

St Matthias July 3rd 2016
Honesty and Integrity
Matthew 5:33-37
Andrew Green

Introduction

I wonder what you had for breakfast? For some (including myself) it would be porridge – and if so, you may have had Quaker Oats. That brand has an intriguing origin: In 1877 two millers in US patented the name “Quaker Oats” – even though they were not Quakers. The reason for this choice was that this Christian group were a byword for honesty & integrity – and therefore a good “brand name”.

It was widely known that the Quakers refused to take oaths (in line with Mat 6). They said “their yes was yes & no was no”. You could trust a Quaker with your life. Their word was their bond.

The history Quakers proved their trustworthiness. They were barred (like all non-Conformists) from university education so they could not enter one of the professions. Also, because of their pacifism, they were excluded from military service. So, Quakers turned to commerce and trade – and prospered primarily because of their integrity. Famous names like Barclay & Lloyds bank, Clarkes shoes, Huntley & Palmers biscuits... as well as the great Chocolate dynasty of Cadburys, Fry’s and Rowntrees.

It is a great story, because TRUST (integrity) was the key to growth. Think about it! A Christian group had such a coveted “brand name” that it was used to sell goods! Can you imagine Christians at St Matthias being so renowned for their honesty that someone patents the name “St Matthias” to promote their bank!

Of course this is a massive contrast to the world we live in now. We are still reeling from the effects of Brexit. It would seem both sides of the debate had exaggerated or misleading claims. The Hillsborough Enquiry demonstrated that police actually rewrote evidence to suit them. MPs lied about their expenses. We could go on about public life; but if we point one finger at others, (as they say) we always have 3 fingers pointing back at us. We lie, too.

For example we lie to hurt others: We think someone is too big for their boots so we tell an unkind story about them. Or we lie to escape a difficult situation. We don’t have the courage to say “no”. We lie by our silence, our flattery, our fudging of issues.

But here’s a strange thing. Society usually minimizes the seriousness of lying. Indeed, we joke about lies. For example: “The cheque is in the post” “Give me your number, I’ll call you back”! We expect lies, and yet there can be fearful consequences .. Jeffrey Archer, Jonathan Aitkin Chris Hulme – all went to prison for perjury.

Now, the Bible takes the issue of honesty & truthfulness very seriously. In our series on the Sermon on the Mount we come to the subject of honesty; Jesus says (Mat 5:37) “let your yes be yes, & no be no” (no matter how many oaths swear.. lets have the straightforward truth!)

But we can ask the questions: Why is truthfulness so important? Are there not some occasions when the “white lie” is more kind? Surely, an “economy with the truth” can spare people’s blushes. I want to give two Reasons why Truth is important and then give 3 Practical guidelines for truthful living

1st TRUTHFULNESS REFLECTS GOD

God has all truth in him. Jesus said “I am Way the truth & the life”. More graphically Jesus said, “I am the light of the world”. John says, “God is light & in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:7) ie Truth is truth, there can be no fudging, flattering, exaggerating. We are called to reflect God to the world in our Truthfulness & integrity.

Let me put it like this. I don’t like my wife correcting me when we are having a dinner party & I am in “full exaggerating flow”. I say, “There were 1000s there” and Jenny says “Darling there were 100s there”. I go on, “There was no cloud in the sky”, Jenny interrupts me, “Sweetheart - it rained at 11.00”. You see, I like to embellish the facts – to show what I lucky & clever man I am. But I hear Jesus’ words “let your yes be yes ..”

So, this subject (if we take it seriously) cuts deeply into our heart – because we are all liars one way or another (and we don't reflect God's utter truthfulness) Most of the lies we tell are because we want to hide our shame or to protect ourselves - so people can't see us as we really are.

So, I am glad that Jesus deals with my deceitfulness at the cross. He deals with the shame of my sin as well as power of it. He brings it into the open – so I can be open & reflect God. Which is God's purpose Paul says, we are to "shine like stars in universe" (Phil 2:15)

The first reason truth matters: Is because God is absolutely true and we are called to reflect him

2nd TRUTH BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS

When you hear a gossip tell you a story, there is always the nagging question: "If he gossips to me about other people, how do I know I am not the subject of his gossip to others?" You see there is something corrosive about lies. Lies sow distrust, and distrust eats into relationships.

Again we can see how relevant scripture is to our present situation. Following Brexit, Westminster is awash with gossip and there is some infamous backstabbing. Few are trusted in a ruthless atmosphere of distrust and enmity.

But let's look at this from the other end of the spectrum: not public life, but our very personal world. I suggest that we all want intimacy. We want to be included & trusted. We want people to share with us themselves and their world – so we can drop our masks and we can be ourselves.

But we will never trust someone with our deepest secrets – if they are going to blab away to others (or not listen to us or not make time for us). You can only share where there is trust.

To put it another way: You will only let yourself be vulnerable if you are secure in your relationship. Trust leads to an ability to be vulnerable. Being vulnerable leads to closeness & intimacy. ie Truth builds relationships .

Lies are not just wrong (in an abstract moral sense) they hurt real people! Family life, marriages, business – all flounder because there is no trust!

Does that mean we have to be totally open with no secrets? What about my bank PIN number? How do I foster truth that builds relationships? Let me give 3 practical guidelines.

1. Be Controlled

Self-control is a Fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22). So "Tongue control" is a mark that the Spirit of Jesus is in you. If the Spirit is in you, your "yes will be yes and your no be no". Apparently the tongue weighs just .045 of our body weight yet it is so hard to control. James like a rudder to control ship; Raging fire. "Careless talk costs lives" was a slogan during the war and is still true today. People can be devastated by unkind and untrue words said over them like, "You're stupid. You're clumsy, You will never be any good". But, by the Spirit of God we can control the tongue .. and we MUST for the good of society.

In particular we must be careful of GOSSIP. Gossip is usually a distortion of truth (the very thing Jesus is against in the Sermon on the Mount). Earl Wilson said, "Gossip is when you hear something you like, about someone you don't". J John says "Gossip, is repeating private information to someone who is neither part of the problem, nor part of the solution.

We can control our tongues & we should encourage one another to do so. Think before you speak!

2. Be open

We have an in-built tendency to hide. The first thing Adam & Eve did after disobeying God was to hide. John says, "Men loved darkness rather than light" ie to be really open is an un-natural thing for fallen beings. Have you ever turned over a stone in garden & seen the insects scurry away from light? Well, we are like that! Sin is so all-pervading it is almost unbearable to let God's light of truth light shine on us - unless we are confident of two things : Firstly, that God forgives us & love us. Secondly, that those around us also acknowledge themselves as "forgiven sinners".

Now, there are some good secrets: That surprise Birthday party, my PIN number, my medical records. Openness does not add anything!

But there are bad secrets: Things that we know are unhealthy for us; that control us or obsess us. For example, that bit of pornography furtively examined when no one is around. On the other hand it may be that hurt we nurse – that un-forgiven bit of personal history – which is like that stone in the garden with all sorts of light-averse insects hiding underneath!

We need to live in light! John says, “Walk in the light. If we walk in light as he is in light we have fellowship with one another”. (1 John 1:7) ie Fellowship is conditional on truthfulness! Do you want good family relations, good church relationships, good work relationships? Then you need TRUTHFULNESS in every part of your life.

One way to help that is by cultivating accountable relationships. We all need one or two (of same sex) who we trust. Whose yes is yes, no is no! Who will not flatter, who will keep a confidence. To whom we give permission to ask questions about our lives so that we are “open”.

3. Be a builder

This is not about putting on “spin”; rather it is about using words as God usually wants words to be used. You see, God’s words are so creative: In Genesis 1 God said, “let there be light” – and there was light. He said, “let there be dry land” and there was dry land. Similarly, Jesus said to man with withered hand “stretch forth your hand” and it was healed. In Bible times people knew God’s Words were creative and “building words”. So Jesus (the source of all good) is called The Word. Words & communication are seen as a great gift of God to us; words set us apart from the animals & show that we are made in the image of God.

In this sense we are to use language - to build people up and encourage them. That does not mean we engage in flattery. Flattery is insincere praise; it is speaking to earn a favour, it is an artificial sweetener (it has no nutrients) But a builder does not tell lies; he/she has the ability to see the good, be encouraging and build community. Paul tell us to look for “Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable.” If we were able to use our words truthfully as builders – I know the church would be a different place and the community would be blessed.

CONCLUSION

A few years ago the Times told the story of a policeman in Chicago who filled out his lottery ticket using the numbers supplied by the waitress who always brought him coffee. “Thanks, darling (he said) if I win, I’ll give you half of my winnings”. He did win & he did give away half his winnings. The Times correspondent said, “the policeman kept faith with his friend the waitress. But he kept another faith – with his soul”

Why tell truth? Yes.. to keep faith with our soul! But that’s because we keep faith with God in whose image we are made – and whose truthfulness we want to reflect to the world.

Why tell the truth? Because Truth heals relationships and the world needs healing. So we are to ..(1) Be controlled (2) Be open (3) Be a builder

Then maybe “St Matthias” people will be so renowned for their integrity that someone will patent the name for a new brand.