

James: The Practical Christian

Truth-Telling: Key to Authentic Relationships

James 5:12

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February 12, 2006

Truth-Telling: Key to Authentic Relationships

Scripture

In a *Reader's Digest* survey of 2,624 readers in January 2004 we read about the percentage of those who said they had:

1. Switched price tags to get a lower price: 12%
2. Cheated on their tax return: 17%
3. Misstated facts on a resume/job application: 18%
4. Lied to their spouse about their relationship with another person: 28%
5. Lied to their spouse about the cost of a recent purchase: 32%
6. Downloaded music from the Internet without paying for it: 37%
7. Been undercharged or received too much change from cashier and not told him or her: 50%
8. Called in sick to work when not ill: 63%
9. Taken office supplies from their office for personal use: 63%
10. Lied to friends or family members about their appearance to avoid hurting their feelings: 71%¹

Lying is a chronic problem in our society. One of the results of lying is broken relationships. In our text for today James calls for truth-telling, which is absolutely necessary for healthy relationships. Let's see what James says about truth-telling: key to authentic relationships in James 5:12:

¹² Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned. (James 5:12)

Introduction

A few years ago Isuzu ran a series of advertisements featuring “Joe Isuzu.” For the five years that Joe Isuzu was on the air he became the most famous liar in America.

¹ “How Honest Are You?” *Reader's Digest* (January 2004).

Some of you may remember Joe Isuzu. He was the reptilian TV ad man who looked straight into the camera and said, “Isuzus only cost \$9.00. They get 94 miles to the gallon, and if you buy one soon, you will get a free house.” And then superimposed on the screen came the white block letters saying, “He’s lying.”

Joe Isuzu continued, “Isuzus go 300 miles per hour. They seat the same number of people as the Astrodome, and they are roomy enough to carry the state of Texas.” Once again the words, “He’s lying,” appeared on the screen.

The advertising executive who put the advertising campaign together said, “Young people today are cynical. They have been lied to before. So they are amused by the simple shocking truth of the ‘liar commercials.’”

Oh, incidentally, when that advertising campaign came out Isuzu sales went up 21%. I guess we all knew that sex sold cars, but apparently lies do too.

Sometimes we lie to impress people. We drop names, and we refer to people we barely know as “close friends.” We lie about numbers and statistics just to impress people.

Sometimes, we lie to please people. We agree with those strong personality-type people in their presence, and then kick ourselves in private, saying, “I shouldn’t have agreed with him. I shouldn’t have bought into what he was saying. I just nodded my head and said ‘yes’ to please that person.”

Sometimes we lie to get revenge. Someone hurts us, and so we trump up a story or a rumor to get back at the one who wronged us. Or we pass on damaging information without checking its veracity, hoping to damage to the one who wronged us.

Many of us lie to make a profit. It goes on all the time.

Lots of us lie to escape punishment. “My speedometer must have malfunctioned, Officer.” “I didn’t see the sign.” “Oh sir, I would have finished this assignment, but you wouldn’t believe what happened.” And he probably won’t.

Sometimes, we lie just for convenience. Parents lie by writing sick notes for their children at school. Secretaries lie when they

answer phones and say, “He’s out,” when he’s really in. We call in sick to work some days, and then we have a miraculous healing, and go out and do some shopping. Sometimes we say, “Sure! I’ll try to be there!” when all the while we know we won’t be.

If you ask the question, “What is the most important quality you look for in a relationship?” nine times out of ten the answer will be *honesty*.

Conversely, if you ask people who have been hurt in a relationship, “What caused the deepest disappointment in your relationship?” the answer will usually be *dishonesty*.

It’s almost impossible to overstate the amount of damage that occurs when evidences of dishonesty are uncovered in a relationship. Most relationships can withstand the periodic bumps and bruises brought about by misunderstandings and miscommunications, but when there is evidence of deception, particularly calculated and continual deception, many times that relationship is over.

And if the wound isn’t actually fatal, the relationship will probably be in the Intensive Care Unit for a very long time. It takes months or usually years for credibility to be re-established in a relationship after deception has manifested itself.

Lesson

In James’ day, as in ours, although people revered the idea of truth in principle, in practice it was being blatantly disregarded. James knew the tragic results that could come as a result of someone neglecting to uphold truth as a way of life. And so in James 5:12 he made a special point to address this issue of being truthful.

He does so by telling us first of all *what not to do* by exposing the many convenient distortions of truth in his time. Then he tells us *what to do* by setting before us God’s standard for truth.

I. Avoid Compromising the Truth in Relationships (5:12a)

First, avoid compromising the truth in relationships.

James says in verse 12a, **“Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else.”**

Many of James’ readers had been abusing what the Old Testament taught about upholding truth and keeping oaths and vows.

By the way, there is a difference between an “oath” and a “vow.” An “oath” has to do with a person’s duty towards fellow persons, whereas a “vow” has to do with a person’s duty towards God.

Although the Old Testament required that oaths be limited to only very serious occasions, people were advocating that oaths be used for almost anything. The result was frivolous, meaningless oath-taking that completely violated basic honesty.

For instance, we find that the *Mishna* (which is the Jewish commentary on God’s law) contains large sections which specify the kinds of oaths and vows you ought to keep and those you need not keep. For example, one rabbi wrote that if you swear *by* Jerusalem, you are not bound by your oath or vow. But if you swear *toward* Jerusalem, then you are bound by your oath or vow.

It was this kind of deception Jesus addressed in the *Sermon on the Mount*. And it’s probably Jesus’ teaching on truth that James draws from here. James’ point is that instead of oaths and vows being a mark of one’s integrity, they had become a mark of deceit. Instead of prompting confidence, they were prompting skepticism. And so these people, with all their oaths and vows, were quickly becoming nothing more than a society of liars. Swearing evasively became justification for lying. Lying under oath became a fine art.

Although we don’t find too many religious oaths and vows in today’s vernacular, the fine art of lying continues. We lie today for all kinds of reasons!

Lying has a cousin named *exaggeration*. It’s so easy to stretch statistics and to embellish stories, to add a little extra to a personal experience, so the story is better.

And it is so easy to use exaggeration in the midst of conflict with others. The classic exaggeration is when couples are fighting.

“You *always* come home late, Dear.” *Always?*

Or, “You *never* express appreciation to me.” *Never?*

Or, “You *destroyed* me when you said that.” *Destroyed?*

Those kinds of exaggerations merely exacerbate the conflict. We need to be on our guard against exaggeration.

One of the most subtle and dangerous reasons we do not tell the truth to others is because we don’t want to disturb the peace. We don’t want to have to deal with the conflict that often results from truth-telling. Oh, we all agree in theory that honesty is the best policy, that it’s the key to authentic relationships, but in those awkward moments when we stand face-to-face with someone, knowing that person may not readily receive the truth, truth-telling doesn’t sound like such a great idea.

“Come on, Pastor, if I told my boss the truth, he would blow his stack.”

“If I told my husband how I really feel about his constant traveling, he would get defensive and withdraw even more.”

“If I told my parents how frustrated I am in school, they would be too disappointed to understand.”

“If I told my wife how frustrated I am with our romantic life, she would accuse me of having a one-track mind.”

“If I told my teacher the real reason I didn’t finish my paper on time, she would dock my grade.”

On and on we go explaining why we can’t afford to tell the truth.

In his book, *The Different Drum*, Scott Peck presents an interesting theory about relationships. He says God designed us to yearn for open, honest, authentic relationships—he calls them “Communal Relationships.” But because we choose *peace-faking* over *truth-telling* we end up in “Pseudocommunal Relationships” instead.

The result is that marriages, family relationships, and friendships are strictly surface level. No one ever says anything “unsafe.” They never discuss misunderstandings or reveal their hurt feelings or air their frustrations or ask those difficult questions. The under-

lying commitment is, “Don’t rock the boat. Don’t disturb the peace.”

But it’s a counterfeit peace! Misunderstandings arise, but they’re never resolved. Feelings beg to be shared, but they’re not. Offenses occur, but nobody talks about them. Doubts about integrity creep in, but they’re never dealt with.

In time such relationships are destined to deteriorate. The secret agendas of hurt and misunderstanding lead to detachment, distrust and finally deep bitterness. Feelings of love begin to die. It’s the story of too many marriages, too many family relationships and too many friendships.

In the midst of all these different types of dishonesty, James cries out, “Stop! Stop all of this!”

James knew that such dishonesty in relationships would not only result in major relational breakdown with others, but it was also a major violation of the very essence of who God is.

Truth originates in the very character of God. Truth is at the very center of who God is. If there is no God, there would be no truth. In the absolute sense, the concepts of God and truth are inseparable. Whenever God speaks, he speaks truth. Nothing less than full truth can ever proceed from his mouth. No shadow of error, no falsification, no deceit, no distortion, no exaggeration can ever proceed from God, because he is a God of absolute truth.

Now, once you come to terms with the fact that truth is bound up in the very essence of who God is, then you can begin to get a hint of how your dishonesty makes God bristle. Very few of us realize the impact of our dishonesty on God.

Suppose a world class pianist comes to the Ruth Eckerd Hall to perform a solo piano recital in front of a packed house. He comes out from backstage, takes a bow, flips out the tails of his tuxedo, stretches out his sleeves, and then begins playing the piano, only to find out during the first eight bars that the piano is badly out of tune. What would happen?

A world-class pianist, with a highly developed sense of pitch, could not continue that performance. He would be so traumatized,

so internally irritated, that there would be no way he could finish the performance. He would stop just for self-preservation.

Even if the audience tried to convince him that it didn't bother them that much, the pianist would bristle at the sound of every ill-tuned note. Playing that piano would cause an incapacitating level of agitation for the accomplished pianist. And in fact, if you think about it, the better his sense of pitch, the more annoying the ill-tuned sounds would be.

That's the flavor of what our lies do to the very heart of God. Your dishonesty might not keep you awake at night, but oh, what it does to God. Can you imagine the dissonance in the mind of an absolutely truth-filled God when he hears deceit, distortions, exaggerations, and out-right lies coming from the mouths of his children?

Being dishonest runs contrary to the whole character of God. Lying is not a minor infraction. It's a major violation, which is one reason why God made sure that the command not to bear false witness made it into the "top ten" commandments.

Never forget that the clamoring discord of deceit, dishonesty, and distortion causes all kinds of dissonance in the heart of God.

II. Commit to Speaking the Truth as a Way of Life (5:12b)

Second, commit to speaking the truth as a way of life.

James says in verse 12b, **"Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned."**

Here James draws again from Jesus' teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount*. The point he is making here is that as a child of God you need to have an inward truthfulness that doesn't depend on an oath or vow at all. As a follower of Christ, you are to be the type of person that when you say something, it can be counted on. When you promise something, you will keep that promise.

When James writes, **"or you will be condemned,"** he is saying, "If you are a liar, then your tongue is revealing your heart.

And God tells us that liars are numbered among the condemned of God and not among the acquitted.”

The Psalmist wrote that God desires “truth in your innermost being” (Psalm 51:6). God has never had any standard other than absolute truthfulness. Truth has no shades. A half-truth is a whole lie. A white lie is really black lie. Therefore God is obligated to judge and condemn all lying.

But the good news of the gospel tells us that even though we are all guilty and worthy of condemnation for our lying, we can be completely forgiven and accepted by God through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul writes, “There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). The Bible teaches that Jesus took the condemnation for all your sin, including the sin of lying. If you will turn from your sin and trust in him, God in heaven will declare you “Not guilty” forever in the heavenly court. He will do so not because of anything you have done, but because of what Christ has done for you.

When you trust in Christ, God promises to give you his Holy Spirit to empower you to live the kind of life he calls you to live. You see, you can’t control your lying on your own. But God can! The problem is not with your lips but with your heart. You need a new heart. And God gives new hearts to those who trust in his Son. Your responsibility then is to continually draw near to Jesus Christ in repentance and dependence on him to be the man or woman of truth he has called you to be. As you do that, God will change your heart. When your heart is changed, so will your ability to tell the truth as a way of life.

Conclusion

What I believe God is asking each of us to do this morning is to declare a war on lying. Allow me to leave you today with two very practical challenges that I hope will help you grow in your commitment to truth-telling as a way of life.

Step one: Take a regular moral inventory. I have learned that the first way I have to address my propensity to lie is to be ruthless on myself when it comes to truth-telling.

I periodically review conversations I have had and I ask myself, “Was there the shadow of deception in my conversations? Did I mislead somebody? Was I trying to be improperly diplomatic? Did I border on being deceptive?”

When I realize my sin, it hurts, and it makes me come to terms with who I am. It calls me back to Christ for forgiveness and strength, and in so doing it tends to root out this kind of deception in my life.

And so I challenge you to take a regular moral inventory of what comes out of your mouth. Ask God to change your heart and lips.

Now, how do you stop lying, and start telling the truth? If you know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, then the Holy Spirit of God is in your life, and he gives you the power to stop lying.

In Galatians 5:22 you find that part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is *faithfulness* and *self-control*.

In John 16:13 Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, and he will guide you into all truth.

So, the filling of the Holy Spirit is the key to truthfulness.

Truthfulness is so important. Do you know what is at stake in your truth-telling? Its not only the key to your relationships, its not only the key to staying sane with yourself, but in every way, truth-telling is the key to being rightly related to God, and that affects all of your eternity.

God is a holy God, his kingdom is a holy kingdom, and the people of his kingdom are to be a holy people. His righteousness is to be your righteousness and anything less than his righteousness, including anything less than absolute truth, is unacceptable to him, because it is evil.

And so our Lord shatters the fragile glass of hypocrisy and invites you to find in him forgiveness and power to live a life of truth.

Step two: Invite personal accountability. To invite ruthless accountability from others is a sure way to improve your averages in truth-telling. Say to someone you respect, “If you sense that I say things that I fudge, that I bend, that I work the facts around so they suit me and aren’t quite truthful, please bring that to my attention, because I want to be a truth-teller and not a lie-teller.”

My goal is to become such a lover of truth that I am willing to listen to even the hardest words. I want to deal more with truth than with my fragile ego. Now that doesn’t mean I have to bow to every word of criticism that comes my way, because the criticism may not always be correct. But it does mean that if people bring me words that are true, I owe it to them and I owe it to myself to listen.

Let me give you a challenge. Go to someone you know well and trust—a spouse, parent, child, friend, or fellow worker and say, “If you knew I wouldn’t get defensive and angry, what hard truth would you like to tell me? Is there something you’ve wanted to say to me, but haven’t dared to because you were afraid of my reaction? Well, now is your chance.”

Then sit back and listen. Don’t say anything. Don’t shake your head in disbelief. Don’t pound your fist on the table. Just let their words sink in and do a work in your heart.

I am convinced that if you come to realize how much dissonance your dishonesty creates in God’s heart, and if you are ruthless on yourself, and if you will invite ruthless accountability from others, chances are you are going to begin to stem the tide of the battle, and head your life more toward truth-telling.

It’s a major gain of character in your life. In this process God will change you from the inside out. And your relationships will change as well. They will improve at home and in the workplace, and your walk with God will be cleaner as you become a truth-teller.

May God help each one of us become truth-tellers today.
Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our gracious God, we confess to you that we are guilty of being liars. We ask you to forgive us through Jesus Christ and his shed blood. We want to flee from you but we know that it is only in turning to you that we can find forgiveness and the power to live as your kingdom people. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to be uncompromising as we face the temptations of this day and this week. When we fall, grant us the grace to keep getting up and to be numbered among those who truly walk in your Spirit and do not carry out the desires of the flesh.

All of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

When you have declared war on dishonesty and committed yourself to telling the truth—know that you will be tested again and again. But know also that in so doing you will never be more like Jesus Christ! You are never more in line with your identity as one of his disciples. Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no. As you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all forevermore. Amen.