

One Sermon That Changed The World

To Tell The Truth

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. (Matthew 5:31-37 ESV)

BEYOND RULES

One either side of the straight and narrow road lies a ditch; there is one on the left and there is one on the right. And every preacher knows that how you read the Bible can lead a sincere Christian to fall into either ditch. If I were reading the Sermon on the Mount with a church full of people raised Lutheran or Reformed, many of you would say to me, “Do you know what I see? We are so terrible. We can’t do any of this. Isn’t it great that Jesus came and did it for us?” I would look at them and say, “Yes, it is true that we are nothing without Christ. Yes, it is great that Jesus came and did for us what we could never do (by giving us the gift of salvation). And, yes, only Jesus lived a perfect life. But this sermon is meant to be lived. You and I are supposed to stop doing bad things and start doing good things, and—you know—look more like Christ in how we live. There are ethics in this sermon!” That’s what I would say.

But people who read the text that way do not represent the majority of people in the audience today. I am so glad that many of you were raised with a balanced perspective. But if there is any “extreme” tendency that some of us might have heard growing up, it

would be found in the other ditch. One where we read the Sermon on the Mount and say “Of course this is about ethics. So, what’s the new rule? Jesus said it’s wrong to say “you fool,” so if my son uses the word “foolish” am I going to wash his mouth out with soap? That’s a word that goes on the list. And lust? What’s the rule? Let’s draw the line. Any movie rated R must be wrong—especially if it has nudity in it. And Jesus calls lust adultery. So, I guess we should have a conversation about exactly how much lust and in what way constitutes a reason for me to put my no good husband away, because we all know that adultery is an acceptable reason to divorce.”

We may think Jesus is trying to give us a new checklist of do’s and don’ts. We want tangible rules. Clear lines. We want verses that say “don’t do *blank*.” Don’t smoke. Don’t drink. Don’t do drugs. Modest clothing means just above the knee, or just below the knee, or just above the ankle, or just below the ankle. We want clearly defined lines and rules.

And Jesus says—just as clear as I’m standing here—I’m wanting you to think *beyond* the rules! That’s hard for us. It’s hard to imagine that thinking “beyond” the rules could actually mean doing the very literal thing he says *not* to do, or *not* doing the very literal thing he says *to* do. But it’s true.

It is *not* a sin to call someone a fool. The Bible does it in both testaments, even though Jesus said, “if you say, ‘you fool’ you are liable to the hell of fire.” And it is *wrong* to cut off your hand or pluck out your eye—which were given to you by God—to try to fix a spiritual problem; Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point. This type of exaggerated language is meant to show you that plucking out your eye *won’t* fix the problem. *Blind* men lust. And it just isn’t the case that *any* nudity is clearly off limits. I’ve heard Christians say that art textbooks should have no great works of art that include scantily clad, barely clad, or non-clad images, as if the sculpture of David is an abomination rather than a declaration of beauty. And so, our missionaries went to Africa and told tribes where women walked around bare-chested and the men were used to it that they were sinning for doing so—and just like in the Garden of Eden, we created a problem that wasn’t there.

Rules are not for the righteous, but for the unrighteous. When we can’t or don’t or won’t see with spiritual eyes and live with renewed hearts then we have to impose rules; it’s a sign of our immaturity.

TWO NEW CASES: DIVORCE AND OATHS

Jesus is raising the bar. And so it is with the next two sections of this powerful sermon. Take the second one first. Jesus says don’t swear at all. I remember being told in Sunday

school class this means don't use swear words. Or maybe you shouldn't say OMG. I certainly think it's worth reflecting on. The Hebrews wouldn't even say the name of God out loud, for fear of desecrating the holy. So, I can certainly see value in an argument like this: if our ancestors wouldn't say God's name to invoke most holy things, why would you invoke his name to describe your joy at the latest Taylor Swift album? That is a helpful point to make, but that's not what he's really getting at here. Your section header probably says, "Jesus' teaching against oaths." The examples he gives are about oath swearing by heaven or the Temple. So, we begin to wonder if we sinned in taking the boy scout oath, or serving on a jury, or taking the witness stand. In my view, Jesus isn't talking about that. Enlisting in the army, pledging allegiance to the flag, signing a check, saying "I do" in a wedding are all forms of oath taking. But that is not what Jesus is getting at here. Even in the Old Testament, a priest could force someone to take an oath (Num 5:19-22), and one could voluntarily take a Nazarite vow with God's approval (Num 6:2). Moses lifted up his hand to heaven to swear (Deut 32:40), and in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul comes close when he appeals to people by the mercies of God (Rom 12:1) and declares by the living God (2 Tim 4:1). Simply as language goes, it doesn't seem like a sin.

And what about the divorce passage? You probably have heard sermons insisting that Jesus is writing new rules here. Jesus, they argue, is saying:

- Here is a clear NT definition of adultery.
- There is one and only one exception for divorce
- This rule applies to every person on the planet
- It admits of no exceptions.
- And, by inference, there is no recourse available if you break it.

But what if Jesus is using hyperbole just as he does in every other case study in this chapter, to go beyond rules to get at the heart? "You say you want to avoid adultery? When you get divorced by your spouse for adultery, you are admitting you committed adultery. If you divorce your spouse for some reason other than adultery, that, too, is adultery. And the one who gets left out in the rain because of adultery? When they get married, that's adultery." So, what's your point Jesus? "You really want to avoid adultery? Stop with all this divorcing!"

We want Jesus to give us rules. And instead, he challenges whatever it is that makes us go looking for a rule in the first place.

TRUTH MATTERS

Riley came home from her first grade Sunday School class. At the lunch table, her mother asked, “What did you talk about in class today?”

“We talked about what it means to tell a lie,” answered Riley.

“Oh interesting,” said her mom; “and what does the Bible say about lying?”

“Well,” Riley replied, trying to remember her memory verses, “A lie is an abomination in the sight of the Lord, and an ever-present help in time of trouble.” Isn’t that the truth?!

In 1956, CBS debuted a game show called “To Tell The Truth,” and it has appeared in several different decades. Maybe you remember it hosted by Bud Collyer, or Garry Moore or Anthony Anderson. But in all its iterations, three people would appear on stage, while the host would read out the strange experience or unusual occupation belonging to one of them. Four celebrity panelists would have to guess which of the three contestants was being described. To make it interesting, and to make sense of the show’s name, the two imposters would lie, trying to make you believe the lie and get you to choose them.

It works great in TV shows. It works terribly in real life. Suppose you are happily married, and I handed you an envelope. “In this envelope,” I say to you, “is absolute, 100% proof whether your spouse has ever cheated on you.” Remember, you are happily married, and not knowing of any unfaithfulness (or, assuming faithfulness) has been a major component in your happiness. Here is the question: would you open the envelope? Most people answer “yes.” No amount of pleasure will satisfying our deepest longings for the truth. We will stand cold, naked, and alone face to face with the nagging feeling that what we find pleasing can never measure up to what we find to be true.

Truth lies at the heart of all relationships; indeed, it is part and parcel of the fabric of any society. Because *without truth there can be no trust*. Immanuel Kant was a great ethicist, deeply influenced by his Lutheran upbringing. He argued that the way you can decide if something is wrong, completely wrong, always wrong, is this way: could you imagine a world where everybody did that thing whenever they wanted to? If you can imagine it, would you want a world where everybody did that thing whenever they wanted to? He used lying at his chief example. If people lied whenever it suited their fancy, you could never really know how much money is in your bank account, if your package is really on its way, if anything is really as it seems. Can you imagine a society where every business CEO only revealed the truth about their product if there was enough money in it? Where every teacher was a fraud, and every preacher was a sham? Look around! Maybe you could imagine it, but the question is “Would you want to live in a world like

that?” So, Kant argued one thing that is clearly and obviously wrong is to tell a lie; for if a person believes ethics means *anything*, he must tell the truth.

Without truth, there can be no rights. If there is no truth, everything reduces to power games and manipulation. Rights become preferences for individual competing groups; but there can be no certain inalienable rights—not if there is no such thing as truth.

Without truth there can be no freedom. Os Guinness helped me see this by sharing the following stories. Freedom isn’t simply freedom “from” something (like addictions and oppression); freedom is also freedom for something. Freedom to truly be yourself implies there is a true “you” to which you are entitled. G. K. Chesterton pointed out that if you have a camel and a tiger, both in cages, and you wanted to set them free, you wouldn’t think the answer is to remove the hump from the camel or the stripes from the tiger. You would know that is not setting them free, it is manipulating their identity. To know what it means to set them free, you first need to know what they are. Freedom assumes and requires truth. No truth—no freedom. In his Nobel Speech, Alexander Solzhenitsyn declared that “one word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.” Or to borrow a line from Jesus, only the truth will set you free.¹

WHERE THE DIVORCE PASSAGE FITS

Jesus places the “divorce” passage between the one about lust and the one about oaths. And I think it’s because it provides the perfect segway. On the one hand, putting away your spouse for some reason other than their fooling around is probably because you can’t stand them or because you desire someone else. Anger and lust are the key ingredients that go into most every divorce. If lust is your game, watch out. It could so easily lead to your divorce. That’s the reason divorce follows the discussion of lust and could easily be included with last week’s lesson.

On the other hand, it fits today with this lesson because divorce is a public lie. If you divorce your spouse for some frivolous reason, you’re saying “I know I said I do...But I don’t.” If you are divorced because you found someone else, you are announcing again, “I know I said I do, but clearly I don’t.” And if you can’t keep your word in the most important relationship of your life, how can I trust what you’re telling me in the little things you say?

VERBAL MANIPULATION

¹ Os Guinness, “True Truth.” <https://www.bethinking.org/truth/francis-schaeffers-true-truth>

Like, when you try to sell me your used car. The used car salesman is synonymous with telling us white lies and half-truths. Do you remember that Brady Bunch episode where Greg learns how to twist the truth when selling his awful car; he can't even call it lying. He calls it "gilding the lily."²

Oh, we see people gilding that lily every day, don't we? The product we buy on Amazon or order when we roll down the window never quite looks as good in real life as it does in the advertisements. And then you learn that French fry in the ad isn't a French fry at all—it's plastic. That's not ice-cream; it's mashed potatoes. The sauce looks so juicy—that's because there's wax in it.³

And we can lay it on real thick too, can't we? There's a word for all of this. "Manipulation." We manipulate our pictures on social media, using ever filter known to man, airbrushing out all the imperfections to give an impression that never actually existed in real life; but then we call it "putting our best foot forward." We see the media do it after a political debate; but they brazenly call it "spin." I once heard of a school who thought the people in their science department didn't look as good (physically) as their art department. So, they had their art teachers wear lab coats and hold test tubes and pose for the cameras to put in the catalog. Did I mention it was a Christian school? They called it "effective PR."

Manipulation. It's become second nature to us. Always coaxing, always sugar-coating, always trying to tailor our words to fit what we want you to hear, not the truth as it actually stands.

Manipulation. Leaving things out, adding things in, twisting, distorting, revising and retelling. And we always have good reasons. In the interest of not hurting your feelings, not divulging private information, not exposing our own mistakes, not lessening the effectiveness of our pitch, we manipulate—and we do damage to the truth.

Let's admit it. Studies show we tell a lie once every 3 minutes, and that someone deceives somebody else in 2/3rds of all conversations.⁴

- When we tell that story again—the one about the fish we caught: and it's bigger this time.

² The Brady Bunch, "The Wheeler Dealer," Season 3, Episode 4. <https://jimihaze68.com/2019/06/23/s3-e4-the-wheeler-dealer/>

³ <https://www.quora.com/How-does-food-in-commercials-look-so-perfect-Is-it-real-food-or-is-it-fake-food-made-with-graphics-and-or-plastic>

⁴ See Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004) & David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004). Cited in James Bryan Smith, *The Good & Beautiful Life*.

- When we add a line in our resume that wasn't true, but it made us look or sound better, and covered up a weakness.
- When we pad our business expense account.
- When we mirror whoever we are talking to, changing what we really think to agree with what they are saying so they will find us likable, or think we are in the know, instead of admitting: no, I have never read that book you are talking about; no, I don't agree with that view; yes, I *have* been talking about you behind your back.

What if there was a drone with a powerful microphone, and it picked up every word you spoke the entire day (in public and in private). And then the next day, it played it—out loud—for all your neighbors to hear. Would your words to them match up with what you said about them?

Jesus is making one simple point. Tell the truth. Mean what you say. Keep your word. Let it be as good as gold. Speak truth to your neighbor. Reveal the situation for what it is. Don't engage in verbal manipulation.

IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

I'll tell you how *they* did it. First century Jewish people would say things to each other that you couldn't really take to the bank; but when they really wanted to convince you of something, they would say "I swear by the heavens; I swear by the earth; I swear by the temple; I swear by the altar." If you are wondering if they are dancing around just saying the name of God, you'd be right. Do you know why they danced around it? Because there was a command against it. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," says the third commandment; "for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex 20:7 ESV).

You might, intuitively, see one obvious problem with their interpretation of that commandment. They went for the wording, not the meaning. Or as we might say—they went for the letter of the law, not the spirit of it. That's true. Swearing by the heavens and the temple is swearing by the name of God; and Jesus points that out. But there's a second problem with their interpretation of that commandment. I learned this from a Jewish person. This passage isn't even primarily talking about your words. To belong to Israel was to wear an incredibly precious badge. But some of them wearing that badge followed the ways of the pagan world around them. What did it say to outsiders? What did that say about God?

Do you know what Jesus probably had in mind when he made a commandment to never take the Lord's name in vain? He meant in word and deed, don't betray your calling. You bear the Lord's name; it's stamped on your forehead. Don't live in such a way that you wish it was covered up. When no one is looking...are you who you say you are?

Jesus says to people who want to seek the heart of God—be people of the truth. Let your words and deeds reflect our God who is full of grace, and full of truth. And if you think, “well, I didn't pinky swear; I didn't invoke the name of God, so it's ok I didn't really mean it,” you forget that in everything you do you invoke the name of God, because the name of God abides in you.

CONCLUSION

So put it all together. These two passages and this sermon. Here is what Jesus wants from his people. Two Things. #1: Put your trust in God. Believe that God is taking care of your future. If we aren't acting out of anger toward someone, or lusting for money or power as if we want something from someone, think about how that *frees us*. We can live lives so pure and simple, so full of God's goodness, that we could care less whether we make a lot of money or a little, so we have no reason to change the story to get the outcome we need. As the little boy quoted Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd, I don't want nothin! We can simply live in authentic relationships and accept whatever outcome results.

#2: Go love your neighbor. Put their needs before yours and put the truth above all. Love your neighbor enough to tell them all the things wrong with the car you are selling. Love them enough to tell them the truth, not make up an excuse.

Can you even *imagine* a world like that? Complete, honest, unadulterated truth? I can. Do you know why? Because God—your God—is not only the way and the life...He is the truth. And he is truly yours. No ifs, ands, or buts. No qualifications. Not only when you do it all right. Do you know how I know that? He said, “I do.” He is eternally covenanted with you. And he will never leave you nor forsake you. I swear to God.