

“Did God Really Say: Tell the Truth?”

A number of years ago there was a movie that was based on an interesting premise. The premise was a world in which no one told a lie. People never even thought about the possibility of being dishonest. In fact, in the movie's portrayal, people were often brutally honest. What strikes me most about this concept is how far-fetched it seems. Parts of the movie were simply meant to show how often people really do lie to each other. It is hard to even imagine a world in which no one tells a lie.

Isn't that true? Lying is almost everywhere, isn't it? There are so many little things that people lie about that it would be hard to cover them all. People lie about their age when they want to impress someone in a certain way or when they want to do something with age restrictions. People offer compliments that they don't really mean just to score points with someone. People call work and excuse themselves supposedly “because they are sick” when they really just have other plans. People lie about their financial situation to avoid paying taxes that they owe. I'm sure you could add more to this list.

I said that these were little things, but I'm certainly not convinced that they are. That is, however, the way that many view them. They call them “little white lies” and they even think that sometimes lying is better and more loving than telling the truth. Or at worst, they suppose that lying really doesn't do any harm to anyone. Lying is so common all around us that we really just expect it as part of our experience. We don't even think twice about it.

But God thinks about it. He says to tell the truth. Does he really say that? Yes, he absolutely does.

This morning, we'll specifically focus on the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. This section of Scripture is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Through much of that sermon, Jesus addressed issues that may have been misunderstood by his hearers. Specifically, in many cases, he combated the errors that they would have learned from the Scribes and the Pharisees, who were considered religious leaders at the time. See, those leaders tended to focus so much on the outward actions that they often missed the heart of the matter. They focused on lots of little details of behavior, but they neglected to consider the reasons for behavior or the motivation behind it.

The Pharisees had in many cases taken passages of Scripture and added their own details to it, focusing again on the outward actions. The Pharisees became known for all of their strict rules, but many of their rules had little or nothing to do with what God originally said. Part of Jesus' purpose was to correct these misunderstandings. More importantly, Jesus was teaching the people how to take the words of Scripture and apply them to their own lives.

The issue in our section of Scripture this morning is that of taking oaths. An oath is swearing to something. It is saying that you call on God to testify that what you are saying is true or that the promise you are making is one that you will keep. By implication, it is saying that if you are not telling the truth or if you don't keep your promise, that God should punish you for that. Swearing or taking an oath is a serious matter.

In the Old Testament Scriptures, God offered directions about oaths. In Leviticus 19:12, he says, **“Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.”** By Jesus' time, the Pharisees had taken this passage and others like it and confused them. Oh, they were careful not to swear by the name of the Lord, so they would avoid breaking this law. But instead these same Pharisees would be willing to swear by something else, perhaps by heaven or

by earth or by their own heads. In fact, they had come up with a whole system of oaths and described a hierarchy of how binding each one really was. Later in his ministry, Jesus would rebuke the Pharisees for this specifically. Matthew 23 records that he said, **“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath’”** (v. 16). This sort of quibbling was not what Jesus intended.

Jesus didn’t want the people to swear by anything, at least in the course of casual conversation. To separate God from things associated with him in making oaths was fruitless. To make oaths apart from God is pointless.

But as we look closely, we notice that there is a deeper issue here than the issue of swearing or how binding an oath really is. The issue really is telling the truth. Think about how people swear in conversations. They say, “I swear it’s true” because they don’t expect the listener to believe them. Unfortunately, sometimes they swear because they know what they are saying is a lie and they want to go out of their way to cover it up. On the other hand, as Jesus says, **“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”** The ideal situation is this: you are honest and trustworthy. You are known for telling the truth, so when you say something, people believe that it is the truth. Nothing else is necessary.

That is the way that Jesus lived his life. Read through the Gospels and find Jesus saying, **“I tell you the truth”** almost 80 times. He doesn’t say, “I swear this is true,” as if he needed to appeal to some other authority. What he was saying was more like, “pay attention to this important truth that I’m about to tell you.” This was the way Jesus talked. He told the truth. He told the truth that needed to be heard, even if it made some listeners uncomfortable. He told the truth even when it meant trouble for himself. In fact, he even claimed to be truth itself when he said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life”** (John 14:6). He had no need for little white lies. He had no need for careless swearing. He did allow himself to be placed under an oath to testify before the authorities that he was indeed the Son of God. And because he told that truth he was put to death. By his death, therefore, he became our life and our forgiveness.

And he enables us to tell the truth. He comforts us with the assurance that we have no reason or no need to lie. He tells us instead that our honesty is a reflection of his life of truth. He instructs us to follow his example and to let our words of truth stand for themselves.

And that is true even when the truth seems unimportant or inconsequential to us. Even if we believe that no one would be affected by our untruths, even if we believe that no one could possibly catch us in a lie, even then our integrity and honesty are valuable in and of themselves. As Christians, as followers of Christ, we tell the truth.

And that also means that we tell people about the Truth. One of the reasons that the reputation of a Christian is important is that we want people to be willing to listen to us when we tell them about their Savior. If we are known to have trouble with the truth, why would anyone listen even when we talk about important matters like forgiveness and salvation? But when we are open and honest, when we speak the truth in love (see Ephesians 4:15), people will want to listen. Then we will be able to tell them the truth that is the power of God for salvation: the truth of forgiveness in Jesus our Savior.

No, we don’t live in a world where people always tell the truth. We don’t expect to find that world this side of heaven. But by God’s grace we can make a difference in the world. We can tell the truth. We don’t need to take careless oaths or to swear pointlessly. It will set us apart from many. It will surprise many, but it will please our Lord. Our yes will be yes and our no will be no. And we will be prepared to speak the truth about our Savior to anyone who will listen.

The Text: Matthew 5:33–37 (NIV84)

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.”