful of total honesty.

Jesus words are certainly neither a command nor an excuse for rudeness when you wife asks what you think of her new dress.

To those who want to object to the requirement of "total" honesty, I quickly add, "Understand that Jesus is not saying we have to say everything we know or think every time we speak to someone.

Again, Jesus is not calling us to rudeness or an open expression of our own sinful thoughts but to honesty instead of deceit.

A couple of weeks ago I introduced the word "casuistry" to some of you.

Casuistry is excessively subtle reasoning intended to rationalize or mislead.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were very good at it and we've only gotten better.

People of Jesus' day knew well what God's word said about being truthful.

Matthew 5:33 "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.'

When Jesus reminded them in verse 33 "Do not break your oath..." he was speaking of their honesty.

When they affirmed or denied something, their words must represent the truth.

When Jesus reminded them in the next phrase in verse 33 to "keep the oaths you have made to the Lord" he was speaking of their faithfulness.

If they said they would do something they were to do it.

That seems fairly straightforward.

But what had people done with such instruction to be truthful?

With excessively subtle reasoning they determined that only those statements made with an oath had to be truthful.

And then they took it further and said only oaths taken in God's name had to be truthful.

And they even got so technical that they defined what constituted using God's name.

Jesus said in verse 34-36 (Matthew 5:34-36) "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.'"

Apparently they had this system worked out to where they felt that if they swore by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by their own lives **but didn't say** "God" then they weren't bound to what they said.

The Mishna is the Jewish code of law and it has one whole section given to when oaths are binding and when they are not.

The rabbis had turned truthfulness into a matter of prepositions.

One rabbi said that if you swear **by** Jerusalem you weren't bound to what you said, but if you swear **toward** Jerusalem you were.

An oath is usually taken in order to give the impression that you really intend to keep your word on the matter.

"I'll do it so help me God."

"I swear on a stack of Bibles, I'll be there."

But in Jesus day with the technical distinctions between oaths, oaths were often taken as a way to subtly evade having to keep your word.

Jesus considered all of this casuistry to be utterly ridiculous.

No matter how they worded it, or how they meant it, God was their witness because heaven is his throne, the earth is his footstool, Jerusalem is his and even your life, right down to the color of your hair, is under God's control.

Jesus wasn't thinking about modern hair-coloring or he would have used a different illustration.

God is witness to every word that comes from our mouths – there are no exceptions.

Our casuistry is no less ridiculous:

As children we say “I don’t have to do it because I didn’t cross my heart and hope to die.”

Or “I had my fingers crossed behind my back”.

Or as we get a little older, “Son did you chop down the cherry tree? “No father” (and then under our breath “not with the big ax.”

Or as we get older yet, “I didn’t actually sign the contract.’
Or “It was in the fine-print that apparently you didn’t read.”

Or it is in half-truths that masquerade as truths:

He forced himself up at the sound of the alarm but as he sat on the edge of the bed he thought: “You know, you really need to sleep a little longer.

But I can’t. I was late yesterday and I was sick two days last week. It won’t look good.

“But you had to work late last night. They should have a little mercy.

But the boss will be angry. He was there last night also and you can bet he’ll be there early this morning.

“Maybe you can find a legitimate excuse. You need to stop at the doctor’s office to pick up that information. You could call in and say you have to go to the doctor. That’s legitimate.”

Yes, but my reason is because I want to sleep a little longer.

I’m not sure that’s kosher.

“Sure it is. People come late to work all the time because of doctor’s appointments.”

Well, I am very tired and I probably wouldn’t get much done this morning anyway.

“That’s right. You don’t even need an appointment – just stop by the doctor’s office on your way in to work later.

At 8:15 he called his office to tell them he had a doctor’s appointment.

He got another hour of sleep and then he stopped at the doctor’s on the way to work.

At Jesus trial, Pilate asked: “What **is** truth?”

Philosophers and college freshmen have debated it for centuries.

But it’s really not so hard.

Truth is an exact correspondence between what you say and what you do.

Truth is whatever is consistent with reality.

Augustine wrote that truth is the affirmation of what is.
(Three times three equals nine.)

From the French Jerusalem Bible:

It is called **veracity** – it is when your “yes” means “yes” and your “no” means “no”.

It is called **sincerity** – when the “yes” or “no” of your mouth correspond to the “yes” or “no” of your real intentions.

It is called **solemnity** – when your plain “yes” or “no” are as solemn as if attached to an oath. (from the French Jerusalem Bible cited in Bruner 205)

And what is a lie?

We say children don’t tell lies they tell stories or fibs.

As we get older we make a distinction between a little white lie and a “whopper” of a lie.

Much older and sitting in a committee meeting we might call it “constructive revision”.

The former head of the Civil Service Administration of Great Britain refused to admit in court that what he had written contained a lie.

He did admit to a misleading impression and later in that same testimony to “being economical with the truth.” F.G. Baily [The Prevalence of Deceit](#) p2

But what is a lie really? That too, is not so hard!

Very simply it is the opposite of the truth.

Jesus said in John 8:55 “I know (the Father). If I said I did not, I would be a liar.”

Moses wrote in Genesis 18:13-15 “Why did Sarah laugh...? ...She lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

Sociologist J.A. Barnes said, A lie is “a statement intended to deceive someone about the state of (things), including the intentions and attitudes of the liar.” (A Pack of Lies – Toward a Sociology of Lying p11)

Any communication, verbal or non-verbal, intended to deceive is a lie.

And from both the OT and NT, just a reminder of how God feels about lying:

Proverbs 6:16-19 “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, **a lying tongue**, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, **a false witness who pours out lies** and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Revelation 21:8 “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters **and all liars**--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.”

Or as my young children would occasionally yell at each other, “Liars go to hell!”

That may have been unkind but it wasn't bad theology.

No, it is not that hard to know what lying and truth are.

But we know it is very hard to consistently tell the truth.

Deceit is a part of our culture.

Distortion of truth is everywhere in our society.

Tax returns, in the justice system, spin doctors, much political speech, much, maybe most, advertising, and it is even the basis of much of what we call humor – just watch any of the sit-coms on television.

Deceit is woven into everything we see, hear and do.

We expect it and we use it.

We only get anxious about it when we are the victims of it.

We distort the truth, we tell lies, when we fear – when we fear that others will take advantage of us, or hurt us, or won't value us as much as we think we are to be valued.

How many of us speak with a slant to our stories to make our point more emphatically or **to present ourselves as more knowledgeable, more clever, more caring, more generous, or whatever.**

George Macdonald wrote: “I always try – I think I do – to be truthful. All the same I tell a great many lies, e.g. things that mean one thing to myself though another to other people. But I do not think lightly of it. Where I am more often wrong is in tacitly pretending to hear things I do not, especially jokes and good stories, the point of which I always miss; but seeing everyone laugh, I laugh too, for the sake of not looking a fool. My respect for the world’s opinion is my greatest stumbling block I fear.” (Macdonald *Reminiscence of a Specialist*)

And so with a deceitful culture and deceitful hearts we are greatly tempted to try to distinguish one kind of lie from another.

But Jesus’ emphasis is not on subtle distinctions.

Last week we saw that Jesus emphasis was not on the technicalities of divorce but on committed marriage.

Likewise this week Jesus rejects subtle distinctions between what is and is not a lie and calls his kingdom people to truth – just truth.

Verse 37 “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

Truth matters!

The Scripture says in Titus 1:2 “God...does not lie”

Using “light” as a metaphor for truth, the apostle John wrote, 1 John 1:5-7 “...God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...”

Why do we care about truth?

We live today among those who say truth doesn’t matter.

We live among many who think there **is** no “truth”.

They say everything is a matter of interpretation and context and language all shrouded in subjectivity so that nothing is truly knowable with certainty.

Others would say, “Since different people hold different opinions, there is no reason why my opinions should be better or more valid than anyone else’s.”

But this leads to thinking that since conflicting “truths” can’t all be true they must all be phony which in turn leads to cynicism or despair.

Into the plethora of competing philosophies in our world, Jesus came as truth incarnate, ultimate reality, truth in the flesh.

Everything else may be transient and obscure but he is the light, he is the way, he is God, he is truth.

His life was without sin, his words were without guile, his love was without limit and the desperate flocked to him like moths to a yard light -

because for the first time they had contact with something that wasn’t transient, wasn’t obscure, but was solid and perfectly trustworthy.

We who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven are to reflect that reality now.

We live in a world and in relationships clouded with deceit.

Most people live in a false-reality, acting as if this life is all there is and using every means available, including deceit, to get all they can get.

And everyone becomes more and more cynical until they see truth lived out - until they see relationships where truth in love reigns rather than deceit in selfishness – until they see Jesus’ life lived out in us.

Living the truth means to embody what is real through our words and actions.

Jesus calls us to a kingdom lifestyle that demonstrates truth – “Simply let your `Yes’ be `Yes,’ and your `No,’ `No’”.

The apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians 4:22-25 “...Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires (and) be made new in the attitude of your minds; and...put on

the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”

A human being in isolation from other humans is unnatural.

We were meant to live in relationship with others.

A human being in isolation from God is unnatural.

We were created to live in relationship with God.

Truth is the only basis for such a relationship.

Truth about God, truth in Christ and truth in us.

This teaching is not just moralistic.

Jesus words are not akin to Aesop’s fables, or the Book of Virtues or other moralistic aphorisms.

The kind of truth-telling Jesus speaks of requires a change of heart, a Spirit-empowered commitment and practice of truth-telling.

Not just not lying but telling the truth.

Not just repression but expression.

Telling the truth with consistency is contrary to our nature.

We don’t trust God so we use whatever means necessary to protect ourselves.

We think too highly or too little of ourselves so we are forced to compensate by exaggerating our importance through our shading the truth, our lies.

Just try living one whole hour without in any way shading the truth -

When required to speak you choose only words consistent with the intent of your heart;

no hint of exaggeration or minimization of facts when you pass them along;

always careful in representing the remarks of others completely accurately;

never intentionally leaving a false impressions.

To be a person of such absolute integrity is as impossible as being perfect in anything.

The better I know myself and human nature, the less surprised I am by evil and the more surprised I am by virtue.

I am learning not to be shocked when people lie but to be pleasantly surprised when they tell the truth.

That's not cynicism, that's God's appraisal of us without the change he alone can bring by his Spirit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The cross is God's truth about us..."
We are so fundamentally flawed that only death can change us – and Christ died for us.

The rest of the quote from Bonhoeffer is this:

"The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. When we know the cross we are no longer afraid of the truth." (Bonhoeffer The Cost of Discipleship 155)

Jesus expects us to be very serious about this issue of truth-telling. But he knows we are incapable without his Spirit's intervention.

The Psalmist wrote, Psalm 51:6,10 "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts... Create in me a pure heart, O God..."

Will we take Jesus seriously?

Do we dare to pray that prayer of David's sincerely?

Are we willing to walk out of here dependent on God's Spirit and determined to be people of truth, nothing but the truth, so help us God?

Prayer