

Matthew 5:33-37 (1984 NIV)
Honouring God by Honouring Our Word

Introduction

On 31 Jan. 1996, a 66-year-old lady was sentenced to 6 months jail by the Singapore court. She was found guilty of attacking her domestic helper with a hot iron.

When passing sentence, the judge said that it was clear that this elderly lady had lied in court, together with her son and daughter. They all could remember almost all the details of that fateful day some two years ago. They could even remember the number of pieces of clothes that the domestic helper was made to wash on that day. Their testimonies tallied perfectly with one another, but with only one obvious flaw—too perfect to be true.

"It is clear that so and so has shamelessly lied ...," so said the judge when he pronounced the sentence on the elderly lady.

Indeed, there are always people who try to deceive by hiding behind a false front of truthfulness.

(The New Paper, 1 Feb. 1996)

The lack of truthfulness is not a modern day problem, but one that even our Lord Jesus had to deal with while He was on earth. In His Sermon on the Mount, He addresses this problem in Matt. 5:33-37. In a nutshell, what Jesus is teaching His disciples then, and us today, is the lesson of upholding truthfulness as a mark of Christian integrity.

To uphold the virtue of truthfulness, there are at least three things that the Lord is calling us to note in our text today. The first thing that the Lord is calling us to note today is ...

I. Truthfulness is primarily a condition of the heart (v. 33).

In v. 33, Jesus quoted the traditional understanding of the Jews concerning oath-taking—"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.'"

This is the fourth of six examples that Jesus uses to correct the common misunderstanding and misapplication of the Jewish law. The other five examples are found in Matt. 5 itself:

- Verses 21-22
- Verses 27-28

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- Verses 31-22
- Verses 38-39
- Verses 43-45

The refrain in all these passages is—“You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ...”

Question is—heard from whom, and said by whom? The answer is—heard from the teachers of the law, and said by them (i.e. the scribes and Pharisees).

Notice that Jesus does not say, “You know it is written in Scripture ... but I tell you ...” If this is so, Jesus will be guilty of amending the very teaching of Scripture. Instead, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ...” “You have heard that it was said by the teachers of the law (the scribes and Pharisees) ... but I tell you ...”

Thus, Jesus is not amending Scripture here, but He is correcting the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees because they have misled people to a wrong understanding and application of Scripture.

- That’s also why Jesus is able to declare that He has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them (v. 17).
- That’s why Jesus is warning His disciples that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 20).

In v. 33, Jesus also quoted this traditional teaching of the teachers of the law—“Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” On the surface, this teaching seems perfectly legitimate. But the flaw in this teaching can only be recognised when we realise that it is used not so much to promote truthfulness, but as a formula for deceiving/lying by playing with words.

It seems that by the time of Jesus, the teaching on oath-taking in Judaism had included oaths that were binding and those that were non-binding.

- Oaths that were binding were those made in the Lord’s name.
- Oaths that were non-binding were those that avoided the use of the Lord’s name.

This means that the people were taught that if you wanted to sound credible yet not quite committed to follow through with all that you had said, you should not swear in the name of the Lord. You could swear by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, or by your head. But you should not swear by the name of the Lord because that would make you bound to do all that you had promised.

Thus, this very traditional teaching of the teachers of the law concerning oath-taking did not encourage truthfulness. Instead, it provided a loop-hole for people to deceive and lie by impressing others with a false front of credibility. Yes, in

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Jesus' time, oath-taking had degenerated from truthfulness of the heart to deceitfulness of words.

The do's and don'ts regarding oath-taking as advocated by the teachers of the law in Jesus' time had encouraged people not to regard an oath as a matter of having a right heart, but as a matter of using the right words to impress without intent to mean what they had said. In this sense, the oath had become a pretence rather than a promise. Truthfulness is primarily an intentional condition of the heart. If the heart has already intended not to be truthful, no amount of nice-sounding words can serve as a substitute—these words are merely a pretence, and never a promise.

In today's world of competition and one-upmanship, the temptation to be less than truthful is always there.

- To secure the sale of a product, a person may hold back some important information about it, or exaggerate its strength beyond what is actually true.
- To impress other people, a person may speak of qualities about himself that are untrue.
- To clinch a contract, a person may promise delivery and performance standards that he knows are impossible for him to meet.
- To hide his incompetence, a person may fake activities that he has never participated in or results that he has never achieved.

One of the things I did when I was with the Singapore Bible College besides teaching was to assist in the field education department.

- We placed our students in different ministry settings and in different churches.
- The students were to learn as they undertook their field education assignments.
- Every month, they were to see me or the field education director to talk about their hands-on experiences in their respective churches.
- At the end of the month, each of them would have to submit a form to us, recording all the things they had done and learned in that month.

I remember this one student who was extremely impressive because he would fill up his form neatly, thoroughly, and meticulously. I was also impressed by the many activities that he had participated or led in church. Not surprisingly, he always received top marks for his monthly reports.

Not long after his graduation, he asked to meet up with the field education director and me. At that meeting, he made a startling confession. He said, "I had lied to you both. I did not do many of the things that were recorded in my monthly reports when I was a student here. I really wanted to do these, but because of the pressures of studies and family commitment, I was not

able to fulfil many of them. In spite of their non-fulfilment, I still had these recorded in my reports as tasks done. I had falsified my reports. I have come today to confess and too seek your forgiveness. Please feel free to discipline me, even if it means revoking the degree that has been conferred on me.”

To cut the story short, both the field education director and I counselled him, extended to him our forgiveness, and prayed for him.

Indeed, truthfulness is very much a condition of the heart. If our heart has no intention of fulfilling something, no amount of nice-sounding words will make us true to what we have written or said.

In fact, the realisation that we have been intentionally untruthful can be very haunting in life. Thus, we need to let the intent of our heart always guard the words of our mouth. To uphold the virtue of truthfulness, the “yes” of our mouth must be a true indication of the “yes” in our heart.

A second thing that the Lord is calling us to note today is ...

II. Truthfulness is ultimately an accountability before God (vv. 34-36).

Verses 34-36 read:

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.”

In response to the abuse of oath-taking in His time, the Lord said in v. 34: “But I tell you, ‘Do not swear ...’”

This seems a rather extreme reaction. After all, swearing or oath-taking is taught in the OT and NT. To swear in the Lord's name is to call on the Lord to be one's witness.

- Deut. 10:20—“Fear the Lord your God and serve Him. Hold fast to Him and take your oaths in His name.”
- Rom. 1:9—“God whom I (i.e. Paul) serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of His Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ...”
- 2 Cor. 1:23—“I (Paul again) call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.”

In fact, we even find God swearing in the Bible. This does not mean God appeals to a higher authority. Rather, it means God takes the most solemn step to assure people of His own truthfulness. E.g. Heb. 6:17 says, “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath.”

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So, what does Jesus mean when He says, “Do not swear ...”?

Some have taken this to mean that Christians should not take any oath at all. But Jesus is not here against oath-taking per se. But Jesus is against the abuse of oath-taking in His time—the abuse that promotes deceitfulness rather than truthfulness. It is the abuse that asserts if you swear by heaven, or the earth, or Jerusalem, or your head, then you are not bound to your oath as long as the Lord’s name is not invoked.

Jesus corrects this wrong teaching by stressing that everything belongs to God for He stands behind everything, including every word we say. Thus, no one should think that he is exempt from any accountability before God by manipulating his oath with a particular formula.

- Thus, don’t swear by heaven thinking that you can get away for being untruthful because heaven is God’s throne.
- Don’t swear by the earth thinking that you can get away for being untruthful because the earth is God’s footstool.
- Don’t swear by Jerusalem thinking that you can get away for being untruthful because Jerusalem is the city of God.
- Don’t even swear by your head thinking that you can get away for being untruthful because your head belongs to God, who even numbers the hair on it.

Indeed, to say that God stands behind everything is to acknowledge that everything belongs to God. Thus, Jesus warns against swearing in any form if we have no desire to be truthful ... because we are ultimately accountable before God for all that we say.

An oath is only as reliable as the one who makes it regardless of the intensity of the words used. We see Peter’s example in Matt. 26:69-75.

- When he was in the courtyard while Jesus was tried by His enemies, a servant-girl said to him, “You too were with Him.” Peter replied, “I do not know what you are talking about.
- When another servant-girl made a similar statement later, Peter “denied it with an oath”.
- Still later, when other bystanders made the same assertion, Peter “began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know the man!’”

Yes, Peter increased the intensity of his words of denial with an oath, but that did not increase the truthfulness of his words. He lied, and he even lied by calling God to be his witness—he not only denied his Lord, but also used God’s name in vain. Little wonder he cried bitterly when the sin of his own untruthfulness weighed heavily upon his heart.

All that we say is ultimately held accountable before God. Thus, as believers of the God of truth, we are to learn to make truthfulness a mark of our integrity.

- As an employer, are you true to your employees in terms of dispensing their due wages and benefits?
- As a businessman, are you true to the promises you have made to your customers or clients?
- As a parent, are you true to the little promises you have made to your kids?
 - I recall a time when my elder daughter was still very young. I had promised to bring her to the fun fair near the home of my mother-in-law ... only if she would behave well. Indeed, she was at her best behaviour for most part of the week. I was wondering late in the week why she was so well behaved until she reminded me, “Daddy, you are taking me to the fun fair, right?” I had almost forgotten about my promise to her. But you know, our promises to our kids mean a lot to them. So they remember and expect us to be true to our words.
- As a spouse, are you true to the words of the marriage vow that you have made before God and others to your wife/husband?
- As a NS man, are you true to the words of the pledge that you have made to the nation on your first day of enlistment?
 - Are you taking your role as a NS man seriously and positively? Or are you adopting a “couldn’t be bothered” attitude?
- As a working person, are you true to your responsibilities in your workplace?
 - Do you discharge your responsibilities faithfully, as you have agreed and signed in your employment contract? Or are you just making do with shoddy and half-hearted work?

The reminder for all of us is that whatever promises we have made, we are ultimately accountable before God. Indeed, truthfulness is ultimately our accountability before the God of truth Himself. To uphold the virtue of truthfulness, we are to always remind ourselves that we say all things in the presence and hearing of the omnipresent God Himself.

Lastly, let us now consider briefly one more thing in our text today, and that is ...

III. Truthfulness is fundamentally a spiritual weapon against evil (v. 37).

Jesus says in v. 37—“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’, and your ‘No’, ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

The Lord is here challenging us to let our integrity lie in the truthfulness of our ordinary conversations, not in the intensity of any oath made. Our truthfulness is a spiritual weapon against the work of the evil one because he is known as the “father of lies” (John 8:44). So, whenever we insist on being truthful, we are actually waging war against the evil one because of two reasons.

- One, truthfulness helps to build up trust and relationships among people. Conversely, the devil's aim is to breed mistrust and to strain relationships among people.
- Two, truthfulness means that we let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no". We do not embellish what we say with unnecessary words. Conversely, the devil's aim is to entice us to exaggerate and overstate so that our words become half-truths and even distortions.

It is therefore needful for us to be discerning as we learn to cultivate this characteristic of truthfulness in our lives. The devil will not like it; he will hate us for it; he will cause others to hate us for it too.

I visited my late father-in-law just 10 days before he died of lung cancer. While he was sitting on the wheelchair, he stared at me and asked, "Tell me. What is wrong with me?" It was a stare that gave me the shivers because it was as if he was demanding me to tell him truthfully what's wrong with him.

I turned to my eldest brother-in-law and asked him in amazement, "Haven't you tell him about his illness?" Immediately, one of my sisters-in-law insisted that we should not tell him the truth. Only then did I realise that the family had kept his illness as a secret from him.

When I turned to my brother-in-law again, he said, "OK, you tell him."

I protested, "But you are the eldest son. I am only the son-in-law."

My brother-in-law replied, "But he has asked you, not me."

So, I said to my father-in-law, "Your left lung is failing."

My father-in-law understood what I meant because one of his brothers had died of the same illness some years ago. Immediately, I could sense some resentment from some of the family members. Perhaps, I even resented myself for being such a "big mouth".

Indeed, truthfulness often stirs up some kind of spiritual warfare because it is the very opposite of deceitfulness. Yes, truth can hurt but there will be times when we need to speak it courageously ... and with love.

Today, we live in an age of much fake news and false views—all in the name of upholding the freedom of speech. However, such freedom is only meaningful and constructive if it is in a context of truth-speaking. Without truth-speaking, such freedom will be demeaning and destructive—leading to hatred, division, confusion, fear, and suspicion among people.

To fight against this age of such misinformation, we need to wield truthfulness as our weapon to both protect ourselves and attack the works of the evil one. We do this by committing to speak the truth, upholding the virtue of truthfulness.

However, it is important to recognise that even if we do not actually speak falsehood, we can still be undermining truthfulness if we unintentionally or naively spread the fake news or false views that we have received and passed on to us.

I suggest some simple steps we can take to protect ourselves and others from such misinformation today are:

- One, find out if it is true. Make sure the source is reliable. Check with other credible sources to verify the information.
- Two, if it is not true, do not send or pass it on to others. Delete it as soon as possible, and alert others if need be.
- Three, if you are unable to verify the information as true, do not send or pass it on. “When in doubt, leave it out!” It is better to send or pass on nothing than to spread fake or false information, even unintentionally.
- Four, if it is true and helpful, then send or pass it on. Information that builds up others is both truthful and helpful.

Yes, whenever we are tempted to say, send, or pass on something that we have yet to confirm as true, credible, charitable, and helpful, let us be reminded that it is OK to say nothing, or send nothing, or pass on nothing. It is even OK if such a “silence” means losing an argument, but keeping our mark of Christian truthfulness in good order.

Conclusion

Truthfulness is:

- Primarily a condition of the heart.
- Ultimately an accountability before God.
- Fundamentally a spiritual weapon.

In short, truthfulness is a display of Christian integrity. However, the evil one, others, and even ourselves may resent being truthful. But what is important is this—truthfulness that is charitable and helpful is always pleasing to God.

Let us seek the Lord to help us live as truthful people here on earth and as trustworthy citizens of His Kingdom. Amen!