

I. Advanced Organizer.

A. The first year or so of our marriage, I used to do this thing that drove Jason crazy.

1. Friday night. What should we do for dinner?
 - a) I had an opinion. I wanted pizza or a juicy hamburger and fries. But I didn't necessarily want him to know that.
 - b) Maybe he wasn't feeling it for those things. Maybe he wouldn't like my suggestions. Maybe he would think splurging on hamburger and fries wasn't something I should be doing.
 - c) So I'd play it coy. "I dunno. I'm open. What do you want to do?"
 - d) He'd suggest something and I'd make a face. He'd pick a restaurant and I'd sigh. It was not what I wanted and that was obvious. I had put Jason in the impossible position of not telling him what I wanted, acting like I didn't have an opinion, and then being annoyed with him for not reading my mind.

B. We almost had a sweets-free Valentine's Day this week, which in the eyes of my kids, at least, would have been quite lamentable.

1. **Context: disappearing candy.** Someone has clearly been sneaking sweets with an increasing frequency. They've just been disappearing too quickly. But no one would admit it.
2. **Jason and I felt like our hands were tied. Someone was lying to us.** Someone was taking desserts but not admitting it so we couldn't hold them accountable. We hadn't caught anyone in the act, but the evidence of the sneaking was piling up. So we declared that treats would not be in the house until someone told us the truth and confessed. Until we could restore some accountability.
3. The night before Valentine's I took the kids to Target to pick out some cards for one another. And in our house, they generally get some candy with Valentine's cards. And the sight of all the Valentine's candy and the fear that none might appear the next day apparently was enough to crack. One of my children pulled me over in the aisle of Target and confessed.

C. About a year ago, Jason and I found ourselves in the position of needing to replace our car. We are a one-car family and our car had been totaled in an accident. The insurance company was giving us a handful of days before we had to return our rental car, so time was of the essence to buy something else. We didn't want to finance anything, but were hoping to basically use cash purchase a used vehicle on Craigslist for around the amount of money they were giving us for the totaled vehicle.

1. As we were looking, it seemed that a lot of the cars we were interested in were in the South Bay. So Jason took off early from work, we packed the kids in the rental car, and we withdrew a lot of cash from the bank, heading towards San Jose in the hopes of possibly buying a car on a Thursday afternoon.
2. The trip had issues from the start. More than one of the people we'd made arrangements to meet canceled while we were driving south, the cars we were interested in being sold right from under us, in some cases. The kids were squirmy and loud. The first car we did manage to see was a dud. And then we made contact with a car-seller who had just posted what looked like an amazing deal and exactly what we were looking for. He was available to show us the vehicle. He suggested the parking lot of a nearby Target. We drove there, we did a test drive of the vehicle. He was asking a little more than we were hoping to spend, but for a car of such low mileage, it was a great deal. And with that low mileage, we worried little about the driving history. The kids loved the car because it had a DVD player, a feature we had told them was unlikely, so with their pleas in our ears, and

our own fatigue and desire just to be done, we decided to jump. Jason signed the title. We handed over the cash. We took the keys and drove our new van home.

3. When I got home we did the due diligence we should have done before signing on the dotted line. We looked up the carfax of the car to see the history. But what came up was not what we were expecting. We had bought a vehicle that we thought was under 60,000 miles. The Carfax told us it was actually over 130,000. We had been lied to.
4. Later, we'd speak to folks from the San Jose detective's department and find out that our car was part of a whole crime ring that was being investigated in the South Bay - a network of folks who were buying cars, turning them over to others who altered the digital milage with a special computer hacking tool, along with doctoring the titles to match the falsified milage on the cars, and then turning the cars over to a third group of people who sold them. The cars were never registered in any of these peoples' names, so we'd been given a false name by the guy who had sold us our van. He had forged the signature that was on the title, passing it off as his own name.

D. **I have just told you three stories, all of which feature some sort of deceit;** some variation of untruthfulness. All of these stories are ultimately about lying. The motivations for the lies and the consequences of them vary, the stakes of the stories are different, but all of them are examples of ways that people are untruthful.

1. There's been a lot of research by psychologists on lying in recent years, that have yielded what may be some surprising insights:
 - a) Humans are lied to as many as 200 times a day.
 - b) Around 3/4 of those lies go undetected.
 - c) Children demonstrate the capacity to deceive as early as six months. Babies will pretend laugh or cry for attention. That's a form of deceit.

E. All of this is relevant to us this morning because **this is our second teaching in a series on personal character: Character Matters.** Each of the next three sermons throughout Lent we're going to consider an aspect of character that Jesus actually seemed to care about and think about **how in our present context, Jesus' advice to us might bring insight, clarity and life to us and those we interact with.**

1. We're living in a moment where misinformation is all around us, where it feels increasingly difficult to nail down what's true, what's false, what's real, what's not. Just this Friday, 13 Russian Nationals were indicted for doing what? Spreading lies on the internet. Maybe we feel like just throwing up our hands and saying, "what can we do?" Maybe we just give up on trying to know the truth altogether.
2. Believe it or not, **the temptation to misrepresent information has been with us a long time, and Jesus had some things to say about it.**

II. Our text for this. From the famous Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:33-37

A. **33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to an older generation, 'Do not break an oath, but fulfill your vows to the Lord.' 34 But I say to you, do not take oaths at all—not by heaven, because it is the throne of God, 35 not by earth, because it is his footstool, and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. 36 Do not take an oath by your head, because you are not able to make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no.' More than this is from the evil one.**

B. At first glance, this text might be puzzling. The context is so different than ours. **What does Jesus direction not to take oaths (or not to swear) have to do with the way we interact with one another?** I didn't swear by anything when I told Jason I didn't care where we went for dinner...

1. Some people have interpreted this text very literally through the centuries, **believing it only applies to something like testifying in a court of law**. Folks may say that they cannot testify under oath, because their religion forbids swearing. But this kind of narrow reading is missing the thrust of what Jesus is calling his followers to.
- C. To better understand this text, **it's important for us to consider how people related to each other in the ancient world, and the way that oaths and vows functioned in those relations**.
1. First, it's helpful to remember that the **ancient world was one by and large without a paper trail, or a digital trail**. There was no string of emails to look to to track an agreement or an exchange. Literacy was rare, as was the capacity to write: having the tools and the means. The printing press and the reformation - the technological revolution that would change the fundamental way that the majority of humans interacted with the written word - was still about 1500 years in the future. So putting something in writing was not a common practice. **Verbal agreements were the foundation of human interactions**.
 2. Think about the implications of this on how commerce had to be done without a paper trail. It was a bartering society. **Every economic exchange required some sort of relational negotiation based on the cultivation of trust**. Your word had to be your bond. Yet human beings struggled with trustworthiness then as much as they do now. Just the ways those struggles manifested were different. They didn't share Russian memes, or "alternative facts" on Social Media. They used oaths and vows in creative ways.
 3. What did this look like?
 - a) **Oaths and vows were a way of testifying to the voracity of something you said**. One swore an oath as a way of testifying to the truthfulness of what one was saying. A vow was a kind of oath, a sub category, in which something was promised. One might make a vow to pledge a possession to another: money perhaps, or livestock, or your daughter in marriage. With oaths and vows, the thing you swore upon was understood to be a witness to your claim. The implication would be that if you said something untruthful whatever you had sworn to now had power over you and could punish you if you didn't actually fulfill your vow, or if you weren't truthful under oath.
 - b) So Greeks would often swear an oath to Zeus or to Aphrodite when they were making an economic exchange or wanting to testify that the thing they were saying was truthful. To do so was a way of saying that the deity they called upon could attest to their truthfulness and would punish them if they spoke falsely.
 - c) As Jesus points out, the Jews had their own challenges with oaths. The text he's referring them to is from Leviticus. Here's the verse he seems to be making reference to: Leviticus 19:12.
 - (1) ***You must not swear falsely in my name, so that you do not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.***
 - (2) So the followers of God have taken this idea, this proscription against **swearing falsely** against Yahweh, and they've focused on the idea that **God doesn't want you to call on him to backup what you say**. You're taking your life in your hands when you do that. So it would be better to swear to something else; something that seems like it has similar authority as swearing to Yahweh, without actually calling on the Divine. Instead, they'd come up with elaborate, creative alternatives. Jesus points out a few of them here. They swear by heaven instead of the one who lives there. They swear by the earth instead of the one who made it. They swear by the

city of Jerusalem, instead of the deity this city is meant to worship. In Matthew 23, Jesus gives another account of how ridiculous some of the religious in Jesus' day were getting. They had worked out a whole system of supposed loopholes every time they took an oath, as he points out.

(a) ***Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple is bound by nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple is bound by the oath.' 17 Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 And, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift on it he is bound by the oath.' 19 You are blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and the one who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and the one who sits on it.*** Matthew 23:16-22

4. What's the problem with all the oath taking? Is it actually the swearing part? God really doesn't want to be called upon as a witness to your truthfulness? **Or is the problem actually your desire to swear falsely?**

- a) This is where the Pharisees Jesus is critiquing are profoundly missing the point. Their system of oaths, vows, legal loopholes have created a system where they can ultimately be fast and loose with the truth. **The only reason to invoke anyone other than Yahweh in your vows is if your vows are actually false.** By calling upon something less than God, they were ultimately creating a way of trying to bolster the authority of their claims without being held accountable to them. It was like a profound system of crossing your fingers behind your back.
- b) **I think the text Jesus is referencing in Leviticus was never meant to get people to come up with technical ways they could swear without profaning the name of God.** It was actually **trying to encourage people not to lie.** Not to be deceitful. And that was important in the law, because for God, dishonesty was connected to harming and oppressing others. Here's the broader context for that verse in Leviticus:
- c) **9 "When you gather in the harvest of your land, you must not completely harvest the corner of your field, and you must not gather up the gleanings of your harvest. 10 You must not pick your vineyard bare, and you must not gather up the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.**

11 "You must not steal, you must not tell lies, and you must not deal falsely with your fellow citizen. 12 You must not swear falsely in my name, so that you do not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. 13 You must not oppress your neighbor or commit robbery against him. You must not withhold the wages of the hired laborer overnight until morning." (Lev. 19:9-14)

- d) This is a text not about hurting God's feelings by taking God's name in vain. **It's a passage about hurting one another. God doesn't want us to be deceitful because it hurts others.** He doesn't want us to steal from each other. In their day, observant Jews were expected to leave the corners of the fields, and the leftover parts of the harvest - the gleanings - for the poor and the foreigners. If one didn't do that, they were stealing from others, the way God saw it. This is the context God was calling on folks

not to make these false vows; God didn't want God's people to be swindling one another.

- e) But the swindling had continued. People have just found ways to not directly involve the Divine in it, thinking that somehow they were now less accountable. And so Jesus says, cut it out! Stop all this swearing and oath taking. You're using it as a way to justify your BS. You shouldn't need a way to justify it. You shouldn't need a vow at all. Just cut the BS! Let your yes be yes, let your no be no.
- f) The literal greek is say "yes, yes" or "no, no". Double affirmative or negative were powerful and emphatic. Jesus is asking people to give answers that are clear. Straightforwardly, enthusiastically, abundantly clearly yes or no.
(1) Yes, I want a hamburger. Yes, I took the candy. No, the car is not really 60,000 miles.
- g) It's not that Jesus is saying we can never be under oath. Some have interpreted him that way; but Jesus himself testified under oath in his trial, as did the followers of Jesus. It's more that Jesus is saying don't call upon God or anyone else to make yourself look more truthful than you are. Don't get God involved in your BSing. Just tell the truth.

III. (What this means for us)

- A. A number of years ago I was introduced to the Enneagram, I have found it to be a tool that's very helpful for self understanding and growth.
 - 1. An ancient personality indicator, classifies all people into one of 9 general personality types. And while each of us is unique, to be sure, the typology is surprisingly insightful in naming some of our strengths, our proclivities, and our weaknesses, depending on which of the nine types we are.
 - a) Richard Rohr is a Franciscan father and spiritual leader who has done a lot of work with the Enneagram and written a book on it, which introduced a lot of contemporary Jesus-centered people of faith to its usefulness. And one of the things Rohr does is reflect on each type's core sin, that part of our character that is most challenged to conform to the character of God. If we think of sin as "missing the mark", here's where we're most likely to get off track.
 - b) **I'm a 3.** "The Performer" or "Achiever". Performers are really good at executing things. They know how to perform. They tend to lead well. They tend to be strong in front of a crowd. They're often quite accomplished. But there's a dark side to that. Richard Rohr would say **my core sin is deceit**. I struggle with being fully authentic. I want people to praise me, to admire me, to think I'm doing well. But with that is a temptation not to be fully real. To say whatever will garner the most admiration, respect, sympathy from whoever my audience is.
 - c) This is often a subtle practice. **It may not be outright, bold face lies. But there are other ways to be deceitful.** I might omit some key details in the telling of a story that color it to look more sympathetic. I might exaggerate. I might shade things differently depending on who I'm talking to. And while that can be a very effective communication strategy, it can also be a subtle way of escaping the truth.
 - d) **3s might be a master of this game, but they're not the only ones who do it.** Pamela Meyer is a researcher, author, and trainer in the area of deception and lie spotting. In a TedTalk she gave on the issues she talks about human's propensity to lie in this way: "Lying is an attempt to bridge that gap; to connect our wishes and our fantasies about who we wish we were, how we wish we could be, with what we're really like."

- (1) Lying is a way we preserve an image of ourselves and present it to the world. As people who are particularly invested in what others think, thees may do this the most, but they're not the only ones.
 - (a) When I was a newlywed, it was this insecurity that caused me to be untruthful with Jason. I felt embarrassed about my desire to eat pizza or a hamburger and fries, or I wanted to look more openminded then I really was, like I was totally open to possibilities, even if in reality I had opinions. But this was ultimately not helpful for our relationship. It was stealing from Jason the opportunity to know the real me. As long as I was wearing some sort of mask, however subtle, the real Leah wasn't visible.
- (2) Joseph Sharand is a Psychologist who says that most lies fall into two categories - what he calls "white lies", generally told to maintain social status - and strategic lies, told to deceive another person or group for personal gain.
- (3) The problem is, one often leads to another. The more we tell even small falsehoods, the part of our brain that feels uncomfortable speaking untruths begins to change. We fear the consequences less. We get better at making up stories. We can move from lying as a way to protect our own image to lying to hurt others.

2. And the shading of the truth doesn't just happen in relationships. **It happens on a widespread scale.** The media is filled with people who are payed lots of money to "spin"; to paint a narrative that is not fully accurate, even if it sounds accurate. There may not be any direct lies to point to, but there is implication. The spin colors people's perceptions of events. It tells folks how to interpret things. It sets up a framework for them to process information. And once that framework is in place, it's hard to dislodge. And it shapes what is further interpreted as truth and not truth.
3. Spin, shading truth, white lies, all of these are ways we have our own version of oaths and vows that keep us from being fully honest, while preserving our sense of ourselves as having integrity. And all of them eat away at our capacity to be forthright and to expect that of others.

IV. So in our moment in time, what might Jesus's words to his followers about oaths and vows mean for us?

A. Pay more attention to Spin.

1. Spin we put out there.
 - a) What would it mean to take a day and consider with every remark you make, "Why did I say something this way? What was I hoping for?" Look for the places we may be subtly trying to color other's perceptions of us through spin. What's the agenda? How can it move to yes, yes or no, no.
2. Spin we consume.
 - a) What's the agenda of others? What's the agenda of our media? Consider limiting our exposure to media with a lot of spin. Or trying to balance it with alternative points of view or alternative "spin"s.

B. Hold each other accountable.

1. Pamela Meyer, "Lying is a cooperative act." There's the person who lies, and the person who believes it, who participates in it, who receives it. What if we worked not only to be more transparent, to empower one another to keep each other honest. To commit to calling BS on one another when needed.
2. Pushing back when folks share disinformation on social media - even when this misinformation sides with your pov. Example about misinformation on the right and the left in the wake of horrific shooting. On the right: photos shared of supposed shooter

identifying him as DACA, or undocumented, or as Antifa. On the right, a misleading statement about this being the 18th school shooting so far in 2018. We need to be willing to vet the stuff we see and share, and call it out when we see it and create cultures where we agree to cooperate toward culture of truthfulness and honesty. not cultures of misinformation.

C. Allow our connection with God to inform our identity more than the perception of others.

1. When we are able to more fully experience ourselves as beloved children of the divine, we have less we feel like we need to prove.
 - a) The Bible uses the language of evil personified with words like “Satan” or “The Devil”. Those words literally meant one who accuses, who comes against, an enemy who conspires to take us down. And Jesus talks about this being rooted in deceit. “he is a liar and the father of lies”
 - b) But Jesus comes empowered by the Advocate, the *parakaleo* in Greek, the Holy Spirit. The one who has authority to speak truth to lies. To say no, no emphatically to deceit. To call out the whispers in our heads and our hearts that testify untruth: that we’re unlovable, that we’re unworthy of care, that we’re too messed up to be accepted by others or by God.
 - c) A core reason we deceive others is because we’re afraid of being not enough, being rejected for who we are. We may even deceive others because we are also deceiving ourselves. My hope for all of us this Lent, is that we could grow in greater self-awareness, greater self-acceptance, and greater knowledge of a God who holds us in love and acceptance. A God who made us, delights in us, and is committed to silencing the lies that keep us from seeing ourselves clearly or allowing others to see us.
2. Consider some new practices throughout this season of Lent that you could commit to.
 - a) Daily prayer practice, meditation, Bible reading, contemplative prayer. What will you help best connect with the God who loves you as you are and wants to advocate on your behalf in your day to day living?
 - b) Perhaps a fast.
3. End in Prayer.