

## Truth or Truthiness?

*Matthew 5:33-37*

In the movie *Christmas Story*, Ralphie, about eight years old, belts out a really bad cuss word. His mother totally freaks, marches Ralphie to the bathroom, and stuffs a bar of soap in his mouth. **She takes out the bar of soap and says**, “All right. Now, are you ready to tell me where you heard that word?” [Ralphie as Adult](#): [*narrating*] Now, I had heard that word at least ten times a day from my old man. He worked in profanity the way other artists might work in oils or clay. It was his true medium; a master. But, I chickened out and said the first name that came to mind. “Schwartz.”

Well, Jesus has a different concept of swearing in mind. In the first century, people underscored the importance of truth by swearing by Jerusalem, by Jove, anything that could cover the lies. Shady deals were made. Schemes hatched. Products hawked. The air was filled with swearing. And into this “Let’s make a deal” culture Jesus injects. “Don’t swear at all.”

But this is not a lecture about bad language. This sermon is not a bar of soap in your mouth. Not a Sunday School teacher warning of the evils of cussing. Not a riff on the “seven words you can’t say on television.” There’s more at stake in our world than four-letter words. Cussing may be regrettable but it is not a game changer in a world built on lies and deception.

Jesus says that swearing testifies that we live in a world of lies. “I swear to God,” “It’s the gospel truth!” “I swear to you I’m telling the truth.” A person can lie so much they no longer know when they are telling the truth. “Of course I love you,” “The check’s in the mail,” “I’m from the government and I’m here to help you.” Our world has become such a sewer of spurious truth claims and enormous exaggeration that Stephen Colbert coined the word, “Truthiness” – an approximation of truth not burdened by pesky facts or reality. So when Jesus says, “No swearing,” he is not banning cuss words but truthiness – new word for old ways.

Jesus is looking at our world – a world of big lies, where words are used as weapons to gain power. This world has low tolerance and little respect for the truth. We aren’t interested in actually discovering truth, we just want to be right, be on the winning side, and get rich. Our political system has become a breeding ground for sophistry and demagoguery. America is not a Christian nation; America is an antisocial Darwinist nation: “a brutal survival-of-the-fittest doctrine, a winner-take-almost-all mentality, the losers take the scraps that fall from the table in a scrap with bulldogs.” When it comes to getting our way, we will move heaven and hell to get what we want, to crown our opinions as the truth. The blind pursuit of the American dream – getting rich, getting even, and getting laid – tramples truth to death. If words of truthiness were raindrops, we’d be building an ark this morning.

In the old cartoon strip “Li'l Abner,” there were these lovable creatures called Shmoos. The selfless Shmoos were so good that whenever they showed up people automatically told the truth. Finally humans hunted down and exterminated the Schmoos. Why? Because the whole world was falling apart. In the movie, “Liar, Liar,” Jim Carrey plays a lawyer named Fletcher Reed who discovers that he can't tell a lie. His resulting dilemmas demonstrate how a truth-teller can't function in a world built on layers of lies. In the drama of the Gospels, Jesus is the truth, but the authorities kill him off. Why? The truth would wreck the world as they knew it – politics, business, and, yes, even religion.

Well, no wonder we swear so much. In a world that has so little trust, we have to do something to claim credibility. In courtrooms we swear on the Bible to tell the truth. Our Anabaptist ancestors took the words of Jesus literally and seriously by refusing to serve on juries or swear on the Bible, and thus were making a determined effort to obey Scripture. But there's more to it than literalism: All oath taking is confession that truth is not our way of life. Somehow we think that swearing to heaven, to God, on our mother's grave will make all our falsehoods believable. “If his lips are moving, he's lying,” we say. The lies keep dropping from our lips like bombs from the sky. God's prophets, those fierce spokespersons for truth, those defenders of widows, the fatherless, and aliens, those men and women who could not help but speak the truth with piercing clarity – still their words echo: “Truth stumbles in the public square” (Isaiah 59:14-15). God cries, “See if you can find just one person who seeks truth, says God, and I will save the city (Jer5:1). “They bend their tongues like bows, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the land, declares the LORD.” In the words of the General Confession, “There is no truth in us.” Or as the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (1662 version) puts it, “There is no health in us.”

So what's the answer? A social reality built on truthiness and falsity can't be changed by appeals to be nice or civil, or “Can't we all just get along?” What we need is a whole new social order. This is why Jesus says, “Let your YES be YES. Let your NO be NO.” Sounds simple enough, but training in truthfulness is not the easiest course in the Christian curriculum. But we have the endowed chair of truth as major professor: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.” Jesus is his name; Truthful his nickname. We have Truthful to teach us the ropes.

God looks for those who will to construct a whole new kind of world based on truth. God seeks those who will worship in spirit and in truth. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will teach us the truth. Jesus prays, “sanctify my [disciples] in the truth.” Jesus claims, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” Our culture is obsessed with being on a particular side – left or right, but in a world built on lies, here's Jesus on the side of truth and there we all are on the side of lies. Here Jesus and truth; the other side all our political ways even though that try to drag Jesus across the line to their side.

To speak truthfully to one another, we must learn to speak truthfully to God, that is, we must learn to pray, especially the prayer of confession. The church is the only institution in the world that exists for the confession of sins. No matter how many

degrees we nail on our office walls, it is presumptuous to think that we have it all figured out, and that we are always right. Truth is not so much relevant as righteous; not absolute but an agonizing search.

I John 1:8-9 lays it out in plain speech for us: **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** The prayer of confession admits that we have strayed from the truth and brings us home again. It makes us face that we have followed the deceits, desires, and devices of our own hearts. It requires our admission that we have offended the Truth, confused what we ought to do with what we ought not do. Confession reconstitutes us as the church every Sunday as we dump the mud and clear our minds and hearts. When we confess our sins swearing is redundant. After all, **we can’t tell truth until we face truth.** Some need to face the truth that they are not as bad as they think; others need to face the truth that they are not as good as they think. You decide which spoonful of this truth applies to you.

Confession makes love possible. And love makes truth possible. Love is patient; kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but **rejoices in the truth.** If we despise ourselves, if we wallow in self-misery, if we think that happiness comes only from others meeting our needs, we are incapable of loving others.

Listen, a degree in truthfulness takes training in good manners. Even among those we love the most, we have the common sense to soften the truth with preliminary preambles: “I don’t want to hurt your feelings but” “Maybe I’m having a bad day, but what you just said bothered me.” Unvarnished truth may only be a power play designed to express one’s own agenda – a form of verbal assault or rhetorical rape. Truth simply will not stay where she is treated shabbily, ignored, or reviled. Truth is uncomfortable in church these days, because too many Christians are unwilling to hear their most cherished dogmas contested. There is a door that opens to truth and that door is our ears, but we have ears that refuse to hear. The mind and heart are rendered useless unless we open our ears to the truth. Love and truth are the speech acts of our witness to the world. Hear the word of God: Love people and tell the truth.

What’s this got to do with us? We are God’s truth tellers. To us the kingdom of love and truth has been given. This is the church’s vocation. Of all the institutions in our society, which ones have the most potential to create a community built on truth? Not gambling casinos or horse racing tracks. Not bars on East Third Street. Not the corporate offices of Lexus Nexus. Not Wright Pat Air Force Base. Not the Dayton Daily News. Not Congress. Not the Supreme Court. Not the White House. The church and the university. Together we can learn to be part of a people of virtue, a people who take the time to learn to practice truth, be faithful in our promises to one another, and seek reconciliation (SH, *Matthew*, 72).

Can we pull this off? Can we practice truth? A simple meaning of what we say. No tricks up our sleeves. No political game playing. No nasty accusations that we know are untrue. No duplicity. No demonizing. No caricatures and exaggerations. No pious hypocrisy. No false arguments built on lies, statistics, and more lies. Instead we will come into the house of the Lord, real people confessing our sins, caring for one another, rejoicing in the truth, and telling the truth in such plain, unvarnished language that we will become known as THE Truthful Baptist Church.