

February 20-24, 2023 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 60

Small Words ~ HUGE Impact

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are looking at the words of Jesus from the Sermon On The Mount surrounding vows. I know that vows aren't something most of us deal with on a regular basis but it's important to understand what Jesus was talking about in this part of the Sermon On The Mount if we're going to understand what it means to follow Him and become more like Him (a little bit every day):

You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.' But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Do not even say, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one. Matthew 5:33-37 (NLT)

I don't know what your initial reaction is to these words. I know that growing up I assumed I knew what this meant- no "swearing to God". That was the only kind of vow I knew of as a younger man. In my neighborhood if someone made a statement that was doubted by the rest of us kids they would invariably say, "I swear to God...". This was meant to halt all debate as to the honesty of the kid in question and the truth of his/her statement that the rest of us doubted.

Later in church I was taught that to "swear to God" was to take God's name in vain- something the third commandment frowned upon (to put it mildly). Strangely this is one time my childhood teachers kind of got it right when it came to the things they taught me about the Bible's dos and don'ts. With one exception- it wouldn't be taking God's name in vain if the kid in question was actually telling the truth.

But when I came to the Sermon On The Mount and read Jesus' words on vows I thought that what He was saying to me and the people of my generation, "don't "swear to God" about anything". But was He? Probably not. But maybe kind of. Does that clear it up?

I don't think Jesus is saying we are no longer allowed to make any kind of vow at all. After all the apostle Paul made a vow at least twice that we know of after his conversion to Christianity. There is no way he would have done that if Jesus' words in the Sermon On The Mount meant we were not allowed to ever make a "vow". To this day when someone testifies in court they are asked to "vow" that the statements they give will be the "truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" with the statement, "so help me God".

That's a vow. A vow is nothing more than a promise. I guess in a way any promise we make could be considered a vow. So what is Jesus getting at? That's what we're going to look at this week. Jesus' concern isn't that people shouldn't make promises but that their promises not require a vow. He wants trustworthy followers who are known as men and women of integrity. The Pharisees were using vows as legal loopholes that only they knew how to navigate and that REALLY bothered Jesus. This week we'll spend some time reflecting on Jesus' words about vows but for today maybe spend some time thinking about how trustworthy the people in your life (and Jesus Himself) consider you to be.

Tuesday Reflection: Yesterday we looked at Jesus' words about vows from the Sermon On The Mount. On the surface it looks like Jesus is forbidding all vows of any kind for those of us who follow Him. But is He? I don't think so (we talked yesterday about how the apostle Paul made at least two vows that we are aware of AFTER his conversion to Jesus). So what are we to understand these words to mean?

First of all I think Jesus is asking us to tell the truth and not lie. Really this passage is all about integrity. Integrity is when the outside of our lives matches up perfectly with the inside. When what we say is really what we mean. If we could live lives of integrity then vows would become obsolete. Why? Because nobody would doubt us when we said whatever it is we say. That's who Jesus is- it's who He wants us to be becoming:

Say just a simple 'Yes, I will' or 'No, I won't.' Your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong. Matthew 5:37 (TLB)

Do you see what He's getting at? Integrity. His dream is that those of us who follow Him will lead lives of such honesty that nobody would doubt what we say. What He'd really love is for His followers to be so defined by our honesty and integrity that even if someone didn't know us personally the fact that we are followers of Jesus would automatically lead them to believe we are telling the truth because that's the reputation that Jesus' followers have in this world.

So let me ask you, is that the reputation that followers of Jesus have in this world? Not. So. Much. Instead the number one adjective used to describe us by our non-believing countrymen is, hypocrite. Why? What would make those outside of the church look at this of us within that church and say, "the church is filled with hypocrites"? Maybe because we are not known for our integrity (which is a tragedy).

Jesus was the first to take the word hypocrite and turn it into a negative description of religious people. He used it of the Pharisees often but it wasn't a negative concept in the first century- the word simply meant, an actor. Anyone who performed in the theater pretending to be someone they weren't was a "hypocrite". Jesus takes this concept and uses it to describe the Pharisees. Why? Because they did this all the time. They condemned people for doing the things that they had found a loophole for.

Vows was one of those loopholes that they used. By manipulating the language used in vows and codifying those loopholes in the "law" that governed first century Jews the Pharisees were pretending to be people of integrity when in reality they were just able to walk the crooked line of their laws knowing the average Joseph would never be able to do the same thing. Jesus hated that. His words in Matthew 5:33-37 aren't so much about never taking a vow as much as they are about never abusing a vow to lie to someone and make them believe you were telling the truth. Truth, as it turns out, is pretty important to Jesus:

We will lovingly follow the truth at all times- speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly- and so become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

Truth as it turns out is about much more than just not lying- it's about speaking truly, dealing truly and living truly. Can you imagine what this world would be like if the church

started living up to this kind of standard. Can you imagine what this world would be like if the church just attempted to live up this kind of standard. Made it our goal to speak, deal and live truly with the world around us rather than using our words to mislead and trick people (all the while telling the world they are living in darkness and need us to show them the way)?

Wednesday Reflection: The quest for honor is the passionate pursuit of greatness. Integrity is the compass you will use to find God's unique path for you on the road to honor. It will not only inform your humility but it will harness your passions and focus your intentions. With integrity as your guide there will be some paths you will automatically reject simply because they lead in a direction contrary to the heart of God. And maybe that's the best definition of integrity- when your heart is joined with the heart of God. What is important to God becomes important to you. The things that make God happy make your heart soar. The things that hurt God, hurt you. When that begins to happen integrity becomes your compass and suddenly the future becomes much clearer. When we choose to ignore integrity and go our own way, somehow the future becomes much foggier and we find ourselves wondering what happened and where to go next.

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to trust someone with integrity? When people do what they say they are going to do, trust is the natural result. But when someone says one thing and then does another how does that make you feel about that person? How about you? Do your actions and your words line up with each other? Believe me, I know how scary following God's compass can be. When you decide to live your life by God's heart instead of your own there will be plenty of times when you have to make truly courageous decisions- and that's why this path of honor must lead us to courage through integrity and to integrity through humility. Because without humility you won't see the need for integrity, and without courage you won't be able to live your life with integrity.

When I grew up I was a HUGE liar. I lied about everything. I lied to get out of trouble, I lied to make myself look cool, I lied to "protect" people's feelings, I lied just because it was who I had become through a lifestyle of dishonesty. It caused lots of problems for me but that didn't stop me from being who I had decided to be- a liar.

Hi, I'm Ed and I'm a born liar.

But even though I had become a liar, I knew I wasn't doomed to live my life that way if I didn't want to. When I gave up on living life my own way and decided to start living a life that would make God smile rather than cringe, I knew integrity would have to play a big part. But I didn't know how hard it would be. When you've lived your life lying to get yourself out of trouble or to spare the feelings of someone else, it's not an easy habit to break. And habit is a good word for my lying. People would come to me and ask me if I had done something yet and I would decide it was easier to tell them yes and then make sure I did it after they left rather than tell the truth and disappoint them. I was after all, looking out for their feelings. That seemed like a truly Christian thing to do. But when I would get caught it caused some "minor" problems. Namely people didn't trust me anymore. And when Jonathan was born I remember thinking about how I wanted him to

see me as he grew up. I decided I'd rather have the temporary discomfort of telling the truth than having people (especially my son) see me as a person with no honor. And when you live life without the compass of God's integrity that's exactly what happens- you live a life absent of the honor of God. Not that when you're using God's compass you'll be perfect. None of us are. But we all know the difference between a person who's on the quest for honor and the one who has decided it's just not worth the trouble.

So let me ask you- what characteristic of integrity are you having problems with. What threatens to knock you off the quest for honor? I know, you're not all liars like I was, but all of us have that special place inside of us that struggles with integrity. What's yours? You might as well just name it right now and decide that it's not going to rule your life anymore. I know it can be scary but that's where courage comes into the quest for honor. If you don't currently have integrity God can form it in you- but like everything else that we've been talking about, you have a part to play in this transformation as well.

Take a look at the scripture reading for today. Both of those verses are pretty good lists of integrity. In fact in my quiet times one thing I do is go through those lists (or others like them) and ask God to point out what areas I need to work on. Usually one of those qualities of integrity will start flashing at me like a neon sign! Then I've found that I have to do my part if God is going to do His. With transformation there are the things God does for us because we cannot do them for ourselves, and the things we have to take care of ourselves because God will not do them for us. Integrity is one of the things that is going to require us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. Look at what Colossians 3:12 tells us:

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you...

God wants you to wake up every day and get dressed in the clothing of honor. This isn't the garden of Eden where you can be "naked and unashamed". You need your pants and your shirt but you also need to dress yourselves spiritually. And here is the wardrobe God picked out for you:

...compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Imagine the extreme makeover God could do in your life if you let Him dress you spiritually every morning when you wake up!

I have never been a fashion expert. When I was a teenager I wore clothes that I liked without ever wondering if they went "together". What does that mean anyways?!?! I went to an amusement park once with a group of friends and I wore my favorite Bermuda shorts (it was the '80s- Bermuda shorts were cool then, ok?) and my favorite shirt. What did I care that the shorts were plaid and the shirt was striped? One particular girl (I think her name was Tammy) seemed to take great pleasure in pointing out how stupid I looked. I didn't care much though so she eventually stopped because there's no pleasure in making fun of someone who's so fashion impaired they just don't get it.

Then I went to college and met Judy. After we started dating she made sure she went shopping with me so I wouldn't embarrass her too much when we were out in public. She showed me what shirts to wear with what pants and what sweater. I even had socks that went with "outfits". I was styling. One day I went into class and Tammy (the girl from the amusement park had transferred to our school by then) took one look at me and asked, "who dressed you?!?!?" I told her that maybe I had dressed myself. She said, "no, I saw how you dress yourself and this isn't your doing!"

Have you ever had a similar situation when it came to your spiritual wardrobe? Are people horrified by your lack of spiritual fashion sense? Do you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror knowing you have no clue what kind of spiritual clothing to put on so you're not naked? Then let God pick out your clothes tomorrow morning when you wake up. You just have to put them on. Then it will be up to you to make sure that they stay on throughout the day. I don't want to act like it will be easy but this much I can promise you. If you put on God's wardrobe every morning and do your best to leave it on as you go through your day people will notice. They'll ask, "who dressed you?!?!?" And when you ask why, maybe they, like Tammy did with me will say, "because I saw how you dressed yourself and this isn't your doing!"

Prayer: Father, teach me how humility can lead to integrity so that I won't simply see myself as You do but will also move forward to become more and more like Your Son. Point out what qualities of integrity I need to work on today. Lay out my spiritual clothing for today and give me the wisdom to put it on and leave it on throughout my day. I want to become a person of honor. Show me the areas in my character that are truly weaknesses and are preventing me from becoming like Jesus. Give me whatever I need to overcome my poor character habits. Teach me how to move forward with You... even when I am scared... and show me what my next step is. What do you want me to do today? Give me the strength to do whatever it is. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday Reflection: The second thing I think Jesus was getting at goes beyond just the idea of lying to the arena of misleading others with our words. My friends who attended the Catholic Church would talk of sins of commission and sins of omission. I had no idea what the difference was. Turns out a sin of commission would be an outright lie but to mislead someone by withholding the truth or sharing only parts of the truth would be a sin of omission. Both were bad in my Catholic friend's view and I think Jesus would agree.

But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool.

Matthew 5:34-35 (NLT)

What in the world is Jesus talking about? He's talking about misleading people by manipulating the wording of certain vows. The Pharisees loved making and taking vows. If they were promising you something they'd take a vow that ended up being worthless and if they were taking a vow from you (to make sure you did what you said) they made sure the vow you took was binding. Jesus is not a fan:

Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple,' but that it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.' Blind fools! Which is more important- the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? And you say that to swear 'by the altar' is not binding, but to swear 'by the gifts on the altar' is binding. How blind! For which is more important- the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Matthew 23:16-20 (NLT)

What were the Pharisees doing? They had come up with a system where they could swear by the Temple and it meant nothing (they didn't have to follow up on their promise) but would make you swear by the gold in the Temple and that was legally binding (since they were pretty much the judge, jury and executioners in the Jewish legal system of the first century). It was pretty much impossible for an average Jew to keep up with- much like it's pretty much impossible for an average American to keep up with the IRS tax law these days. You pretty much have to be a professional tax preparer to know the ins and outs of the tax laws. That's what the Pharisees had done with the whole vow-system of first century Israel. It was another case of the powerful taking advantage of the powerless and Jesus hated it.

He's not saying you're no longer allowed to make a vow or take a vow (like I pointed out earlier in the week- Paul took at least two vows that we know of and wasn't chastised by Jesus for it)- He's saying don't use these vows to mislead people. Why not? Why does Jesus care so much?

Do you remember earlier in the Sermon On The Mount when Jesus tells the people listening to Him (which includes you and me as we study this most influential speech in all of human history) that they/we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world? How does He suggest we go about living that kind of life? That's what the rest of the Sermon On The Mount is about- how to live lives that slow the process of rot and decay in a world that is falling apart and how to live lives that shine brightly in a world that is stumbling in darkness. So far He's told us what that looks like when it come to anger, lust and divorce. Now He comes to how we do that when it comes to our integrity.

After all- what kind of witness are we going to have if we are known as liars rather than men and women of complete integrity? Not much as it turns out:

The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine. But the road of wrongdoing gets darker and darker- travelers can't see a thing; they fall flat on their faces. Proverbs 4:18-19 (MES)

You want your life to shine? Tell the truth. Don't lie. Don't mislead people by cleverly crafting your words to mean one thing when the truth is something else entirely. By living a life of integrity your life will shine brightly and you will be a light to a world that is stumbling in darkness. But choose to go the other way and the Bible promises your life will soon stop shining and will become dimmer and dimmer. I doubt you want that for yourself and I know Jesus doesn't want it for you.

So shine by living a life of integrity the best you can.

Friday Reflection: The final thing I want to look at when it comes to Jesus' words on integrity/vows is that Jesus hates it when people make getting to God more complicated than it has to be. We are always doing that but the Pharisees were world-class when it came to making a person's relationship with God convoluted. Jesus on the other hand was simplicity personified. When He invited someone to join Him He used one very simple statement:

Follow me and be my disciple. Matthew 9:9 (NLT)

Those were His words to Matthew but He offers the same invitation to any of us who are willing to listen. Nothing could be simpler. It may not be easy but it's far from rocket science. Just come follow and become His disciple. Now a disciple wanted to become exactly like their Rabbi. They wanted to take like their Rabbi, walk like their Rabbi, eat like their Rabbi, sleep like their Rabbi...

I could go on but you get the picture. Jesus' invitation is simple but all encompassing. There's no room for a part time disciple. He has plenty of room for imperfect disciples- in fact that's all there is in this world. He doesn't expect perfection- He expects complete devotion. It all comes down to a person's mindset. Do you want to become just like Him or not? Are you willing to trust Him enough that even when you think something that He asks seems unfair or impossible that you will say "I really want to do what you ask but I'm not sure how I'm going to pull it off" or do you say, "I'm not really into that so I'm just going to ignore that part of Your calling, Lord."

The Pharisees were masters of figuring out loopholes for the parts of God's law they weren't interested in obeying. But (and as a friend of mine likes to say, "this is a very big but!") they were fanatically committed to making sure the average Joseph of first century Israel followed the whole law- even the parts the Pharisees sidestepped:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Matthew 23:13 (NIV)

How were the Pharisees shutting the door of the kingdom in people's faces? By making it seem like walking with God was impossible. By making it seem like they themselves were following the law perfectly (even though they weren't) and demanding that typical Jews live up to what the Pharisees had decided didn't apply to them. It was a toxic religious climate and left the people of God in a constant state of uncertainty and guilt.

Jesus comes along and demystifies the process. When asked what the most important commands in the Old Testament was Jesus didn't hesitate:

Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." Matthew 22:37-40 (NLT)

All the law and the prophets are based on these two laws- love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. There's actually an implicit third command in those two laws- to love yourself. Not a narcissistic, selfish love but a love where you're taking really

good care of yourself so that you have the time, energy and health to love God and love others. It's not complicated. It may not be easy and knowing what the most loving thing to do for God, others or yourself might now always be obvious and may take a lifetime of walking with Jesus to figure out.

But you've got a lifetime and when you get to the end of that life you'll have an eternity to keep figuring it out with Jesus' help. But until you get to the other side of eternity the best way for me and you to figure out the answer to that question (what is the most loving thing to do in any given situation) is by spending time with Jesus. Read His story. Get to know Him. The more you do the more clearly you'll see how to be loving towards the people Jesus has entrusted into our lives.