

Speaking the Truth in Love

Readings: Deuteronomy 19:15-21; Ephesians 4:17-5:2; John 8:38-45

"Don't lie to me" is perhaps something that we all heard at some point in our lives, for many of us from our mothers. From an early age we are taught that lying is bad. This is a scriptural truth that our culture endorses.

Yet we live in a culture where we are used to being lied to. Our media, to use the words of Mark Twain, regards the truth as its most valuable possession and therefore is most economical in its use. Politicians have perjured themselves so often that we know they are lying because their lips are moving.

The ads with which we are daily bombarded so over use "unbelievable", "fantastic", "brilliant", "life changing" to describe another new shampoo or toaster, that almost all our adjectives have lost their force. In such an environment we become cynical about what we are told, we get used to being lied to, we come to expect it. In the cynical words of Pilate from 2000 years ago: "What is truth?"

It is bad enough that we are used to be lied to but we are also used to lying. Calvin could say 400 years ago: "And yet it is wonderful with what thoughtless unconcern we sin in this respect time and again. Those who do not markedly suffer from this disease are rare indeed." (Institutes II.8.48). The amount of material in the Bible about lying, summed up in the 9th Commandment, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour, suggests that even thousands of years ago things were no better. And it starts so young. My 4 year old son, when caught red-handed drawing on the wall after a moment's reflection said it was his twin brother!

How then are we to think about being truthful when it seems that the cards are stacked against us? Perhaps a better question than "what is truth" is "why the truth?"



GOD'S TRUTH

I believe that our starting point is to think about God. The Bible tells us that he is the God of truth (Ps 31:5; Isaiah 65:16), he cannot lie (Titus 1:2). There is such a thing as truth and it is found in God as creator, the true source of reality. This means that all truth is God's truth, we should never be afraid of the truth. Here is the start of any philosophy of the truth.

But when the Bible talks of God being true it means much more than this absolute, philosophical sense. Rather he is true in his relationships, as we would describe someone as a true friend. Being the God of truth is closely tied to his faithfulness, he can be trusted. (Romans 3:3,4).

Living a Lie

God's desire was to be in a true and proper relationship with his creatures but his people rejected him. Paul, in Romans, calls this suppressing the truth, even exchanging it for a lie for which they would one day be judged. (Romans 1:18, 25) Jesus describes this rejection of God as following Satan, the father of lies (John 8:46). Yet God promised to do something to restore his relationship with his rebellious creatures, to bring them back to the truth.

Jesus - The Truth

God was true to this promise by sending Jesus. Jesus came to tell people the truth, one of his characteristic phrases was "I tell you the truth". But more than that he said that he was the truth. In who he was, what he did, what he said, the way he related to people he showed the truth of who God was, he made the true God known. (John 1:17-18; 14:6)

More over in his death Jesus showed God's true love for his people by taking the punishment for their sins, his resurrection was the ultimate vindication by God that what he was saying about God was the truth. God was calling people back from living a lie, living a life without him, to repent, to recognise who Jesus was and what he had done for them and enter a restored relationship with their true creator Father God.

The Word of Truth

This was the message which the early Christians took to the world. It was not a new religious theory, a new self actualisation technique that was worth a try, but it was "The Truth." Paul could say to the believers in Ephesus "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." (Eph 1:13 see also Col 1:5, Rom 15:8) The Christian truth is not an additional truth to add to our lives it is a truth to base our lives on. This is the truth which Paul says in Ephesians we are to speak in love, to build us up into Christ, who is the truth.

Living the Truth

Given this, that the gospel is message of turning from living a lie to live in the light of the truth, from the father of lies to the our heavenly Father, the God of all truth, it is no surprise that Christians are called to live a life that is characterised by truth expressed in relationships.

Later on, in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that having been taught in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus that the believers were to be imitators of God. What this meant was to live a life of love which included putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully in love to their neighbours. (Eph 4:21, 24; 5:1). Primarily speaking Christian truths to each other, but more widely in all things we are to speak the truth in love.

This then is the basis for being truthful. Being truthful is central to who God is and the message of the gospel. God has been truthful with us, so we should be with others. In this way as in so many others we are to imitate God, in all areas we are to speak the truth in love.

LYING AND OTHERS

This desire for truthfulness in God's people is expressed in many places in the Old Testament. Lying was forbidden outright. Leviticus 19:11 says "do not lie, do not deceive one another." This was particularly to be so in the courts, when justice was being sought it was vital that there was truth, for there cannot be justice without truth. The commandment that we are looking at specifically relates to being a true witness in court. As a witness a person was to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. To refuse to give evidence is condemned as severely as giving false witness (Lev 5:1). And a person convicted of false witness must pay the penalty the man on trial would have suffered if the charge had been true. (Deut 19:16-21). The Jewish legal

system did all that it could to make a witness hesitate before giving false testimony. This of course adds great irony to the story of Jesus trial where the Jewish leaders deliberately bring forward false witnesses. Where there is lying there cannot be justice.

But also in general life lying was forbidden. One of the most graphic ways to contemplate the gravity of lying is to list the bedfellows of lying in the prophets. It is linked with violence (Hosea 12:1), plunder (Nahum 3:1), misgovernment (Proverbs 29:12), adultery (Jeremiah 23:14), and murder (John 8:44). These establish a strong link between lying and causing harm to others.

Given all this there is a strong push for us to value the truth and telling the truth very highly. How highly do you value it? Psalm 51:6 teaches that God desires truth in our inner parts, do you desire the same? So many of us have got so used to being lied to, to excusing lying that we need to re establish the priority of telling the truth.

Harmless Lies

You may be thinking well what about those harmless little lies that we all tell. They may be polite lies, "Well of course I'd love to come to the party but I have another engagement" or the preachers' favourite "Lovely sermon". Or euphemisms (fling rather than adultery), exaggerations (I beat 7 defenders before smashing the ball into the top corner of the net) or glosses that we all use. What harm do they do?

If we are doing them all the time they erode further our sense of truthfulness. We may become so prone to exaggeration that we can't tell the truth without lying. We can get so used to telling not quite the truth that we suspect that no one is really being truthful with us. This is the punishment of the on-going liar.

Furthermore it must damage relationships, as true relationships need to be based on the truth. And others are hurt as well as they may not know the truth. The person holding the party may not know who their true friends are, the preacher may never now how tedious and irrelevant he may actually be, or in what way he can improve. Little lies can end up causing big damage.

This does not mean that we have to tell all the truth all the time to all the people. The Jim Carrey film "Liar Liar" mined a rich vein of comedy when his character has to tell the truth all the time. Such a person may in all possibility be mentally challenged (note the euphemism) and certainly an embarrassment. We do not have a responsibility to tell a stranger how hideous his dress sense might be but we do have a responsibility to speak truthfully and lovingly to our friends.

Slander & Gossip

In my examples above I have been considering lying to someone, it is worth also considering lying about someone, slander which is closely tied to gossip. By starting, or even passing on a juicy rumour we can do much damage to our neighbour and take from them much more than we know.

Shakespeare wrote in Othello

*Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls,
Who steals my purse, steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him, And makes me poor indeed.*

Lying about someone may be far more damaging than lying to them and the Bible takes a very dim view of it. We need to watch not just what we say to others but what we say about others. There are few things more damaging to Christian fellowship than gossip and slander. We should be guided by the old adage of is it true, is it fair, is it necessary.

LYING TO YOURSELF

There is much more that could be said on this topic. Is it ever right to lie? Augustine and John Wesley, to name two, said not. It is from this tradition that some Christians have shunned acting and games that require bluffing. Few of us would go to such extremes and most of us can think of situations where the ethical balance seems to favour lying, to save a life for instance. But thinking about the limits should not distract from the heart of the matter, to reflect the truthfulness of God. We could talk about hypocrisy, the way we can lie through what we do, rather than what we say and so. But perhaps the most helpful question to ponder is why we lie.

If we are honest I suspect that generally we lie to protect ourselves, to make ourselves look better than we are, either by lifting ourselves up or by bringing others down. We would prefer people to believe a lie about us than to know the truth. Of course maintaining a lie can be very exhausting.

We need to remember the truth that we have in Jesus Christ, it will set us free. We are God's creation, made in his image which brings us great dignity. We are fallible creatures who want to live a lie, away from God, we are sinners. Yet God sent Jesus to show us his great love. The truth which God speaks in love, is love for us. Understanding this truth will set us free from many lies but free us from the need to tell lies.

When we realise that we are loved by God no matter what we may be like, or what has happened to us we are set free from living the lies we tell ourselves or are told about us: that we are useless, a fool, a victim, a drunk, a failure or perhaps worse we are fine just as we are, which is perhaps the hardest lie to maintain. The truth of the gospel encourages us to take a good long look at ourselves. "To be honest with ourselves is the way to self humiliation, but self-humiliation is the way to grace." (William Barclay). Such knowledge of truth will set us free. Are you afraid to be yourself, to let others know you as you are? God knows you as you are and he loves you as his beloved child.

When we are honest with ourselves we are more likely to be honest with our friends and neighbours. Often our relationships with others are shallow because we don't let people get to know the real us, who we really are. Telling the truth may involve some embarrassment at first but it will be worth it in the improved and more satisfied relationships with real people rather than projected images or masks.

I knew a man who had over a number of years in a church put a forward a front in church, projected an image of himself, to hide the fact that he really was a recovering alcoholic. In the end he stood before the whole church and told them the truth about who he was. This was intensely embarrassing but once it was done true relationships could start.

Our God is a God of truth and he calls us to imitate him as we speak the truth in love to others, but if we are willing to speak the truth about ourselves we may also find that we are loved ourselves. That is no lie