

Sermon on the Mount

July13, 2014

## **Title: Truth or Consequences**

Text: Matthew 5:33-37

Summary:

### **Lies**

#### **More common than we think?**

How important is it that we tell the truth? Not as important as you might have thought, according to a study conducted by psychologist Jeff Hancock, assistant professor of communications at Cornell. Hancock discovered that people fudge the truth at least 25% of the time in their interactions with others!

He asked 30 college students to keep track of their social communications for a week, and asked that they note when they lied. He also asked them to indicate how they communicated when they lied. The results: the students admitted to lying 1.6 times per day out of 6.11 social communications. In other words, they lied about 25% of the time.

And just how did they communicate those lies? It turns out that they were *least* likely to lie in an email -- just 14% of the time. They were *most* likely to lie on the phone -- 37% of the time. Hancock speculated that it's easier to lie on the phone because the other person can't see your facial expression, and the call is unlikely to be recorded. Not so for an email. It leaves a "paper trail."

And why do people tell so many lies? Psychologist Robert Feldman discovered in his research that "women were more likely to lie to make the person they were talking to feel good, while men lied most often to make themselves look better." He also discovered that "good liars" tend to be more popular than other people!

So how important is it that you tell the truth?

#### **Living in an untrue world:**

All this goes to show that *Truth* doesn't always work in our world. Truth is too "true" for a world that is filled with innuendoes and mixed motives. If people lie to each other in one out of every four social interactions, then:

- (a)** they must feel that fudging the facts is preferable to honesty
- (b)** they must also feel that lying is part of how the world works

Truth simply doesn't work in this broken world.

What's more, we all grade lies on a scale from "fib" to "whopper." The Washington Post routinely fact-checks politicians, scoring their lies with a rating of "Pinocchio's." One Pinocchio Nose for a fib; four for a whopper. We like Truth, but we're willing to let it be diluted with varying amounts of falsehood.

### **The very first form of evil:**

Go back to the beginning of the story of God and the World and you will find that the very first form of evil that corrupted God's good Creation was a Lie.

We all know how the story went: God placed a man and a woman in His garden, with the command that they not eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This was, of course, the making of a test. And the test came in the form of a serpent who tempted Eve. That temptation began with a lie:

### **Genesis 3:1-4 NIV**

**Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"**

**The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"**

**"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.**

Notice that Evil did not come in the form of a violent act; it did not come in an act of passion or lust. It came through an act of deception -- a twisting of the truth into a lie. God's Creation had been, up to that time, a place of Truth. From that time forward it would be a place of Truth mixed with Falsehood: the only world we have ever known!

### **God's True World**

**"You have heard that it was said..."**

So how do Truth and Falsehood fit in God's New World? When we pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," what does that mean when it comes to stretching the truth?

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus tackles the question of telling the truth head-on. First, He reminds His listeners of what God's Law had to say about the subject:

### **Matthew 5:33 NIV**

**“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’”**

Here was an ancient command that was designed to squeeze untruthfulness out of human communication. It was one thing to say that you would do something. It was quite another to reinforce it by swearing an oath to God! This command recognized that Truth and Falsehood get tangled up in an untrue world. A solemn vow was a way to make a person stick closer to the Truth.

But the very fact that you might reinforce a promise by appealing to God suggests that if you *didn't* make such a solemn promise, you might leave yourself some wiggle-room. And isn't that what happens all the time in our world? We don't buy a house with a promise and a handshake. We sign a raft of legal documents that hold us to our word. We can't testify in court unless we "solemnly swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

In the same way, people of Jesus' time found it necessary to reinforce the Truth by making vows and swearing oaths in God's Name. All well and good, but these efforts never addressed the underlying problem that Truth doesn't work in our world.

**"But I tell you..."**

Jesus turns the tables on this entire effort to somehow protect or reinforce Truth. Listen to what He commanded His listeners:

**Matthew 5:34-36 NIV**

**"But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black."**

His point is the same in each example that He cites: appealing to something important or vastly greater than ourselves doesn't make us any more *true*. Saying, "As God is my witness" doesn't guarantee that what I say is as true as God. Even if I'm trying to be truthful, what's to say that I'm fooling myself in the process? Jesus points out that we don't control Heaven, Earth, Jerusalem or even our own genetics. Trying to appeal to eternal or fixed truths is just another form of deception -- deception of ourselves and of others!

**Yes and No:**

So how should we communicate truth in this broken world? Jesus calls us back to the simplicity of the Garden and God's good Creation.

**Matthew 5:37**

**"All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."**

Before the Evil One came into God's Creation, "Yes," or "No" was all that was needed. There was no need to deceive. The moment that evil came into Creation, deception began.

- The serpent lied to Eve.
- Adam and Eve hid from God.
- When God asked Adam what happened, he blamed Eve (and God, for giving her to him!)
- When God asked Eve what happened, she blamed the serpent.

Lies, half-truths, evasions, all worthy of a high-powered defense attorney determined to get his client off the hook. Thus was born the untrue world.

Jesus calls His followers to a radically different standard: Truth.

## **Speaking the Truth in Love**

### **How much Truth?**

In our broken world Truth itself can be a deadly weapon. There's a reason, after all, why we tell so many white lies, like, "Your hair looks great!" when the stylist did a terrible job. Why make a friend or loved one feel even worse? The world is so messed up that Truth -- unadulterated -- might push someone over the edge!

And religious people have mishandled Truth in some very painful and destructive ways. Have you ever been around when some self-righteous person decided to unload on a "poor sinner"?

We talked about such a case last week. The religious police had caught a woman in the act of adultery (no mention of her partner, interestingly enough.) They brought her to Jesus to see if He would agree to having her stoned to death. They felt that they were on the high ground, with the Truth on their side, thus making a nice trap in which to catch Jesus.

Don't we do much the same thing when we blast away at someone, arming ourselves with Truth?

### **Truth/Love:**

Jesus' response to them was to ask them a simple question:

### **John 8:7 NIV**

**When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."**

His question re-focused them on the truth about themselves.

And then, when they had all dropped their stones and slinked away, He forgave the woman with these words:

**John 8:10-11 NIV**

**Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"**

**"No one, sir," she said.**

**"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."**

Notice that Jesus did not gloss over her sin. He didn't create a gray area for her based upon the fact that she had been mistreated by the religious police. He didn't minimize the evil of her action. Instead, He forgave her and pointed her in a new direction: "Go now and leave your life of sin."

No blurring of Truth and Falsehood, Good and Evil. Jesus invites her into God's New Creation. In that new world all there is is Truth, but it is Truth in the matrix of God's Love. Paul puts it this way:

**Ephesians 4:14-15 NIV**

**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.**

No more cunning and craftiness or deceitful scheming. Instead, we "speak the truth in love." And when we do, we grow up to be Jesus' Body in this world.

**Truth or Consequences?**

Every one of us deal with the issue of truthfulness in a different way. Some of us like to "tell it like it is" regardless of how the truth affects the person we're talking to. Others of us tend to soften the truth, shade it, dilute it. Sometimes we feel the need to reinforce our own truthfulness. All of our strategies are coping mechanisms for handling Truth in an untrue world.

Jesus tells us that there is a better way. When we follow Him into God's New Creation -- God's Kingdom in the here and now -- we become true ourselves. All we need to do is live and speak truthfully. But every act or word of truthfulness must be saturated with God's Love. We must live and speak the truth in love. Only then will we grow to be clear and true reflections of the God Who made us.

Truth or Consequences? The choice is yours. Living in God's New Creation begins right here!