

## Swearing Solemnly

Sermon texts: Exodus 20:16 and Matthew 5:33-37

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### I. Deliberately bearing false witness

I have a little cultural quiz for you. I'm going to say a some words and hit a few musical notes and your job is to tell me what comes to your mind – just say it right out loud, okay? Here are some of the words: "This is the city, Los Angeles, California. I work here. I carry a badge."

And here are a few musical notes that go with those words: "Dum de dum dum. Dum de dum dum daaaaah." Here are the other words: "The story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent."

What comes to mind when you hear those words and those nine musical notes? That's right – it's the old television show, *Dragnet*. It was one of my favorite TV shows when I was a kid. You may remember it too. Steve does – he mentioned it in last week's sermon. The main character was Joe Friday, a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department. His partner, during the years I watched the show, was Officer Bill Gannon. Sergeant Friday was a serious guy. He was a man of few words. A typical sentence for him was: "Let's go" or "I see" or maybe "How's that?"

But perhaps the thing that Detective Joe Friday is best known for was his insistence that the person he was questioning give him "just the facts." When a witness got all emotional and overcome by the trauma of the crime she had witnessed, Joe Friday would ask her for "just the facts, ma'am – just the facts." He wanted the truth. Sometimes an episode of *Dragnet* included the trial, and us viewers got to see the witness preparing to give testimony about what he or she had seen. It seemed fitting that the show included the swearing in of that witness. The bailiff would ask: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

The importance of telling the truth was a message that came through loud and clear to me as a child watching *Dragnet*. And honesty is a vital character trait for us to cultivate as Christians. At first glance, commandment number nine in Exodus 20:16 seems to address specifically speaking the truth in the context of a legal proceeding – like the witness solemnly swearing to do so in the TV show. The passage reads: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

While it's true that this commandment does prohibit perjury, its intent goes beyond the courtroom. For example, here's what Psalm 34:13 says: "Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking lies." And listen to this prayer to God from Proverbs 30:7-8: "Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die; remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need."

It's not just in the Old Testament that the ninth commandment is interpreted to be about having integrity in all that we say and do. In Matthew 15, Jesus was teaching that it was not observing Jewish dietary laws that made a person pure. Here's what he said, beginning in verse 17: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lies, slander."

In chapter three of his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul calls Christ-followers to stop living like we did as unbelievers. Here's what he says beginning in verse 8: "But now you

must get rid of such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator.”

It’s clear that this ninth of God’s ten best ways to live is intended to tell us that being untruthful is wrong. It’s a simple commandment, but God knew that it wouldn’t be easy for us to avoid lying. Telling untruths is a way of life. It was in biblical times. It is now. The fact of the matter is that there are situations when it seems easier to say something that is less than honest.

As Christians, the Lord wants us to know that it is wrong to lie. Bearing false witness hurts other people. It hurts us. And it hurts God.

## **II. Delicately implying a lie**

Even though it’s not always easy to speak the truth, we probably all agree that deliberately bearing false witness is wrong. But there are other situations, however, in which outright lying is not the issue. Perhaps far more common are those times when we “finesse” the truth. Sometimes all that’s necessary is a nod of the head, a gesture with our hands, or an expression on our face to lead someone to believe what isn’t true. For each of us, every day has opportunities to be straightforward with the truth or to shade it in subtle ways.

In the selection we read from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter five, we heard Jesus extend and intensify the application of the commandment against bearing false witness. The Master said that not only should we avoid lying under oath, but we should not need to swear an oath at all. He warned against the common practice of people in his day to preface their words with an oath that what they were about to say was true.

We still do the same thing today. How many times have you heard someone use a phrase like, “I swear to God that’s how it happened.” That kind of oath is exactly what Jesus was speaking against. Or, what about people who begin what they say with the words, “Now to be perfectly honest...”? Do you hear the implication? That statement indicates that the speaker is about to shift from being less than honest to being honest. The phrase casts doubt on the truth of other things that person has said.

Do we need to swear an oath to God in order for people to believe what we are saying is true? Do we need give others verbal cues when we are speaking the truth? May it not be so for us as followers of Christ. Jesus said that our “yes” should mean yes and our “no” should mean no. He calls us to be people who are truthful – truthful in not deliberately bearing false witness, and truthful in not delicately implying a lie.

I recall an incident a number of years ago when I took Will and Kate to see a movie. The lady behind the glass said, “Two children and an adult for which movie?” I looked at their sign in the window. Reduced pricing was intended for children eleven years old and younger. Will had turned twelve a few months earlier. What was I supposed to do? I didn’t really have to tell a lie. I could have just gone along with what the lady assumed, picked a movie, and saved two bucks. Several thoughts flashed through my mind. What kind of person did I want to be at that point in my life? What kind of person God was calling me to be? What kind of person did I want Will and Kate to see me being?

I explained to the lady that Will was twelve and I needed to purchase two adult tickets and one children’s ticket for the movie. Being dishonest, even in seemingly small things like, could have a serious impact on our Christian witness. I’m not sure if Will or Kate even noticed

what happened that day. But wouldn't it have been tragic if they had learned from me to be less than honest if I had accepted the discount we weren't entitled to? Those are the kinds of decisions we face every day. Do we choose to be completely honest, or do we keep the \$2.00 and figure no one will notice? People do notice. God notices. You know in your heart when you have delicately implied a lie.

### **III. Dealing with others honestly**

Jesus calls us, as people who bear the name Christian, to have such integrity in what we say and in what we do that we don't have to identify when we tell the truth – because we tell the truth all the time. People have confidence that what we say is true. That's the way God intends it to be for us as Christ-followers.

Is that the way it is for you? I am sorry to say that it is not always the way it has been for me. In fact, there was a time in my life when I was not an honest person. It wasn't until my late teen and early adult years and I recognized what hard work it is to be dishonest. You have to have a great memory to remember which story you told to what person. It is much easier to just be honest. When you tell the truth, you don't have to jump through mental hoops to keep your lies straight. Take it from somebody who learned the hard way.

I liked to hang around with the “popular” people in high school. I was a basketball player, so I had enough athletic ability to be accepted in the “cool” group. But I was a better student than I was an athlete. Not all the other “popular” guys were good students. So their parents kind of liked it when they hung around with me. I guess the parents thought that good grades might be contagious or something. And I have to admit that I was pretty good at schmoozing their parents. I acted a little bit like Eddie Haskell from the old “Leave It to Beaver Show.” “Gee, Mrs. Cleaver, that sure is a swell dress you're wearing today.”

One Friday night I was out with my buddies. The guy who was driving that night was an incredible athlete, but not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He had this real fast Dodge Challenger that sucked down the gas like nobody's business. Well, he was running low on gas and so he pulled into a service station and filled up. When he was finished, he got back in the car and peeled out of the gas station without paying for it. Now his Challenger was very distinctive looking – green with wide wheels and raised white letters. It wasn't hard for the gas station attendant to identify it.

The rest of the night we were nervous about getting caught, always looking around and expecting the police to come flying up with lights and sirens blazing. But everything seemed to be fine until we got back to his house later that night. The police had traced the car to his parents' address and had been over to inform them that their son had stolen gas from a local filling station. He was in deep yogurt. He tried to convince his parents that he had just forgotten to pay for the gas, but they didn't believe him. So he came out to the car to get me – Eddie Haskell. He said that if I told his parents that we had just forgotten to pay they would believe it. I'm not proud to admit that I told them that lie. And they believed it. I traded my integrity for twelve dollars worth of gas.

How about you? How much is your integrity worth? It's the kind of decision we face every day. What kind of person will you be? Let's decide right here and right now to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – so help us God. Amen.