

## Being a Truth-Teller in a World of Liars

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Rich Nathan  
February 23, 2014  
Neglected Virtues Series  
Matthew 5:33-37

Just last month our local newspaper, The Columbus Dispatch, wrote a story summarizing the 18-month investigation of the Columbus Public Schools and former Superintendent, Gene Harris. The article was titled “A Culture of Deceit.” Here is how the article began:

*Former Columbus Superintendent Gene Harris surrounded herself with cheaters, and then nurtured and protected them.*

*The findings of an 18-month state investigation released yesterday tell a story of a superintendent who presided over a culture in which administrators lost sight of their mission to educate children and instead focused on creating an illusion that they were getting good academic results. State Auditor Dave Yost’s long-awaited report found that some Columbus school employees set out to deceive the state and federal education departments – and the people of Columbus.*

The article goes on to say:

*The report shows nine key ways in which district employees altered data, often to the detriment of students, to make their schools appear better than they actually were.*

*For example, one assistant principal, Stanley K. Pyle, acted out his motto, “D ‘em up,” to change more than 600 grades from failing to passing at Marion-Franklin High School. He believed no student should get an F.*

*Kids taking online courses earned credit even if they didn’t finish the classes. And employees created “zombie 12<sup>th</sup>-graders” when they marked students who were supposed to have graduated as high-school seniors, even through they weren’t enrolled.*

*Some high-school principals singled out students with many absences or who had failed the Ohio Graduation Test and secretly withdrew them. That meant their test scores and attendance data wouldn’t count against the school or the district on state report cards.*

This multi-page article went on and on detailing the deceit, lies, and fraud that didn’t just cheat tax payers or the federal and state government, but it was a culture of deceit

that cheated our kids, who were passed through the system without receiving the education that they deserved and needed. This was a crime against our kids.

Now, it would be comforting if, for some reason, this culture of deceit was just a local problem, confined to a few bad apples here in the City of Columbus. But that would be false hope. I typed into Google “school scandals”; I got page after page of lying superintendents and corrupt school board officials and cheating principals and teachers in major districts all over America. In Philadelphia an investigation showed that school principals took students’ tests home and changed their answers at night. Teachers posted answer keys. They actually gathered teachers in teams and sat around big tables passing student answer sheets around to erase the answers and to fill in correct answers. In all, there were 138 educators at 27 schools that were found guilty of cheating. 138. And they know that that is just the tip of the iceberg.

In Washington DC 191 teachers apparently changed students’ answers. In Atlanta, 44 of the 56 schools that were investigated cheated on a State-sponsored Standardized Exam. The cheating was apparently coordinated by the school superintendent, who by the way, was named the US Superintendent of the Year in 2009 for the marvelous results that she miraculously achieved in raising student test scores.

Now, it would be wonderful if we believed that lying and cheating and data-manipulation were confined just to schools; that we’re under tremendous pressure from the No Child Left Behind Act. But the problem of deceit and lying is everywhere.

I just read an article in the NY Times that cast huge suspicion on the so-called “academic studies” cited by political parties as they seek to persuade the nation about any particular public policy issue. So, for example, the Democrats have recently proposed raising the minimum wage across the nation. And amazingly, there are academic studies cited by the Democrats, including that raising the minimum wage makes great economic sense. And these studies were paid for by 20 labor unions. And the Republicans cite academic research saying that raising the minimum wage will just increase poverty and throw hundreds of thousands of people out of work. And amazingly these academic studies were paid for by the National Restaurant Association and the National Retail Federation.

John Weaver, who is a Republican political consultant and who has helped run several presidential campaigns, lamented saying:

*It is simply the way of Washington today, and that is unfortunate, because if these studies are not dishonest, they are at least disingenuous.*

I am not sure what the distinction is there. But this is a lobbyist lamenting the utter loss of objectivity and truth in academic studies.

Again, it would be great if for some reason we could believe that lying and deceit was just confined to big institutions – the public school system, the government, or big business. But Gallup Polls show that the trust that we Americans have in each other is at the lowest level ever recorded by the Gallup organization. Gallup has been asking people about how much they trust each other for decades – the same questions. The most recent poll indicated that 2/3's of Americans say that most people can't be trusted. 2/3's of Americans go through life saying you can't be too careful when dealing with other people. One woman said, "I'm leery of everybody."

We started a series a few weeks ago titled "Neglected Virtues" in which we're talking about character qualities that seem to be really in short-supply in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – things like humility, sexual purity. Next week I will be talking about hard work. But today I'm going to be talking about truth-telling. That seems to be in really short supply – telling the truth. And I've called today's message, "Being a Truth-Teller in a World of Liars." Let's pray.

Matthew 5:33–37 (NIV)

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Now when we talk about telling the truth and we talk about lying, these subjects raise to the surface a basic principle of scripture. And that is:

### Words matter

Words matter. We live in a country that doers; there is constantly a critique of people who just talk. There is an old country song that called for "a little less talk and a lot more action." But even with all the talking heads, the 24-hour news cycles, all the people weighing in with their opinions, words still matter.

If you think words don't matter, just think of the difference between you hearing the words "I love you," versus "I hate you." Or the difference between a judge saying, "guilty" versus the judge saying, "not guilty." Words matter.

The book of Genesis tells us that God spoke the universe into existence. Just read Genesis 1 and you will see the phrase over and over again: "And God said let there be light" and the darkness is suddenly filled with blazing light. "And God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image after our likeness,'" And God gave this power of speech, the ability to make a difference with our words, he gave that power to human beings. One

of the ways that human beings are God-like is that we have the power of speech. Our words matter.

By words, wars are started. By words, genocide occurs. By words, a child's self-confidence is shredded. By words, a spouse is verbally abused. And by words, people are built up and hope is restored and love is communicated and thanksgiving is offered. Proverbs says that life and death is found in the power of the tongue.

Do you think words don't matter? Years ago I read a story of a child who was serving as an altar boy at a Roman Catholic church in Croatia. His name was Josip Broz. Josip was helping the priest with communion and he dropped the glass bottle of wine. It smashed on the floor. The priest screamed at him, "You stupid idiot. Leave the altar and never come back." That boy left the church and never returned to church again. He grew up to become Marshal Tito, the communist leader of Yugoslavia after WWII.

About the same time in St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois, an altar boy named Peter John was helping the priest at mass. He, too, dropped the glass cruet filled with wine. He wrote in his memoir:

*There is no atomic explosion that could equal in intensity the decibels the noise and explosive force of wine cruet falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of the Bishop. I was frightened to death.*

But the Bishop, who was presiding at the mass, was a man named John Spalding. And with a warm twinkle in his eye, the Bishop whispered, "Someday, you will be just what I am. Do not fear." That altar boy grew up to be Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who was one of the most beloved and best known pastors in the Roman Catholic Church in the last century. Words matter. And,

#### Truth-telling matters

Matthew 5:33–37 (NIV)

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Let me give you some background to the text. The general idea of this passage is not very complicated. Jesus is saying to his followers, "I want my followers to tell the truth – the simple, unvarnished truth." Craig Keener said:

*Human cultures developed oaths because people could not trust their neighbors without calling an avenging deity to witness; but those who recognized that God witnesses every word must speak and act from integrity of heart that transcends such formalities.*

If you realize that God is watching and paying attention to every word you say, then you don't need an oath to guarantee your truthfulness. Let's look more carefully at the text. Jesus gives us the Old Testament background in v. 33.

Matthew 5:33 (NIV)

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'

He is not quoting any particular verse here. But the Old Testament in various passages does give approval to oaths. By Jesus' time oaths were being abused. RT France, who is a New Testament scholar, said that:

*Oaths normally invoke God as the guarantor of the person's word, and it was this that made it so serious a matter to break them: it was a misuse of God's name.*

By the time of Jesus, people started to avoid using the name of God and they would swear an oath in the name of heaven, or in the name of earth, or in the name of Jerusalem, or on one's own head, in the name of the temple or the altar. People in Jesus' day treated oaths the way we do today. You know, the way people say, "I swear on my mother's grave." "I swear on my children's heads." And it was this casual use of oaths that provoked Jesus to say this:

Matthew 5:34–36 (NIV)

34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

Some people, folks like Jehovah's Witnesses and then among orthodox Christians, folks like the Mennonites say that Jesus' words are to be taken literally here. If you are a follower of Christ, you may not take an oath in court; if you are elected President, you can't take the Presidential Oath. Jesus is forbidding any oath taking at any time.

The problem with this no-oaths-by-Christians at any time view is that people in the New Testament are portrayed as taking oaths. So here is what we read in Acts 18:18:

Acts 18:18 (NIV)

18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.

And Paul writes in 2 Cor 1:23:

2 Corinthians 1:23 (NIV)

23 I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.

Another problem with this view of no oaths whatsoever is that God himself is portrayed as making oaths. Here is what we read in Hebrews 6:16-17,

Hebrews 6:16–17 (NIV)

16 People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

So, I think what this text means is that Jesus is not teaching his followers to never take an oath. He is prohibiting the misuse of oaths. The way that people in Jesus' day and in our day took oaths to actually work around the truth. In Jesus' day, the rabbis had created all kinds of distinctions between oaths that you needed to keep and oaths that you didn't and when your promise was binding and when it wasn't. In a sinful world, taking an oath in court, or taking an oath for the president, is helpful. It mediates against our sinfulness. I don't think Jesus is teaching that no follower of his could ever take an oath. But I think he is teaching against the abuse of oaths and more positively, he is encouraging his followers to be known as truth-tellers. Because truth matters.

Truth-telling matters

Here is what we read in Proverbs 6:16-19:

Proverbs 6:16–19 (NIV)

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him...a lying tongue, ...a false witness who pours out lies...

Here is what we read in Revelation 22:15:

Revelation 22:15 (NIV)

15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

Here is what we read in John 8:44:

John 8:44 (NIV)

44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he [Satan] lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Truth, truth-telling, lying matters to God. Being a liar keeps people out of the kingdom of God.

So, I am going to use the acronym TRUTH for my outline today.

T.R.U.T.H.

T. Truth-telling is Trust-building

When we say that we trust someone else, what do we mean? You trust a friend, you trust your spouse, you trust someone you're doing business with – what are we communicating when we say we trust someone? We're saying that we are totally comfortable being vulnerable with that other person, so that we don't have to engage in self-protective behavior. I can be vulnerable with you; I can give you my credit card and not fear that you are going to steal my number. I can share a secret with you and not fear that you are going to pass it on to someone else. I can have a conversation and I don't have to fear that you are going to hit on me or hit on my wife.

Right now, Americans' confidence in people and in institutions is at an all-time low. In answer to the question: how much confidence, how much trust do you have in Congress, only 10% of Americans said that they had a great deal of trust, or quite a lot of trust in Congress. 10%. I think that's below used car salesmen, or Mafia Dons. Banks by 26% of Americans. Public Schools by less than a 1/3. The President by 36%. The church is trusted by only 48% of Americans.

A society that has lost the ability to trust has lost the ability to compromise because different sides don't trust that the other side is going to keep their word, or that we're all in this to serve the common good. When we lose our ability to trust each other, we wreck our economy because we have to engage in all of this self-protective behavior. I need a hundred-page contract in order to protect myself from you. A simple handshake won't do. I need to count all my change and constantly watch my back. I know that the office is so filled with politics that someone is going to try to stab me in the back. We waste all this energy on being political instead of being productive.

The signs of a loss of trust are everywhere. Lawyers say that there are more couples getting pre-nuptial agreements than ever. I can't trust that when you say "for better or

for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish til death do us part,” that you mean it. So our lawyers need to sit down and I need to be protected from you, even though I’m marrying you.

Think about the last time that someone was lying to you, deceiving you. Maybe it was a family member, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a spouse, a brother, a sister – they were lying to you about where they were and what they were doing, what they were spending, how they behaved. Think about the last time you discovered someone was lying to you. Maybe it was in a professional relationship. You were lied to and deceived by a doctor, by a dentist, by an attorney. What does lying do to you? Why do you get so mad when you are lied to?

Sociologists tell us that when there are high levels of trust in society, people voluntarily comply with paying taxes, and more people vote, more people volunteer in schools, and more people do everyday good deeds like helping someone else find a job. When trust is low, people separate from each other; they cocoon, they hunker down. They don’t volunteer. They don’t help each other. They don’t vote. That’s what’s going on in America. There is a profound loss of trust.

Lying doesn’t just destroy trust. The reason we get so angry about being lied to is that lying destroys choice. It robs us of power. If someone lies to us, we’re making decisions without all the facts. I wouldn’t have had my engine rebuilt, if I knew the problem could be solved by a simple repair. I wouldn’t have chosen this medical treatment plan, if I had been told all the facts. We might do something different with our money, or with our lives, or with our marriages, if we knew the truth. Lying destroys trust. Lying destroys choices.

And lying robs us of control. Truth-telling is trust-building.

#### R. Truth-telling is Rooted in Christ

James Bryan Smith in his wonderful book titled *The Good and Beautiful Life*,

Book cover of *The Good and Beautiful Life* by James Bryan Smith

...confessed to a really common form of lying that most of us have engaged in at some point or other. Mr. Smith was asked to a dinner party with ten couples, all of whom were very well educated, and someone introduced him to another man by saying, “Jim teaches at a college.” The man said, “Oh, I love talking to fellow academics.” This other man began talking with him about literature and he said, “I think that Hawthorne was the most brilliant writer of his generation. Don’t you agree, Jim?” Jim said without thinking, “Yes, he was quite good,” even though he had never read a sentence of Hawthorne’s.

“Quite good? He was the best! Anyway, I was making this point of the genius of the Scarlet Letter and its irony. I mean, the fact that the accusers are the true sinners, and the accused sinner is actually the most righteous character. Don’t you agree, Jim?”

“Yes, yes. I agree.” And, again, he had never read a sentence of Hawthorne’s writings; he never had read the Scarlet Letter. But he finds himself smiling and nodding and agreeing. He said the conversation lasted 10 minutes and it was painful because he had just dug this hole of pretense.

Why do we do that? Why do we exaggerate our accomplishments? Why do we pretend to know more than we do, or pretend to be better than we are? Why are we so afraid of, for a moment, looking ignorant, confessing that we don’t understand a word that’s being used?

The bottom line is that we engage in all of this pretense because we who claim to be followers of Jesus don’t have identities that are deeply rooted in Christ. If we walked around knowing that at the core of our being that Jesus loved us, that we’re never alone, that Jesus was with us, that Jesus accepted us and approved of us, and called us his friends, that Jesus welcomed us just as we are, even though we hadn’t read this or that, or haven’t done this or that, or weren’t very bright, or weren’t great athletes, or didn’t have a string of boyfriends or girlfriends in high school or college; if we knew that we were acceptable just as we are, don’t you think that this would eliminate so much of the neurotic lying and pretense and exaggeration that you and I engage in simply because we’re craving the approval or acceptance of another person? We can’t bear the social awkwardness.

If you are not in Christ, if you don’t know that you are a child of God, if you don’t know that you are loved, it is incredibly scary to be vulnerable before someone else, especially if they have power over you, especially if you think that they might disapprove of you. Truth-telling is rooted in Christ.

#### U. Truth-telling is Uncommon

Years ago Ted Engstrom, who was the former President of World Vision International, the largest Christian relief agency in the world, wrote a book titled Integrity.

#### Book Cover of Integrity by Ted Engstrom

He told a story about a high school basketball coach named Cleveland Stroud, who coached the Rockdale County boys’ basketball team all the way to the Georgia State Championship. They had some miraculous victories. And in order to win the state championship, they had to win five post-season games. Of course, the school was celebrating. They put the State Championship trophy in the trophy case right next to the entrance of the school with all the pictures of the basketball players.

Well, after winning the championship, Coach Stroud discovered that one of his bench players, who had played only 45 seconds in the first game of the tournament, didn't play after that, and had no impact on the game, that that bench player was academically ineligible, Coach Stroud had broken the rules. What would he do?

He and the administrators of this Georgia public school told state officials what they had done and the state took the trophy from them.

Some people in the community said Coach Stroud should have kept his mouth shut. His player only played for 45 seconds. He didn't have any impact at all. Coach Stroud said, "I told my team that people forget the scores of basketball games, but they don't ever forget what you are made of."

Truth-telling is so uncommon that in big things like returning a championship trophy, or in little things like simply acknowledging that you didn't complete a work assignment, or that you don't know what you're doing on a project – being a truth-teller is so uncommon that it will set you apart in a world of liars.

There is a growing concern on the part of many in the faith community about the ever-increasing numbers of folks who are disconnected from the church, checking none in the box next to religion. Many people are scratching their heads saying, "How do we break through all the cynicism, all the suspicion, all the criticism deserved and undeserved, aimed at the church today?"

Brothers and sisters, I don't believe that we need more spectacular church services, or wonderfully produced and crafted productions – that every Sunday ought to be like the SuperBowl half-time show, or the Grammy Awards. Here is what I believe. I think that if Christians were known for just three things, the world would sit up and take notice. If Christians were known for sexual purity; that people knew that because you were a Christian you didn't sleep around, you weren't sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend, if Christians were known for sexual purity; if Christians were known for telling the truth; I know that that person is a Christian, so I know that I can trust them; and if Christians were known for serving the poor – we don't sleep around; we tell the truth; and we serve the poor – I think people would give church another try.

#### T. Truth-telling is a Test

Here is a true story. A few years ago a Brink's armored truck crashed on a Miami highway. While the driver and a fellow Brink's office lay bruised and bleeding, there was a carnival atmosphere on the road as thousands of dollars from the Brink's truck spilled out and blew along the highway. Drivers stopped their cars in rush hour traffic and scooped up cash on their way to work. Mothers with babies grabbed coins and piled them into their strollers. A grandmother filled a box full of money. A school girl

dumped her school bag of books and loaded it with coins and bills. The neighborhood where the crash took place was a poor neighborhood and there were lots of rationalizations for grabbing the money. “We deserve a little something around here,” one person said. “What’s more moral, to return the money and leave your children poor, or to take some of the money and have a better life for your kids?” One man called it “A miracle from God; The Lord was willing to let it happen here,” he said. “There is a lot of poverty around here; this is a miracle.”

The police estimated that over one hundred different people made off with some of the money. They weren’t all poor. Some were middle class. There were a few people who turned the money in. A woman named Faye McFadden, who was a single mom; she made \$5/hour at a local department store, scooped up money and turned it in because she said, “It is important to me to set a good example for my children. I want them to grow up learning how to do right.” An 11-year old boy came forward after hearing a lesson at his Catholic elementary school about telling the truth. He went to the police with 85¢. He told the TV reporter, “I knew it was wrong for me to keep anything; and, I knew if I kept it, I would have been stealing.” So he turned in 85¢.

A firefighter named Manny Rodriguez recovered a bag with \$330,000 and turned it in. He said,

*People were almost killed in that truck and other folks call it a blessing from God. But the money spilled on the highway wasn’t a blessing from God, it was a test from God.*

Brothers and sisters, do you understand that every time you are tempted to lie, every time a situation suggests that deceit is the way to go that that is a test from God. Jesus is asking, “Do you love me? Do you trust me enough to tell the truth?”

Which leads to the last point: H.

H. Truth-telling is Hard

Here is what we read in Psalm 15:1:

Psalm 15:1, 4 (NIV)

1 LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?  
Who may live on your holy mountain?  
4 who despises a vile person  
but honors those who fear the LORD;  
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,  
and does not change their mind;

I love the way the old King James Version puts point #4:

He swears to his own hurt and changes not.

The person who gets to enter the presence of God is a person who keeps their word even when it hurts them. It is a person who keeps their commitments even when it is not convenient and something unforeseen occurs – when the weather is bad, when they are tired, when they get a better offer.

Let me close with a couple of thoughts. Do you know when you grow as a follower of Christ? Do you know when you grow and you can say to yourself: I am making real progress in my faith; it is when we stop running from things that are hard for us. In each of our lives, there are things that are hard for us. It might be for you leading a group, or speaking up when you disagree, or finishing your degree, or getting into recovery. The time we know we are growing in faith is when we stop running from things that are hard. When we stop following the path of least resistance, we grow. When we tell the truth where we normally would tell a lie, we grow. When we keep our commitments even it hurts, we grow. When we trust the promises of God and we believe that my God will be good to me and work good, if I obey him even when it is hard, we grow.

Keeping our promises, as Jesus says, letting your yes be yes, and your no be no – even when it is hard, always releases spiritual growth in our lives. Ask God to make you a truth-teller. Let's pray.

## Being a Truth-Teller in a World of Liars

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Rich Nathan  
February 23, 2014  
Neglected Virtues Series  
Matthew 5:33-37

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