

Sermon- 3-16-2014

Text- Matthew 5:33-37

Title- The Weight Of Our Words

**33** *"You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.' 34 But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. 35 And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Do not even say, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one.*

Have you ever had to make a public vow? It's not an everyday occurrence. Look back at your life and maybe you can come up with a handful. The day you said your vows at the altar and promised 'to have and to hold; in sickness or in health; till death do us part.' Or maybe it was signing a promissory note so that you could get the keys to your home or your car. I had to take an oath on the Bible in court once. It happened several years ago. There was a car accident in front of my house. Just before daybreak my wife and I heard a tremendous screech followed by a loud bang out in the street.

When we looked out our window, there, in the middle of the street was a Lincoln Town car with its' airbags deployed. Jennifer quickly dialed 911 and we watched as the two young men who had been in the car got out, shook off the airbag dust from their clothes, and walked to the front of the car. Jennifer had just begun to talk to the 911 operator when, much to our surprise, the two men became track stars and began running at full speed down the street and away from the car.

I remember hearing Jennifer say, "They're running!" to the 911 operator, but it took me a second to realize what was happening. I watched from the window as Jennifer ran downstairs, out our front door and into the street, all while giving a play-by-play commentary to the 911 operator.

A hit-and-run accident had just taken place in front of our house!

The police arrived and later a tow truck came too. I gave a statement to the officer about what I had seen and then signed it. Later that afternoon I received a call from the officer investigating the incident. He asked me what I had seen and inquired as to whether I'd be willing to testify in court- which is how, two months later, I found myself at the county courthouse. I witnessed someone commit a crime, and now I was playing my part in the legal process. It felt like I was appearing in my own episode of Law & Order.

I stood as the judge entered the courtroom. I watched the prosecutor and the defense attorney as they rifled through papers. I watched the proceedings unfold and then they called my name, and it stopped being a show. I began to feel incredibly intimidated. I walked to the front of the courtroom. I placed my hand on a Bible and swore to tell the truth. I glanced quickly at the defendant- and here's a shocker for you- I didn't know for sure if he was the driver of that car or not!

It had all happened so fast. 30 seconds, maybe a minute at most was how quickly the entire incident played out. Now here I was in court, sitting in a chair opposite a man whose destiny, to some extent, was in my hands- and I was uncertain.

I answered all the questions as truthfully as I could. What I had seen; whether or not the defendant looked like the driver of the vehicle; How far away I was from the scene; What time it was, and so on. I wanted to do my civic duty, but when the moment was upon me I was forced to reckon with the implications of my words.

Today we're in week six of a series we've titled: "The Sermon." We've been progressing through the three chapters in Matthew's account of Jesus' life (5-7) that make up the Sermon on the Mount. We're discovering the answers to some big questions. What does it look like to be a follower of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What would it look like to reflect the light of Jesus as neighbors, friends, spouses and parents? Today we see him dealing with a commandment on lying. He's going to talk to us about integrity and truth and honesty.

So let's take a close look at these verses.

Jesus is dealing in this passage with the law that was being put into practice in Israel during his day around the rule about lying. Don't lie is one of the Ten Commandments. But the law that developed around the commandment looked like this: "If you lie, the seriousness of the lie depends upon the nature of the vow you have taken." You see the people would make promises and vows by swearing on something. And the closer the thing that they swore to was to the "Name of the Lord" and the center of the Temple, the more serious the lie. The reason for this was because the Temple of the Lord was the place where God's name dwelled. So if you swore by the name of God or if you swore by the Temple you were actually swearing by or invoking the personal presence of God for your vow. You'd say, "I'm going to tell the truth, I'm going to stick to my vow, and you're invoking the personal presence of God to demonstrate the seriousness with which you're going to take your promise.

Now the law that developed around this said that if you didn't really do it just so, then the lie wasn't so serious. Jesus deals with these kinds of "Laws of Practice" not just here but elsewhere.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says to the teachers of the law, “(Y)ou say that it means nothing to swear ‘by God’s Temple,’ but that it is binding to swear ‘by the gold in the Temple.’ **17** Blind fools! Which is more important—the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? **18** And you say that to swear ‘by the altar’ is not binding, but to swear ‘by the gifts on the altar’ is binding. **19** How blind! For which is more important—the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? **20** When you swear ‘by the altar,’ you are swearing by it and by everything on it. **21** And when you swear ‘by the Temple,’ you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. **22** And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.

Why is Jesus demolishing these arguments? What Jesus is saying in these passages is there isn’t a time when you are outside the presence of God. He’s always present. God is the creator and the sustainer and the owner of everything. God is everywhere and therefore you are always present to the Lord. And if we understood that we’d be people of integrity.

But is that really true? There’s an underlying motive to everything Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (and if you’ve been with us through this series, you’ve heard us explain this concept.) Jesus is teaching us that if we’re trying to earn God’s favor by the way we behave we’re playing a fool’s game. Our personal attempts at right living will never measure up- and if we are operating under the assumption that when we live a ‘good life’ and ‘play by the rules’ God will have to hear our prayers and He’ll have to accept us, we need to understand that His standards vastly surpass ours. Jesus is making this point yet again in our text by teaching us about the weight of our words.

Think of it this way. If you are trying to merit God’s acceptance of you through good behavior, then the thought that He is always watching you is a crushing weight. It demands perfection.

Illustration- A realtor who used their client’s home for an affair.

But what if you believe the Gospel? What if you believe that you’re saved by radical grace? What if you believe that you’re saved, not by what you can do or will do, but by what Jesus has done? Now do you live in fear of God? Yes, but it’s not a fear of condemnation or punishment. Instead it’s a fear of causing Him pain. Now we want to bring Him joy. Now the Law of God is a wonderful thing. It’s a way for me to avoid causing Him pain. It’s a way for me to know how to bring Him joy.

If you believe the Gospel, the idea of Jesus always being with you is life-giving. Do you know why? Do you understand the difference? When someone is present with you whom you love, that certainly carries with it a measure of accountability. We don’t want to disappoint them. But it also fills our lives with joy and with comfort.

That's the reason why David can say, in Psalm 16:8, *"I know the Lord is with me. I will not be shaken, for He is right beside me."*

Jesus says that's the secret of integrity. That's what will motivate us to be the same person everywhere you go. That's what will motivate us to be the same person in private that we are in public, because we're always in the presence of God.

So, how do we live this out practically? How do we become people who put the principle into practice? How do we learn to behave like people with integrity?

For this we look at the last verse of our text for today (v37). In this verse, as simple as it is, Jesus tells us something about integrity- and honesty in particular. Simply let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.' What does that mean? What Jesus is saying is, if you say 'yes,' let it really be 'yes.' Don't say 'yes' over here when it would be 'no' over here. Don't say 'yes' over here but live like 'no' over here. If it's 'yes' it's really 'yes.' If it's 'no' let it really be 'no.'

That's still a little vague. So here are some integrity questions:

- Do you say one thing but do another?
- Do you say you believe one thing, but really you're thinking another?
- Are you one way in public but another in private?
- Are you one way over here but another over there?
  - When you're in Boston saying, "I love the Sox! I hate the Yankees"
  - When you're in New York, "The Sox stink! I love the Yankees"
- Are you something different where you work than you are here?
- Are you different online than what you are in reality?
  - Are you a snarling lion online and a wimpy little lamb in reality?

I'm going to keep pressing us on this. We have the technology to brand ourselves and present ourselves the way we want to be seen. This is the reason why, today, people have fewer qualms about padding resumes, adding facts to bios, falsifying academic research, misrepresenting facts in doing journalism, plagiarism.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man* said, *"We clamor for qualities we are rendering impossible. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate, and bid the geldings, 'be fruitful.'"* What he means is, we tell everyone that truth is culturally relative. There is no truth; right and wrong are situational. And then we're shocked when people cheat.

If you are not a person of integrity, every act that lacks integrity brings about four terrible results. There are four massive problems when we lack integrity. Here they are: A lack of integrity destroys: community, a person's identity, a person's dignity, and puts us on a collision course with reality.

Every time you lack integrity it destroys community. One scholar put it like this: "Imagine a society in which no one trusted anyone to keep a promise, in which every leader was expected to lie as a matter of course, in which every teacher was suspected as an academic cheat and every preacher a moral fraud, in which all contracts were never expected to be honored, no partner could bank on the loyalty of another, no one would make decisions on assurance of having the facts in hand. Life would be brutalized. We would go from a community to a jungle." And every single time you lack integrity you are eating away at the fabric of community. Because there are places in the world today that are like that, and there have been places like that in the past and they're the most miserable places to live in the world.

Every time we do anything that lacks integrity we eat away at a person's identity. Who are you? The only way to answer that is to find something that is always true of you. You have many roles, you wear many hats, but to ask, 'who are you?' The only answer is something you do, something about you, something you believe, something you are that always stays the same.

In Robert Bolt's, play, *A Man For all Seasons* he wrote about Sir Thomas Moore, who was going to be executed because he refused to take back certain statements he had made, and he's waiting to be executed when his daughter Meg comes to visit him and pleads with him to lie and say he doesn't believe those things anymore, just to save his life. And there's a famous passage in the play where he looks at her and says, 'When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding himself in his hands like water and if he opens his fingers then he needn't hope to ever find himself again.' You hear what he's saying?

When I've sat down with people who've blown up their lives because they've lied, or they've had an affair, or because they've been covering up and lying about an addiction for years, they don't just feel guilty, and they don't just feel bad about all the ruptured relationships. So often they say, 'I don't know who I am.' Why? Because, when in every situation you always do what is most advantageous to you- if it means you lie or cheat or break promises- if you always do what is most beneficial to you, in the end there is no you left. In the end there's no you.

Integrity is essential in community and it's essential to who we are, and third...

When you lack integrity it violates human dignity. What's so wrong about a lie? When we lie to someone we're exploiting that person. We're not allowing them to see reality. We're putting them at a disadvantage. We're using them. We're turning them into instruments to be used for our purposes. We're withholding from them the grasp on reality that they need to have as human beings. And we're violating their dignity. When we lie we treat others as children, at best, an objects at worst.

Joy Davidman in her book, *Smoke On the Mountain*, wrote, "There are lies of gossip that make haters out of us. There are lies of advertising that make money out of us. There are lies of politicians that make power out of us. In other words lies turn us from human subjects into objects to be used."

Every lie demeans. It destroys the dignity of the person you are speaking to and lastly...

A lack of integrity puts you on a collision course with reality. That is to say, you know there is a real world out there. That's why people say honesty is the best policy, because if you lie it does catch up. The disconnect- between who we say we are and who we really are- eventually will catch up to us.

Integrity is more than just telling the truth. It's being the same in every area of life. It's wholeness. But in particular, it's saying truthful things. Not deceiving other people. When Jesus says, 'do not make any vows,' you might think he means that we can't take an oath. Make no promises. But that's not what he means. If it was it wouldn't make much sense because the Bible is filled with covenants and promises. Jesus takes an oath, Paul takes oaths, and God has taken oaths. So he's probably not saying you can never take a vow. Look at what Jesus is saying overall. He says, "do not make any vows; simply say, 'yes, I will,' or 'no, I won't.'"

Here's what I think Jesus means. If someone else wants you to make a promise because it will assure them, fine, but when it comes to you, there must be no levels of truthfulness in your life.

We can never think that if we swear to something then we're bound to it, but if we don't, well, then we don't have to follow through. No. What Jesus is saying is, 'if you're my people, if you're a follower of mine, you're always under oath. Everything we say should be as truthful as if we were standing in a courtroom swearing with our hand on a Bible.'

There's a place in Matthew 12, and I despise this text, where it says we will be judged for every idle word. Every idle word? The word, 'idle' means off-handed comments. There are no levels of truthfulness. That's what Jesus is saying. If others want us to make a promise as an assurance to them, fine, but as far as we're concerned everything we say is, in a sense, under oath- because God is before us. He's always in front of us.

Or put it like this. Can I ask you? If you knew that everything you said tomorrow was going to be videoed and then broadcast so that everyone would know what you had said, would it make any difference in how you spoke?

What you said to others, how you presented yourself- it would all be out there for everyone to hear- would that make a difference in how you would speak? I think we would all say yes, it would make a difference. And that means we're all foolish. If we believe in God- if we know that He's always with us- how can we not be people of integrity?

Simply say, 'yes, I will' or 'no, I won't.'

Now it's not enough for me to say to us, this is how we must live, now go out and try harder. We need to ask ourselves the question, 'why are we not so good at this?' Why are we so bad at this? I believe that the problem and the solution are in our text. It's not overtly stated, but listen to Jesus' words, "*You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.'*" The phrase 'carry out' is an interesting word. In the original Greek it literally means, "pay." Pay your vows. It's a strange word choice, but a significant one. Especially when Jesus is communicating that everything we say is like a vow. What He's saying is- Truth costs.

To tell the truth there is a cost. You have to pay that price. So often, the reason we don't tell the truth (not always, but often) is because it will cost us. If we tell the truth we'll have to pay the price.

It depends on who you are, how that price is paid. For instance, those of us, who look for approval (our self-esteem is based upon people liking us) -sometimes we realize that if we tell the truth, it might anger people. 'If I tell the truth, he's going to be so mad at me.' Or 'she's going to be so mad with me.' So we fudge, or we spin, or we exaggerate or misdirect and lie. Why? We're unwilling to pay the price. Some of us are not approval people. We're control people. We need to keep control of things. Sometimes a person who likes to be in control will realize, 'if I tell the truth, I'm going to be at a disadvantage.' Approval people don't mind being at a disadvantage as long as people like them. And control people don't mind if people don't like them as long as they're in control. In both cases, in different situations, certain truth-telling comes with a terrible price because it actually rattles what makes us secure in the world. We won't be in control. We won't be accepted.

How are we going to get to the place where we're not scared, we're not rattled, we're secure enough to always pay the price to tell the truth? Jesus, in John 18, is on trial before the teachers of the law, the Sanhedrin, and they smack him. When they hit him, Jesus looks at them and he says, 'you hit me because I told you the truth.' And later in the same chapter when he's before Pilate, Jesus says, 'I'm being sentenced because I'm telling the truth.' And Pilate says, 'What is truth?'

What do we learn from these two exchanges? Jesus, when he went to the cross, was paying the price for telling the truth. But he wasn't just paying the price for his own honesty; he was paying the price for our dishonesty. We don't tell the truth and we deserve a penalty because we have done this before God. Jesus has taken the penalty on himself. He paid the price for our lack of honesty.

Why wouldn't those moralistic Pharisees stand for what Jesus was saying? Why could they not stand the things Jesus was saying? Why did they smack him? Because their self-image was that they were good people. And if the basis of your life is that you're a good person and someone comes along and shows you something that destroys or hurts that self-image it's hard to pay the price to admit it. We don't like the truth because we feel stripped naked. Well, Jesus was stripped naked. He allowed himself to be vulnerable for our sake, so that we could be clothed in his righteousness.

Here's the new self-image you have when you choose to trust in Christ as your savior. Jesus died on the cross and that means God looked into your life and looked into your heart, saw the worst you had to offer- He saw everything about you- and loved you anyway. Now we have the security and the strength to handle the truth. If we believe the good news then we are clothed with Christ and he loves us no matter what. That gives us the strength to handle the truth. Someone 'doesn't like us?'- we can handle it. We 'lose control?'- we're secure in him.

Jesus paid the price to tell the truth. He paid the price for our lack of honesty. We are saved because of his integrity. When hell was opening up under his feet, when the nails were about to be hammered in and it looked like it was going to be terrible- Jesus kept his promise. He was a man of integrity and that's the reason why you and I can live. When we see him doing that for us, we can have integrity for him- because he fortifies us enough to do it with his love. We can say with David, "I know the Lord is with me. I will not be shaken, for He is right beside me."