March 6, 2016

“To Tell the Truth”

Matthew 5:33-37

**FCF**: Our struggle with telling the truth

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus has come to fulfill the Law.

(magnet) We need to pay heed to what He says – including with our speech.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Candidates in political campaigns make promises about what they’ll do, boasts about their records, claims about their rivals – many of which are not quite true if not outright false. Which then feeds our cynicism about the process. And we’ve had our share of that recently.

But politics run parallel to our everyday lives. At home, school, and work, we are all both victims and perpetrators of bending the truth, stretching the facts, inflating our claims.

Telling the truth is a common struggle. Which takes us to the words of Jesus once again.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:33-37

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Jesus did not come on the scene without an historical context. So His first hearers (and Matthew’s readers) would have been asking, “*What is the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and the Old Testament? Where does He stand?*” And He tells us (READ Matthew 5:17). “*I have not come to abolish or undo the Law but to fulfill and complete it*.” What does that mean?

It means the Old Testament, every genre through all the stages, is about Jesus. It all points to Him and without Him it makes little sense. Jesus is the answer to every prophecy, the end of all the sacrifices, the reality behind all the key figures and events in Israel’s history. And, with His teaching, the full meaning and intent of the commands is brought out. Which means, of course, Jesus is not just another rabbi, sage, or guru. For He has come to fulfill the Law.

He has come to fulfill the Law and we need to pay heed to what He says. Now, in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is setting out a series of contrasts between what the Law said and how it had been filtered to the people. This is the fourth of those contrasts. And, just as we saw last week’s text wasn’t so much about the grounds for divorce as it was fidelity in marriage, so here this text is not so much about the taking of oaths as the telling of truth.

Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to pay heed to what He says – including with our speech. To get at this, we need to look at three things. First, the command itself. Second, the correction Jesus gives regarding the command. And, third, some needed cautions to consider.

1. **THE COMMAND**

So, first, the command. What is it that’s being addressed? (READ Matthew 5:33).

1. *What Was Said*

We need to start by marking out what was actually said from how it was read at the time.

1. Not a quote

It’s worth noting that this is not a quote from any one particular text in the Old Testament.

1. But a summary

It’s not a quote from any one text but rather a summary of several texts, of several passages. All of which prohibited the taking of irreverent oaths or the making of vows and then breaking them.

1. *What Was Read*

How then was it read? How was it being taught to the people in Jesus’ day?

1. The perspective on the issue

The Pharisees’ perspective was that this was not about perjury, of a dishonest pledging of one’s word. Rather, it was a matter of profanity, of a profane or dishonorable use of God’s name.

1. The gradation of vows

And so they created a system of a gradation of vows. That is, you could swear and not be bound to vows by heaven and earth or by Jerusalem. But to swear toward Jerusalem was another thing. Now with this, they lost the commitment to truthfulness and encouraged a system of deceit.

The command was clear. And Jesus is pressing to make it all the clearer.

*Application:*

For the intent of the command had been to promote telling the truth and of being true to our word. I want to come back to that but let me just ask this here. Could these things be said of us? Are we known to be tellers of truth and true to our word? And if we’re not, why not?

1. **THE CORRECTION**

We’ll come back to that. Let’s move now from the command to the correction.

1. *Clarifications*

(READ Matthew 5:34-36) First, some needed clarifications so we can best understand.

1. Mistaken positions

Through the years, some groups have said this rules out our ability to give testimony under oath in a court of law. But that begs a few questions. Why did Paul put himself under oath? Why did Jesus not refuse to comply during His trial? And why does God swear by His own name?

1. Proper position

Jesus destroys the Pharisees’ system by stating that all of life is lived before God. Nothing is left out. So the proper thing for His followers is to be known as being so reliable that no one would feel the need to ask us for an oath – especially those who know us. That said, in situations such as in a court or when entering military or political service, we should feel free to take an oath.

1. *Intensification*

Which takes us from the clarification to the intensification (READ Matthew 5:37a).

1. The reason for oaths

Why do we have oaths? Because this is a messy broken world. There’s an impulse to speak falsely and to break our commitments. And yet we need to be able to count on each other.

1. The call for truthfulness

And in such a world, Jesus calls us to truthfulness. Now born anew, His followers are new creatures, made part of a new community. Thus the focus shifts from oath taking to truth telling.

So Jesus gives the correction, clarifying and intensifying the command.

*Application:*

But let’s stop and ask, “*How are we tempted in this area?*” What of our false words? Our exaggerations – rounding numbers with the amount we spent or when something happened. Or our eliminations – somehow failing to relay the part of the story that puts us in a bad light.

But it’s not just our false words but our broken words. Promises broken because of new and inconvenient circumstances. Or a better offer. Or that seeming insignificance of the people involved. Or the supposed invisibility of the situation and our assumption no one will know.

Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to pay heed – including with our speech.

1. **THE CAUTIONS**

Which brings me to some cautions for us to consider, things to weigh and think about.

1. *The Bitter Fruit*

The result of taking this lightly predictably yields a harvest of some terribly bitter fruit.

1. Seared conscience

A conscience seared, a heart increasingly calloused and deadened each time we yield to this.

1. Fractured community

And a fractured community. Where trust unravels, so does the ability to live and work together.

1. *The Deep Root*

So this brings bitter fruit. And flows from a deep root (READ Matthew 5:37). Whether this is “evil” or “the evil one”, either way it’s a problem of idolatry – worshiping and serving any god but the one true God, trusting in and looking to anything else for our security and identity.

1. Affection and approval

Affection and approval – we want to be liked. We’re afraid we’ll be found out. So we lie.

1. Power and influence

Power and influence – leaders making promises they know they can’t keep to move the agenda.

1. Security and control

Security and control – to get or keep a job we’ll twist the truth, even at someone else’s expense.

1. Comfort and ease

Comfort and ease – things are too hard and the temptation is too strong. So we break a promise.

**CONCLUSION:**

Where are we tempted? What’s its source? How can we be freed from this? The key is recognizing that what is coming out of our mouths is coming from our hearts. Our speech is an overflow of deeper waters. And as I said just a moment ago, when it comes to false words and broken promises, this is a sign of idolatry. And those idols need to be dislodged and replaced.

How? Through a clearer and greater view of the Truth Himself. Consider this and let the scope of it seep into your bones. Jesus was willing to say the hard and necessary things of us and to us – of the cause of the estrangement between us and our inability to fix it. But, unwilling to let that lie, He promised to come and fix it. And, despite the terrible cost in doing so, He kept that promise – living and dying in our place. And now, flowing from that, He is determined to make us into truth-tellers and promise-keepers, like Him, one to another and to the world.

Now, as that vision of Jesus – who He is and what He has done for us – increasingly fills our vision, it cannot help but to begin to dislodge the idols. It cannot help but to free us from our deceptive ways and transform our speech. So it is good and needed news. My friends, Jesus has come to fulfill the Law. We need to pay heed to what He says – including with our speech.

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