

DEALING WITH OUR TENDENCY TO LIE

MATTHEW 5:33-37

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In MATTHEW 5:20, Jesus is recorded as saying, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

The problem with the righteousness of the Pharisees is that it was based entirely on the letter of the law while neglecting the spirit of the law. The Pharisees failed to grasp the spirit of the moral law. Instead, they were intent on defining how to obey the moral law. They replaced principles with rules. And even though their intentions may have been good at the beginning, they soon forgot the principles and only remembered the rules.

In order for our righteousness to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, we must somehow get back to the principles. We must understand the spirit of the law and be more concerned about who we are on the inside than what we look like on the outside.

After Jesus gave the stern warning that we will not enter into the kingdom of heaven unless our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, He then used six illustrations to drive home his point. We have already looked at three of the illustrations; namely, murder and adultery and divorce. With each one of those illustrations Jesus began with the words, "You have heard that it was said to people long ago." And then, Jesus went on to quote the traditional sayings of the Pharisees as they related to those different issues. When we read the traditional sayings of the Pharisees, we discover that the difference between the traditional sayings of the Pharisees and the actual words of the Mosaic Law is often very subtle. Unless you are familiar with the Mosaic Law, what the Pharisees said and what the Old Testament says seems to be almost identical. But, in every case, the difference is actually huge.

Today's scripture lesson is a perfect example of how the words of the Pharisees; at first glance, seem to be identical to the words recorded in the Old Testament; however, in reality they are really very different. The issue being discussed in these verses is the issue of lying. The moral law, as found in the Ten Commandments forbids us to lie and it forbids us to use God's name in vain. The words that we speak to people must never be anything less than honest. And when we use God's name, we

should always do so in a way that truly represents the name we are using. Integrity is considered holy in the eyes of God. This is the simple principle of the moral law. We are to be honest with each other and we are to be honest with God all the time and without exception.

But, of course, men fail to keep the moral law. In Old Testament times people were prone to lie to one another just as we have a tendency to lie to one another today. Even God's chosen people lied and used God's name in vain. And they did it often. Thus, there was a need for civil law. Civil law was needed to keep order in society.

Let's take a brief look at the civil law given to the children of Israel by God through Moses and found in the books of LEVITICUS and NUMBERS and DEUTERONOMY.

In DEUTERONOMY 6:13, we read these words: "*Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.*" In DEUTERONOMY 23:21-23 we read, "*If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.*" LEVITICUS 19:12 says, "*Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.*" And NUMBERS 30:2 reads, "*When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.*"

Now all these verses have something in common. They all deal with the whole topic of taking oaths or swearing that what you are saying is true. Even though the moral law forbade people to lie, people still lied. Therefore the civil law was established to provide order in a situation that had become chaotic. People were instructed to make solemn oaths to one another in the name of God. When such an oath was taken and the person who took the oath was found out to be lying, then the person who was lying would be guilty of perjury and there would be consequences. The reason we require people to take the witness stand and "swear to speak the truth and nothing but the truth so help me God" is simply because men are prone to lie and

requiring them to take an oath helps to keep the lying in check. When forced to take such a solemn oath, the average person will often think twice before he lies. This kind of civil law actually helps prevent a society from falling completely apart.

Under Mosaic legislation oath-taking was restricted to serious and important matters. Without such restriction, oath-taking would get out of hand. People have a tendency to take oaths about very trivial things just to convince others to believe what they are saying is true. "Cross my heart and hope to die," were the words often used by myself and other children when I was growing up, and we said these words about everything whenever we suspected that someone did not believe what we were saying.

But the children of Israel were never supposed to swear to God about everything. One commentator writes, "Taking an oath in God's name was a very serious matter, something that must be reserved only for those causes and conditions where a matter of exceptional gravity and unusual concern for the individual or for the nation was involved."

So, in Old Testament times, there was the moral law that forbid people to lie regardless of the circumstances. There were no exceptions. And there was the civil law that kept people in check when they disobeyed the moral law. It made people think twice about telling a lie when dealing with very serious matters, and it made them suffer a penalty if they were caught.

Now let's turn to the teaching of the Pharisees and ask how it differs from the moral and civil law found in the Old Testament? Look again at the saying of the Pharisees as quoted by Jesus in MATTHEW 5:33, "You have heard it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'" The first thing to notice about these words is that they are not a direct quote from either the moral law or the civil law. They are simply a saying that the Pharisees used to teach people on the subject honesty.

The first thing that made this saying so damaging in the time of Christ is that it failed to emphasize the principle of the moral law. It failed to tell people that they should not lie under any circumstance. The second thing it did was to reduce the whole issue to the question of committing perjury. Don't commit perjury. That's what the first part of the saying really means. The second part of the saying defined perjury as breaking an oath made to the Lord.

The way this saying was applied to the Jewish community during the time of Christ was extremely damaging to the moral fiber of the

community. First of all, people began to draw a distinction between various kinds of oaths, saying that some were binding and some were not. For instance, if you swore by the temple, that was not binding. But if you swore by the gold of the temple, that was binding. If you swore by the altar, that was not binding. But if you swore by the gift on the altar, that was binding. These distinctions are revealed in MATTHEW 23, and Jesus condemned the Pharisees for making such distinctions. From their perspective, the Pharisees were just trying to make rules to eliminate confusion in the minds of the people. They knew people had a strong desire to clearly define what is right and what is wrong, so they helped satisfy that desire by precisely defining what it meant to make an oath to the Lord and what it meant to make an ordinary oath. But, in reality, their distinctions caused people to think that some forms of lying were OK while other forms of lying were wrong.

The second damaging affect this saying had on society was to make oath-taking a very common practice. During the time of Christ, people were resorting to making oaths about everything in an effort to convince people that what they were saying was true. They were swearing by heaven and they were swearing by earth and they were swearing by Jerusalem and they were swearing by their own heads.

The Mosaic civil law limited oath-taking to just important matters. But in Christ's time, people were taking oaths about everything. The Mosaic civil law made breaking an oath a very serious crime. But in Christ's time, only the breaking of certain oaths was considered a serious crime. The moral law told the children of Israel that they should never lie. But the saying of the Pharisees caused people to think that lying was Ok in certain situations. I hope you can see how, in reality, there is a huge difference between the saying of the Pharisees and the teaching of the Old Testament.

Let's now consider our Lord's teaching. Jesus was the original author of both the moral law and the Mosaic civil law. Only He had the right to say the words recorded in MATTHEW 5:34-37. Listen to those words, "***But I tell you, do not swear 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. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.***"

Consider first the very last thing that Jesus said. He said, "Simply let your 'Yes' be

'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." Those words take us right back to the moral law. Thou shalt not bear false witness. We should never lie. Our 'yes' must never mean anything other than 'yes' and our 'no' must never mean anything other than 'no'. Again, as with the previous illustrations, we see that Jesus does nothing to change the moral law. He affirmed the moral law.

And what did Jesus say about the Mosaic civil law? Jesus said, "But I tell you, do not swear at all." These words have been interpreted in different ways. Some Quakers have taken them literally to mean that no Christian should ever take an oath of any kind under any circumstances. Thus, even in a court of law, they will refuse to take an oath. They argue that *he who cannot be believed without swearing is already condemned*.

The problem with this interpretation of scripture is that there are examples in the Bible where the apostles did take oaths (2 CORINTHIANS 1:23; GALATIANS 1:20). Even Jesus, at His trial before the High Priest, did not protest when He was put on oath. At His trial before the High Priest, the High Priest said to Him, "I adjure you by the living God (I put you on oath by God Himself) tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus did not protest. Instead, He answered under oath. But perhaps the greatest problem with interpreting the words of Christ to mean that no Christian should ever take an oath of any kind under any circumstances is that such an interpretation is based on an assumption that is naïve. The reason why nations have civil laws requiring people to take oaths about important things today is the exact same reason why the children of Israel had their civil laws requiring them to take oaths about important matters. People are inclined to lie. Even Christians are weak in this area. Perhaps it can be proven statistically that Christians lie less than non-Christians, but they still have a tendency to lie. One has to be naïve or very full of pride to think that he is beyond lying just because he is a Christian.

Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic civil laws when He went to the cross and established the New Covenant. We are no longer obliged to obey those civil laws. But that does not mean that we are free to disobey the civil laws of the countries to which we are citizens. For the sake of law and order, we are obliged to obey.

So to sum up our Lord's teaching, Jesus affirmed the moral law, forbidding people to lie under any circumstance. And He set us free from the Mosaic civil laws, but not from the civil laws of the countries to which we belong. The

Bible teaches us to respect and obey the laws made by government leaders unless those laws demand we do something contrary to God's will.

So how do we apply this truth to our everyday lives? Or perhaps the better question is, should we apply this truth to our everyday lives? It is my observation that many Christians choose not to apply this truth to their everyday lives. As human beings, we all have a tendency to lie. As Christians we are often guilty of doing the very thing the Pharisees were guilty of doing. We categorize lying so that some lying is OK while other lying is very wrong. We even encourage people under certain circumstances to lie. In doing this, we are actually refusing to apply the teaching of our Lord to our lives in the way it is meant to be applied. Our Lord said that all lying comes from the evil one. There are no exceptions. We are the ones who make exceptions when we are faced with the difficult challenges that come our way.

Our tendency to make exceptions is especially seen during times of war. I'm sure you have heard the examples of people lying to save the lives of other people during times of war. We don't think it wrong to lie in order to fool the bad guy with whom we are waging war. If lying can result in the destruction of the enemy and reduce the number of casualties among the good guys, then we don't even think twice about doing it. Nor do we think it is wrong to lie when we are protecting people from truth that we feel will cause them embarrassment or emotional suffering. We will tell people that they are OK even when they have cancer, because we don't want them to suffer. And we will even lie for the sake of advancing the kingdom of God.

I faced this issue as a missionary serving in Taiwan. I soon found how difficult it was to survive in Taiwan without lying. Even in the church it was hard to survive. Year after year the church to which we belonged lied about the amount of housing allowance we were receiving. Year after year we informed the church that what they were doing was not honest. But the pressure was great. The church had decided to make the social security and Medicare payments for their employees, and by reporting falsely what they were actually giving, they could save thousands of dollars. Isn't saving the church money a good thing to do? Doesn't it justify lying? At this point, most of you are probably thinking to yourselves, "The church leadership was wrong to do that?" But do we really have the right to make that judgment?

Listen again to the words of our Lord. "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil

one.” He did not say, “anything beyond this is wrong.” He said, “anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

We are so anxious to know what kinds of behavior are right and what kinds of behavior are wrong. That is why we want to put lying into different categories. We want to know what kind of lying is OK and what kind of lying is wrong. But when we do this, we are making a grave mistake. God does not judge right and wrong by what people do on the outside. He looks at the motive of the heart. We cannot judge a certain person as right or wrong for lying when that person is trying to save a life or has been told to lie by his commanding officer or has been told to keep his mouth shut by his supervisor in the church. That judgement belongs to God, and God alone.

But there is something we can know for sure. In every situation, lying always gives the evil one an upper hand in the battle for the souls of men. Anything other than complete truth that proceeds from our mouths causes the evil one to smile. It works to his advantage. Jesus said that all lying comes from the evil one, and when Jesus said all, He meant all.

When I was taking my physical to join the Marines, my recruiting officer told me to lie when taking my eye exam. It was easy to do. I stood in a line waiting for my turn to read the letters on a chart posted on the wall. By the time my turn came around, I had the chart memorized. So when I took off my glasses, I fooled the person giving me the exam into thinking my eyesight was much better than it actually was. To me, it seemed OK to do at the time, because I was simply following orders. But Satan was in it, and I lost an opportunity to witness.

Shortly after millions of people were tortured and killed in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, I talked to some of the survivors. They told me that the only way they were able to keep from being killed was by lying. They were Christians who chose to lie in order to save their own lives. Was that wrong? It is not our place to answer that question. Only God can answer that question, and the answer may be different from one individual to the next. But there is another question to be asked. When those people lied, did it give Satan the upper hand? I think we can answer that question. Those young people I talked to were unable to lift their heads up high. They knew that there were people in the same situation who chose not to lie. Few of those people escaped with their lives, but they left behind a testimony that impacted even some of the people who killed them, causing some of those people to give their lives to Christ.

The testimonies of thousands of martyrs who chose to die rather than lie is the very thing that moves people to believe. Those who choose to lie rather than to die may save their lives and the lives of others, but the testimony they leave behind is weak. The people we trick might admire us for our cleverness, but they will not be attracted to our God. Why should they be attracted to a god who encourages people to lie in order to achieve their goals, even if the goals are noble? Most people think that their goals are noble. Even the bad guys think that their goals are very important and that it is perfectly OK to lie in order to achieve them. But it is the evil one who promotes this kind of thinking. God never encourages His children to lie in order to reach their noble goals.

If we really decide to apply the words of our Lord to our lives, we will find this decision extremely difficult to carry through. For many people, telling the truth means losing a job, because many companies depend on lying in order to make money. It is actually easier to abide by man-made rules than it is to live by the principles given to us by Jesus Christ. People tend to think that the demands of the Old Testament are far stricter than the demands we find in the New Testament. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Without God’s grace, there is no way we can let our ‘yes’ mean nothing more than ‘yes’ and our ‘no’ mean nothing more than ‘no’ in every situation all of the time. Without His salvation we will, just like the Pharisees, categorize some kinds of lying as being OK while we condemn other kinds of lying. We will forget that all lying will be used by Satan to hide God’s image from those who need to see God’s image. And often the ones who need to see God’s image the most are the bad guys.