

The Mount (4): To Tell the Truth

(Matthew 5:33-37)

I. Introduction

- A. We are gearing up for another presidential campaign—one that is wide open.
 - 1. Every politician we've heard of (or haven't) now has a steering committee.
 - a. Choosing president is an important privilege... and a frustrating one.
 - b. Part of the frustration is we never really know if we can believe them
 - 1) Old saying—*"You can tell when a politician is lying— lips move."*
 - 2) Cynical might see plethora of candidates as more people lying to us!
 - 2. **History Test:** Which president got in trouble with lying and cover-up so that people asked, *"What did president know and when did he know it?"*
 - a. **Answer:** All! Watergate. Iran-Contra-gate. Lewinski-gate. Iraq-gate.
 - b. The only one not meant was Ford; we assumed he never knew anything!
- B. Problem isn't that we tolerate dishonesty in politicians, but in ourselves.
 - 1. An AP poll last year showed the ambivalence we have toward the truth
 - a. 50% of those responding said they believe lying is always wrong.
 - b. 66% said lying was sometimes good (*not hurt another's feelings*).
 - 2. **Translation:** You should tell the truth, but I may need to occasionally lie
 - a. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *"Truth is beautiful, without doubt; but so are lies"*
 - b. While most appreciate the beauty of the truth, we need the utility of a lie!
- C. So what we often find ourselves doing is playing games with the truth.
 - 1. We may even fool ourselves into thinking we are truthful when we are not
 - 2. Jesuits would function as French spies in England during in 17th century
 - a. Discovery meant execution, but how could a churchman cover identity?
 - b. It was decided that they could tell two kinds of lies without really lying
 - 1) **Mental Reservation:** Spoken lie followed by unspoken reservation
 - a) So what you say out loud is *"No, I did not murder him!"* (the lie)
 - b) Unspoken reservation, *"... on June 1 with a piece of frozen fish"* (true)
 - 2) **Equivocation:** Using words that can have multiple meanings.
 - a) Clinton points at camera, *"I did not have sex with that woman..."*
 - b) He equivocated on meaning of sex. *"... what the meaning of 'is' is"*
 - 3. Jesus comes to our similar games with the truth in the Sermon on Mount.

II. Jesus and Honesty

- A. What the rabbis taught the people seemed to stress honesty (**Matt 5:33**)
1. The Old Testament law stressed the need for honesty and integrity
 - a. One of the Ten Commandments was not to bear false witness (**Ex 20:16**)
 - b. Decalogue also says, “*Do not misuse the name of the Lord*” (**Exo 20:7**)
 - 1) We may connect that to profanity, it likely refers here to oaths
 - 2) That is the point that is stressed later in the Law (**Lev 19:12**)
 - c. Rabbis did say the right things about honesty, but there was a problem
 2. But Jesus’ response shows a flaw in what rabbis taught (**Matt 5:34-36**)
 - a. Jesus here sums up type of oaths that the Pharisees were teaching.
 - b. They swore by things like heaven and earth, Jerusalem and own heads.
 - c. Jesus says “don’t swear” but it seems he mentions those kinds of oaths
 3. What he says becomes more plain when read beside **Matthew 23:16-22**
 - a. Pharisees were saying that some oaths were binding and others weren't.
 - 1) Swear by the temple, oath wasn't binding. But swear by gold...
 - 2) Swear by the altar, and that’s not specific. But swear by sacrifice ...
 - b. Like the Jesuits we mentioned earlier, they were playing games with truth
 - c. They had a system going where they could lie and get credit for truth!
- B. That was just silly! Coming up with a way to lie and get credit for honesty?
1. But there is a similar game that many of us play—the technical truth
 - a. When Clinton first ran, he was cornered with question about marijuana.
 - 1) He denied it with, “*I have never broken laws of this country. Never.*”
 - 2) Later it was revealed he had used the drug while a student in England
 - b. What he said was technically true, but it was told to intentionally mislead
 2. Does that game sound even remotely familiar? Use the truth to deceive?
 - a. Does “*he stepped out*” mean he is really out or just left to avoid this call?
 - b. Does “*I haven’t quite finished that yet*” ever mean “*I forgot to start it*”
 - c. Does “*I’m too busy*” mean that you’re busy or too busy to do that?
 3. These are games that we play, and we need to recognize them as such
 - a. Anytime we seek to deceive another, that is a lie—no matter its form
 - b. Anything less than the truth is not the truth—technically or otherwise

C. Jesus' "but I say to you" is pretty straightforward—tell the truth (**Matt 5:37**)

1. Understand that Jesus' point here is not "never swear an oath."

a. An oath is a formal or legal promise to tell the truth.

1) Jesus answers under formal oath at His trial (**Matt 26:63-64**)

2) God gives the covenant under oath, swearing by Himself (**Heb 6:17**)

3) Paul also uses the format of formal oath (**Gal 1:20, 2 Cor 1:23**)

b. The point is not that Christians should not answer under oath.

c. The point is that we should not need to swear on oath in daily lives.

2. Jesus' point here is not to never swear but to always tell the truth!

a. Why did some use oaths like Jesus describes? *You couldn't truth them!*

1) As it turns out, you couldn't truth them even if they did swear

2) Point of an oath is, "You can't always trust me, but this time..."

b. **Jesus:** Say "Yes" when you mean "Yes" and "No" when you mean "No"

1) John R.W. Stott comments on Jesus' meaning here by asking—

When a monosyllable will do, why waste your breath by adding to it?

2) Jesus wants us to have such integrity, that "Yes" and "No" are enough

3. But that kind of integrity cannot only apply to the important things

a. People of integrity don't just tell truth when it counts—it always counts

b. The only way that we can always be trusted is to always tell the truth

1) I may ask, "*How do you like my haircut?*" Be person of integrity

2) Integrity means I may not like answer, but I won't wonder about it.

a) Is it OK to tell a "white lies" to spare my feelings? Why answer at all?

b) If I have to figure out what you really meant, that is not integrity at all.

D. Understand Jesus doesn't want you to be unconcerned with my feelings

1. What Paul says applies in all settings, "*Speaking truth in love.*" (**Eph 4:15**)

a. We have no choice as whether or not we will be honest—yes means yes

b. But that doesn't mean brutal honesty that isn't concerned for feelings.

2. We might want to believe that white lies are to protect feelings of others

a. After all, you don't really want to ... or just easier for us?

1) You don't want to hurt my feelings, so... "*Hey, I like your haircut*"

2) Is that really to protect me? Or foes that get you off the hook too?

b. Sometimes it's just simpler to stretch the truth... unless you follow Jesus

III. Conclusion

- A. This series has dealt with how the Sermon on the Mount applies in our homes
 - 1. If discipleship should impact world as salt and light—impact our homes.
 - a. We looked at how forgiveness and turning the other cheek apply
 - b. Last week, we saw how lust and pornography impacts our families
 - 2. A basic failure of honesty is a millstone around the neck of many marriages
- B. Telling little white lies and subtle half-truths seem like a little thing
 - 1. We don't mean anything by it, but it is just hard to be fully honest
 - a. Sometimes being something less than honest is just easier
 - 1) We're not talking about having an affair or national security.
 - 2) Maybe it's how money is spent. Maybe it is what we did after work.
 - b. Sometimes it takes too much time and energy to practice full disclosure
 - c. What does it matter if we're not fully honest? What they don't know...
 - 2. Listen— every little lie chips away at fabric of a relationship. Every one!
 - a. Every time we withhold truth, full intimacy becomes that much harder.
 - 1) At its best, dishonesty is a shortcut that fail to grow relationships.
 - 2) At their usual, dishonesty a short-circuit that poisons relationships.
 - b. Why does Paul mention lying in our church relationships? (**Eph 5:25**)
 - 1) We are members of one another, he says—lying destroys that!
 - 2) If that is true in our church, it is even more true in our families.
 - c. Allow falsehood to flourish at home, and relationship becomes difficult!
 - 3. What is true of husbands and wives is even more true of parent/children
 - a. Sometimes parent-child relationships is game of “catch-me-if-you-can”\
 - b. It is easier for both to get what they want if you just distort the truth.
 - c. Jesus doesn't care about easy; he insists on what's right— *Tell the Truth*
- C. Every birthday, her Nini would bake Tressa a coconut cake (Eagle brand milk)
 - 1. It became a tradition, and Tressa loved it... that's what she said
 - a. In reality, Tressa doesn't like coconut cake... or coconut anything
 - b. She didn't want to hurt Nini's feelings. (*Good for us; we LOVE that cake!*)
 - 2. Being dishonest with each other can become a pattern that's hard to break
 - 3. Right relationships are build on truth—truth cannot be optional.