

**Going Deeper: Simply 'Yes' or 'No'**  
**LaGrave Christian Reformed Church**  
**January 24-AM Worship Service**  
**Reverend Peter Jonker**  
**Matthew 5:33-37**

We continue our growing deeper series, meditating on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The last two weeks Jesus has pushed us deeper in two important areas of life-the management of our anger, and in the use of our sex drive. Today Jesus will push us deeper in another very important and VERY timely area-the knowing and speaking of the truth. This time Jesus doesn't quote one of the ten commandments, but he's clearly thinking about the ninth commandment and all the laws associated with it. That commandment is "You shall not bear false witness." Let's let Jesus push us deeper on the issue of truth.

We need to talk about truth. We need to talk about finding it, speaking it, and loving it. We need to talk about it because we seem to have lost track of it. And it's killing us. It's destroying our trust in one another. And it's got to the point where it's not just annoying, it's scary. It's dangerous. You see the crisis most clearly in discussions about the integrity of the election and the seriousness of the pandemic. Most of us have been in conversations over the last year about these things, in which our conversation partner utterly disagreed with us. We saw the election one way; they saw it totally different. We see the pandemic one way and think that this should be our policy towards it. They see the pandemic in a completely different way and think we should have a completely different policy. As we engage them in conversation and debate, we quickly realize that not only do we disagree; we have no place to build a common understanding. We hold completely different versions of the truth. We are both operating with an entirely different set of facts. Entirely different. We look for some shared facts that we can both agree on that might be the basis of our coming together, and we can't find any.

It didn't used to be that way. People who disagree always had different facts that they use to justify their position. We've always disagreed about some particulars, but there have always been a large set of facts and truths that we held in common and we could use these common beliefs as a basis for coming together. We used those common truths as a way to build trust and as a way to build institutions and a common life. But now we find ourselves talking to other people and asking ourselves, do we share ANY common beliefs?

It's partly because of the way information has changed in our society. We used to have a few major information streams and we all drank from those streams. There were three major television networks, and that's where we went to get our television news. There were a few major newspapers and that's where we went for our written news. We knew they had different editorial slants-the Wall Street Journal more conservative, the New York Times more liberal, but that's where we went. Add to that our one local paper and our few local TV stations, and that was our information stream. We were drinking from the same streams. We had a common set of facts. Today there are thousands upon thousands of information streams. Today there are thousands upon thousands of editorial perspectives. The competition between these streams for eyes and for clicks has led to sensationalism. In the information marketplace, you're not rewarded for truth, you're rewarded for clicks and views. And that means you are rewarded for sensation. Clear, disciplined objective reporting of the truth isn't sensational. Breaking news is sensational. Deep dives into the nuances of an issues isn't sensational. Angry opinion offered by a frothing pundit is sensational. Extreme voices get our attention and get our clicks. And once we

click on a few of these sensational stories, the internet algorithms kick in. They see what we like and feed us more of the same. Pretty soon we are pushed into a narrow stream of information. Pretty soon we are in our own silo of facts. Pretty soon we find ourselves in a world where we are completely divided from each other and aren't sure how to get back to common ground.

Let me be clear, I'm not blaming the media. I'm not blaming the internet. We are the problem. We are the ones who exchanged the hard discipline of truth for the cotton candy of sensationalism. We are the ones who exchanged the treasure of truth for the drug of power. The truth is... We've played fast and loose with the truth, or we've stood by while others have played fast and loose with the truth, and now we're in trouble.

The Bible does not sanction such a thing. In the Bible, truth is not something you can just take for granted. In the Bible, truth is not something you play with; it's something you guard and seek and love. That's the spirit of Jesus' words here in the sermon on the mount. Jesus is calling his listeners to have a deeper concern for the truth. Jesus calls us to be people who discipline ourselves in truth, people who commit ourselves to the practices of truth, who commit to it the way you would commit to an exercise program. Jesus says, "Don't play truth games. When you talk to other people, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Don't swear by your head, don't swear by the temple, don't swear by Jerusalem. In fact, don't swear any oaths at all! Just tell the truth."

In Jesus' day, people used oaths to play games with the truth. They would swear by different objects and depending on the object, their oaths had different strength. So if you swore an oath in God's name, that was a serious business. You better keep that oath! But if you swore by heaven, "I swear by Heaven I'm telling you the truth!"-even though it sounded impressive, it gave you wiggle room. You could weasel out of the commitment. It's literally the same game 8 year olds play. "I said I'd do it, but I didn't pinky swear." "It was a dare but it wasn't a double dog dare!" Jesus spells out these truth games more clearly in Matthew 23. Jesus confronts the Pharisees because they were saying, "If you swear by the temple, it means nothing, it doesn't count. But if you swear by the gold of the temple, well then it's serious." Jesus says, "You blind fools! Which is greater the gold or the temple that makes it sacred! Stop messing with the truth!" "Besides," says Jesus in our passage, "It's all God's stuff. Whether you swear by the temple or by Jerusalem or by the earth, it's the same as making your oath before God because it's all God's stuff! So don't make oaths. Just tell the truth."

In saying don't swear oaths at all, Jesus really is going deeper. He's going beyond the law because the Old Testament law definitely allowed people to make oaths. Numbers 30:2 "when a person...takes an oath to obligate themselves by a pledge, they must not break their word." Deuteronomy 6:13 "Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name." So the law allowed oaths. But now Jesus, in a bold move that shows he is the Lord of the law, goes deeper and says, "You know what? Don't make oaths at all! You should not need to make an oath. People ask you to make oaths when they don't trust you. Be the sort of person who is so dedicated to the truth, who is so committed to the truth that when you speak, no one will ever think that you are lying." In a society where everyone else is spinning the truth, and playing the truth for personal advantage, Jesus says 'My followers should be people whose words are true. People whose words are honest. People whose words come from the center of their heart.'

I can hear some of your thinking, yes Peter I want to be that kind of person, but my problem is less that I'm deliberately playing games with the truth or deliberately lying. My problem is that I don't even know what the truth is anymore! When it comes to these issues that divide people, I don't know who to believe! Everyone is saying such different things! Who do I

believe?! I want to speak the truth, but how do I know the truth in the first place?! I might be passing on lies without meaning to! The Bible can help us here. In the Bible, God gives us many good suggestions for how to find the truth in a world full of deception. I will go through some of them.

Be self-suspicious. Don't overestimate your ability to discern the truth. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul says, 'For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.' People love to use that quote to point at other people. I follow the truth, but those people over there are following their itching ears. I hear the truth pure and clean; but those people over there have a confirmation bias. Let's admit that we all have itchy ears. 1 John 1 says, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." We all gravitate towards people who tell us what we want to hear. Be a little self-suspicious. Expect that you have a confirmation bias. Allow for the possibility that you might be wrong. Listen carefully and humbly to people who differ from you, especially if they are trustworthy.

That's the second piece of truth-finding wisdom. Listen to the trustworthy. Listen to those who have a history of telling the truth. Proverbs 12:22- "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy." As you look for the truth, seek out those sources-people and media-who have a track record of telling the truth. There are journalists and publications that have been around for a long time, who have strict rules about fact-checking and journalistic integrity. And their integrity has been proven over time. The things they report turn out to be true. Whatever you think of their editorial slants, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times practice rigorous journalism. Their reporting has proven itself over time. They have shown themselves to be largely trustworthy. What's the history of the website you are going to for your news? What are its journalistic standards? Do you know? Does it fact check? Does it have an ombudsman? When a story turns out to be wrong, when they make a mistake, do they publish a retraction? It's important to know the editorial slant of the media you watch, but it's also important to know whether they are practicing good habits of truth.

Here's another truth habit. Deuteronomy 17:6-7 says that a person should not be convicted on the testimony of a single witness. You need the testimony of two or three witnesses to convict. This great common sense way to guard courtroom decision works for other areas of truth telling as well. If a story has only one source, don't be too quick to believe it, especially if there is one unnamed source. Does the report have multiple sources? Who are those sources? Is a source just the report of another media outlet? The Bible protected the truth by having really high standards for witnesses. Not only did you need 2 or 3 of them, in the case of a capital crime, if their testimony brought conviction, the witnesses were the ones who had to execute the judgement. You couldn't just accuse, you had to be willing to execute the sentence. And what were the penalties for false witness? If a witness was false, the sentence for the person they were accusing would fall on the witness's head. Give false witness in a capital offense, guess what your punishment was? Think about that standard before you re-post something sensational you found online.

Self-suspicion, trustworthiness, multiple witnesses held to the highest standards of integrity. These are truth disciplines. Biblical truth disciplines that we can practice in our own times as a way to find and seek and love the truth. But let's admit that even with these disciplines, we will still disagree. Because of our human limitations, we will see things differently, and sometimes those differences will be sharp. Which brings us to the last discipline of truth. And this last discipline isn't a truth we find, it's a truth that finds us. Jesus says, "I am

the way, the truth and the life.” Jesus is not the kind of truth that we figure out-although we do try to know him and understand him as far as that’s possible-he’s more a truth we give ourselves to. We do not understand the way, but he does, so we follow him. We do not know all the answers, but he does. So we listen to him and attend to his Word. We do not even really know the truth of our own hearts, we are mysteries even to ourselves, but he knows us, so we give him our heart. We don’t know how to make truth reign in this world, but he does. So we give the future to him and we say ‘Maranatha.’

That last point is really important. It is our job to seek and speak and love the truth. Jesus makes that clear. But we are not the ones who bring the final reign of truth in the world. If we think it’s up to us to purge this world of lies and make the truth reign, that’s a recipe for inquisitions, re-education camps and genocides. As Christians, we know that the power of the truth lies in Jesus. In his death and resurrection, he defeated the devil, the father of lies. He will come again and on that day the lies will be exposed, the truth will be made plain, and all things will be made new. So we seek the truth, we witness to it and we try to embody it in the world, but we don’t enact it with violence. Instead we come to this place and we hear his truth, and we put our life in his strong hands, and we say, come Lord Jesus, our world belongs to you.

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