

Title: Stick a needle in my eye
Text: Matthew 5:33-37
Theme: Integrity
Series: Matthew #26
Prop Stmtnt: Christ is the truth and calls his people to speak the truth.

In “Confessions of a Do-Gooder” Kevin Greer writes, “Here I was, on the front lines, personally handing out blankets and helping families that had lost almost everything. Noble cause. Noble mission. Noble actions of a 25 year old relief worker. A photographer snapped pictures, and I smiled wide for the camera as I did “God’s work.” And the thought running through my head was not about the people receiving blankets. I thought, “I can’t wait until the people back home see those photos of me.” When I saw the photos a few weeks later, I trashed them. . . . Captured on film, I recognized myself as playacting for people far away, not thinking about loving the people in front of me.”

Religion is a great way to get people to think highly of you. The sermon that Jesus preached was like his life: it exposed the hypocrisy of religious do-gooders. Everything is like a personal political campaign. Everything that you do is done for the right angle, the right view, the right pose, the right tweet, the right blog, the right image, the maximum attention to build your image. One by one, Jesus is exposing the religious do-gooders, the Pharisees. But in so doing, he is exposing our own tendencies, isn’t he? Notice verses 5:20 and 6:1. In between are 6 specific examples of invalid righteousness. Matthew arranges many things in his gospel in multiples of three. This morning we are looking at what Jesus says about the importance of your word.

Read Text:

I represented my mom at the closing when she sold her home about a year ago. The number of papers that I had to sign was pretty amazing and I was just representing the seller. Actually, it was more like – ridiculous. For the buyer, it is even more. But, one of the papers that I had to sign is called the Affidavit for One and the Same Person form. It had my name on it, and I was signing it with my name saying that this was my name. Then I had to sign a form that said that I was agreeing that if I signed my name Robert Johnson II, that it was the same as Robert B. Johnson II. What was that about? Well, obviously, someone was trying to get out of their legal obligation and used the fact that since they did not sign the forms with their middle initial that it was not technically their identity, and therefore, they did not have to be held responsible for the commitments that they had made. The reason for all of the rules, all of the forms, all of the red tape and all of the complicated legal processes is because, over and over, people do not speak the truth and do not keep their word. Our lives are characterized by the promises we make and the promises we keep.

How many people have simply walked away from their homes? Well, it is worth less than what we owe on it. Ok, but did you not sign your name? Did you not give your word that you would pay the bank back the money that you borrowed? If they loaned you the money, and you said that you would pay it back, then just because the values of a home

go down, do you justify not keeping your word? I am not talking about bankruptcy. I am not talking about rightfully using the protection that you are given by the law when you are in a financial mess that you cannot fix. I am speaking to the nonchalant attitude that permeates our culture about borrowing money for a home, a car, student loans and then acting as if you can simply not pay the money back because it would be inconvenient. I know a family who told their bank that they were not going to make any more mortgage payments until the bank gave them a better rate. It is like the athlete who refuses to show up for training camp because the 3 million dollar a year contract that he signed, he has now decided is too low and he ought to make more. What about your word? Our lives are characterized by the promises we make and the promises we keep.

Public officials give speeches or grant interviews. Then, their media handlers go on talk shows and “spin” their words and tell people what they really meant to say. People sign contracts and then hire attorneys to get them out of the contract that they signed. Many of you who do work, whether as an engineering company, or as a painter know the incredible challenge it can be to simply get a customer to pay a bill. I talked with a small business owner in our church whose company did residential work for years. I was stunned with his stories of having to take customers to court simply because they refused to pay their bills.

Do you see what has happened to our conversation in the last 30 years? We have this social collision that is taking place. On the one hand, we have people who love instant messaging and texting, combined with a culture that seems completely unable to say anything clearly and succinctly. We want communication in small amounts, but because so much of our culture has rejected clear categories of right and wrong, we tend to communicate with a great deal of muddle in the middle. We kind of, sort of, maybe say a lot of words, in a way, that’s like, you know, morphing, evolving and working it through, which simply makes a lot of noise, and is designed to appear to be engaging and thoughtful, but in the end no one is really certain what was said, though we nod and ponder with feigned gravitas. Style matters more than substance. Image carries more clout than content. But what does that get you?

The other night I saw a commercial that was marketing a new drug that by all appearances would give you an absolutely perfect life. The video content showed scenes of serenity and peace. A man was flying a remote controlled plane in the country; a woman was sitting on a swing on the large front porch of a home on a delightful summer afternoon. But, the voice was saying some very disturbing things, though in a very smoothing manner (I might add) to exercise caution if you experience nausea, vomiting, digestive issues, high blood pressure, open sores, headaches, loss of sight, loss of hearing, thoughts of suicide, depression, mood disorders, loss of appetite, heart palpitations and dizziness, all the while someone is flying a kite and reading a book with a child. In other words, we have to tell you the truth about the side effects of this medicine but we just don’t want you to actually hear it or believe it. If you would close your eyes and just listen to the commercial, you would think that they were advertising rat poison. Do you see what all of this does to truth? Political ads are some of the worst.

Do you realize the consequences of trying to live a life in a society that does not speak truth and does not keep its word? The basic difference between a modern society and a 3rd world society is this: A modern society functions on the basis of law (truth). A 3rd world society is ruled by liars. A building inspector says a building is safe, when in reality he was bribed by the builder to sign the document. So, what happens when a straight line wind hits it? A police officer is paid to look the other way while a prostitution business is permitted to flourish. City council members are paid cash or have home improvements made, or have their kids weddings paid for in exchange for approving a new trash contract. So, it costs the average citizen a few bucks, what's the big deal? The big deal is that truth does not matter. The big deal is that the cumulative weight of this is chaos because there are no boundaries and no definitions of right and wrong. Why is Detroit bankrupt? The city has had so many people in positions of leadership in the last 50 years who have not kept their word. So you tell a fireman, or a police officer that when he retires he will get a pension. What good is that promise? That promise is only as good as the integrity and the authority of the people in power to make and keep that promise. So what if they lied a little bit? So what if every person who did business in the city had to pay off certain officials. So what? Now we are seeing what so. Our city is characterized by the promises it made and the promises it cannot keep.

A week ago Friday night, Cathi and I and four others from our church joined over 900 other bicyclists and rode for 25 miles through the streets of Detroit. On the one hand, it was a blast. We went through some seriously blighted neighborhoods that broke our hearts as well as some nice areas that made us proud. Can Detroit recover? She will only recover to the degree that the people who are put into power speak the truth and keep their word. But, that exposes a serious problem. People who speak the truth are generally not very electable. We have a serious problem with speaking the truth because we have a serious problem with hearing the truth, because we have a serious problem with truth.

I. **The truth matters to God.** (33)

A. **He is truth.**

He is truth because he is, as Jesus called him (John 17.3) "*the only true God.*" Jesus called himself "the truth" (John 14.6) This means that God perfectly conforms to his own idea of truth. He is right. He is the standard. He is the source of all definition and meaning. Without him, we could not have an intelligent conversation because there would not be categories of right and wrong, truth and error, or good and bad. We have language; we have alphabets where letters and words have meaning. We have math where numbers have value and consistency. All of this has a source. It comes from the only true God. The truthfulness of God and the faithfulness of God are inseparable. He is truth.

B. **He speaks truth.**

Therefore, he speaks truth. He cannot utter a lie. He cannot believe a lie. God is absolutely incapable of lying. Therefore, when God makes a promise, he is speaking the

truth. He is saying something that is most assuredly going to happen. When God makes a promise, it cannot fail to happen. It is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6.18) and therefore it is impossible for God to not keep a promise. That is why Jesus said to his Father, “Your word is truth.” (John 17.17) God is characterized by the promises he made and the promises he keeps.

C. **He demands truth from his people.**

When God called the people of Israel to be his own and he rescued them from bondage in Egypt and was organizing them into a nation that was called by his name, he gave them his law. The law was summarized in what became known as the 10 commandments, one of which said, “You shall not bear false witness.” You shall not lie. Over and over God told his people that he demanded truth from them at all times. This is seen in Leviticus 19.12; Numbers 30.2; Deuteronomy 23.21-23. Jesus is summarizing all of those commands when he says, “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, (note what you must NOT do) ‘You shall not swear falsely, but (not what you MUST do) shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’”

Notice how Christ combines the ideas of truthfulness and faithfulness together. You must not lie (you must speak the truth) and then you must do what you said you were going to do. Have you ever seen the connection between the things in life that affect us so deeply and their relationship with God? For example, if you want your child to grow up angry, embittered, violent, and depressed, just lie to him. Make promises that you don’t keep. He will learn not to trust you. He will experience betrayal and the utter loss of foundation. He will ask like thousands of others, “What is wrong with me, that my own dad or mom will lie right to my face?” He will make up his mind that he will never believe you, and perhaps no one else ever again. He can only believe in himself, which only lasts until he realizes that he makes promises to himself that he does not keep. That is when things get even darker.

Truth and faithfulness are incredible gifts from God. But, we have a problem with truthfulness and faithfulness. We are threatened by the truth and we are incapable of being perfectly faithful. We say things in the moment to make others feel good, or to make ourselves look good, or that are simply convenient and then we look for a way to get out of it, or to explain it away on a technicality. While it is not surprising that our world does not speak the truth, it is so disastrous and catastrophic when the people of God do not speak the truth. We, who bear his name, reflect on his very being by our lives. This is what Christ is exposing. Since God is characterized by the promises he has made and the promises he keeps, he calls those who bear his name to do the same. Do you see why this is such an important issue, even on the most personal level?

II. **We twist the truth.** (34-36)

Did you ever make a promise as a kid, such as “cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye” and then later on say that it did not count because you had crossed your fingers? That is what was going on with the Pharisees. They made these artificial

distinctions between which oaths were binding and which oaths were not binding. For example, if you used the name of God in making a promise, then you were bound to fulfill that promise. If, however, you used something else, then you were not obligated. This enabled people to lie and say that it was okay.

A. We use God as an excuse for sin.

So, the person who made an oath and said something like, “I swear to you by heaven” was not obligated to fulfill that promise because he swore on the basis of heaven, but on the basis of God. And Jesus rightly condemns that as hypocrisy. Besides, he says, heaven is where the throne of God is. So, don’t think that you can swear by heaven and lie. He goes on to say that neither can you swear by earth and use that as an excuse for sin. Earth is the footstool of God. You cannot swear by Jerusalem in an effort to make people think that you are serious, but in the end think that you have left yourself a way out because technically you did not swear by God because Jerusalem is the city of God. In fact, you can’t even make an oath on the basis of your head, because you are swearing on the basis of something that you do not have control over. You cannot determine the color of your hair (naturally speaking), so if you do not have ultimate authority, ownership, control over your head, what right do you think that you have to swear on its basis? But, do you see what happens when we do not want to deal with truth?

B. We create our own categories. – This is what Christ is prohibiting

This is what is so maddening. When people do everything they can to find a way to get around the intent of the law and find loopholes in the law, then we have to make more laws. Over time, the result becomes crushing upon the justice system.

Rupert Murdoch is on his third marriage. His wife signed a pre-nuptial agreement and then a post-nuptial agreement. But, she just hired a high-powered attorney to see if she can get around that now that she is divorcing him. So, more time is taken up in a court of law to give attention to a matter that was supposedly already settled. People signed their names to the agreement even before they got married. But, even that begs the question of why did they sign a pre-nup in the first place? Isn’t a pre-nuptial agreement the anticipation that someone is not going to keep their word?

Again, I understand how that is going to happen in this world. I am not surprised when a politician wants to debate the meaning of “is.” I am not surprised when campaign promises are broken. But when the church creates categories of sin, or it tolerates certain things because of creating a loophole of sorts, then we just devastate people because, in the name of God, we are playing fast and loose with truth. And just as a father who lies to his children will often produce an angry child, the church has often been it’s own worst enemy by making artificial distinctions in order to circumvent the real intent. Here is our calling. Like our Savior...

III. We are called to speak the truth, no excuses. (37)

A. **Make and keep commitments** (promises).

Jesus is saying that his followers should be people who are so known by their integrity that there is no need to put them under oath. How do you do this?

- 1) Be willing to make a commitment. (get rid of the “maybe” option on Facebook)
- 2) Be careful about your commitments. (Illus. Herod)
- 3) Be clear with your commitments/words.

Sometimes things come up that are beyond your control. Acknowledge that when you are making a promise.

- Speak the truth
 - Speak the truth in love
- 4) Plan to keep your commitments.
 - Write down what you commit to in your calendar.
 - Do it.
- 5) Take responsibility for your failures.

B. **Your words reflect the gospel.**

The church is a very fascinating organism. No one made you come here this morning. You chose to be here. Part of that, for many of you stems from the fact that you/we made a promise to be committed together as brothers and sisters because of our mutual faith in Christ to help each other grow and mature as followers of Christ. But, there is nothing legally binding about that. If you choose not to come, you do not have to come. If you choose not to serve, not to support, not to pray, not to help, not to love, this whole thing will fall apart. If everyone decided one day that life was way too busy and filled up with other things and that you simply did not have the time for or the desire to be part of this local congregation, then, this church is over. But, the truth is, the church is ultimately not up to us. We make commitments and keep those because God made a commitment to us and keeps it. Cornerstone, we do not need a slick marketing campaign to influence this community with the gospel. There are two profound ways that we can gain a hearing in the lives of other people. 1) Do, what you say you are going to do and 2) Do it without complaining.

Conclusion:

We can sit here today and realize that there is very little truth and integrity in our world. We can make promises that we are going to try harder and do better in order to do our part to bring back some honesty in our world. But, the truth is, we will not do it perfectly.

IV. We need a Savior.

- A. We need someone who knows the truth about us and loves us anyway.
- B. We need someone who will speak the truth to us, no matter what.
- C. We need to listen, agree and submit; no excuses.
- D. We need a God of truth who is a God of mercy, who can forgive us and change us to be a people of truth and mercy.

Start with the gospel.

Grow with the gospel.