

MEDITATIONS FROM ORIOLE-YORK MILLS UNITED CHURCH



Straight Talk!

by Reverend Chris T. Miller
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This is one in a series of selected sermons and resources from Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from the insights they provide.

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James 5:12, Matthew 5:33-37

Will Rogers, actor, writer and witty speaker, once said: “Live so that you wouldn’t be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.” We smile because that makes a lot of sense. At least that’s what my nephew told me through his Facebook page.

Marg said her little budgie picked up a word from her. It was unintentional. She didn’t try to teach the bird to say “sorry.” Dickens just picked up the word as Marg would often apologize for leaving her home alone -- again and again. So think what your family parrot might mimic – if you had one. What would it hear all the time from you – or in your house? Would it be embarrassing?

James, the brother of Jesus, is our teacher today as he has been for the past several weeks. In James 3:9 and 10, James says clearly that those who are followers of Jesus should not be blessing God out of one side of their mouths while out of the other side they are cursing or speaking negatively against people. I suspect James would have said “Amen” to Will Rogers’s reflection on life.

Toward the end of his letter in Chapter 5, verse 12, James builds on his teaching about how we ought to speak as followers of Jesus when he writes:

“Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can’t be used against you.”

James believes that being truthful and honest in our speaking with one another is crucial in our relationships in

the church as well as in the community at large. James is no armchair theologian or philosopher. He deals with practical matters in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another. And how we speak is very practical.

A chaplain of the Kansas State senate was noted for his short, concise prayers. Here is one he used before the opening of one senate session:

“Omniscient Father: Help us to know who is telling the truth. One side tells us one thing and the other just the opposite. And if neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that too. And if each side is telling half the truth, give us the wisdom to put the right halves together. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

James would have appreciated that prayer! “Just say yes or no. Just say what is true.” That’s even a pertinent prayer for us in Canada these days as we wonder about whether there is going to be a federal election this fall -- and why.

We are a suspicious society. We often wonder if people are telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth – or if they are telling half-truths or putting a good spin on the facts. I suppose we have reason to be cynical at times with what we hear and experience. We have our e-Healthgates, our Mulroneygates, our financial scams and our combative political system – all of which contribute to skepticism and difficulty in discerning who is really telling the truth. A cartoon published in the *New Yorker* magazine awhile ago put it well. It pictured two middle-aged men in a jail cell. One says to the other: “All along, I thought our level of corruption fell well within community standards.” [[Bernard Schoenbaum](#), *New Yorker*, July 18, 1988]

We live in a world that clearly has trouble being truthful.

What about the books we read? Are they truthful in their presentation? The late Mortimer Adler, former editor of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Great Books of the Western World Series*, wrote this in his classic book titled *How to Read a Book*:

“The question, Is it true? can be asked of anything we read. It is applicable to every kind of writing.... No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved; by the same token, to criticize it adversely for its failure in this respect is to treat it with the seriousness that a serious work deserves. Yet, strangely enough in recent years, for the first time in Western history, there is a dwindling concern with this criterion of excellence. Books win the plaudits of the critics and gain widespread popular attention almost to the extent that they flout the truth—the more outrageously they do so, the better.” [Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 165.]

We have trouble being truthful in the way we approach history. On the front page of yesterday's [Sept. 5, 2009] *National Post* was the headline “Stalin: The Murderous Dictator? He's History.” According to the article, in new Russian school textbooks, students will now read that Joseph Stalin was “one of the most successful leaders of the U.S.S.R.” In order to instill patriotism in Russian young people, history has been rewritten -- no more reading about how prison labour camps, mass purges and all-pervasive

terror were necessary parts of the drive to make Russia great. Truth and honesty are set aside. As the heading proclaims in large letters on page 17 where the story continues, “Revisionism is the order of the day.”

We also have trouble being truthful in our personal lives. Some of you might remember the Blue Jays baseball manager who replaced Cito Gaston in 1998. Tim Johnson lasted only one year in Toronto because he was caught lying on his resume. He said he was a Vietnam war veteran and told stories from that war to inspire his players. The problem was they were not true. And so his life was built on fabrications. Integrity and truth were set aside in the pragmatic pursuit to be an inspiring leader.

But let’s not rush to judgment about others too quickly. Telling the truth is sometimes difficult for us as well. We who are followers of Jesus Christ must not make the mistake of thinking that the problem is only “out there.” James was not writing his letter to the community-at-large but to followers of Jesus in the church!

In a *Reader's Digest* survey of 2,624 readers entitled “How Honest Are You?”, here is the percentage of those who said they had:

1. Called in sick at work when they were not ill: 63 per cent
2. Taken office supplies from their company for personal use: 63 per cent
3. Taken anything valuable from their company for personal use: 16 per cent
4. Misstated facts on a resume or job application: 18 per cent
5. Shifted blame to a co-worker for something they did: 13 per cent

6. Been undercharged or received too much change from a cashier and did not tell: 50 per cent
7. Downloaded music from an Internet site without paying for it: 37 per cent
8. "Cheated" on their tax return (not declared income or over reported deductions): 17 per cent
9. Switched price tags to get a lower price for something they wanted to buy: 12 per cent
10. Lied to their spouse about the cost of a recent purchase: 32 per cent.

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

Do you identify with any statements on this survey? If not these, maybe there are some other sensitive areas. I have to admit I understand in my own spirit all too well the attitude underlying the following statement written by the great British preacher and writer George Macdonald to his son:

“I always try -- I think I do -- to be truthful. All the same I tell a great many petty lies, [for example] things that mean one thing to myself though another to other people. But I do not think lightly of it. Where I am more often wrong is in tacitly pretending I hear things which I do not, especially jokes and good stories, the point of which I always miss; but, seeing every one laugh, I laugh too, for the sake of not looking a fool. My respect for the world's opinion is my greatest stumbling block I fear.”

Now I understand our culture certainly doesn't help us be honest and always truthful. But as followers of Jesus, let's be honest and admit that even Christians have the tendency to traffic in untruth. Maybe that's one reason a prayer of confession about how we live and speak, spoken together to God, continues to be a part of the church's order of worship.

I recognize it is not always easy to be perfectly truthful but James's teaching in Chapter 5, verse 12 is a call to radical truthfulness:

“Don't add words like 'I swear to God' to your own words.... Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can't be used against you.”

James's teaching was not original with him. He took it directly from the lips of his brother Jesus. Jesus said virtually the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 5. Jesus said that living in God's Kingdom is radically different in many ways from anything the world understands or does. You heard his words about making promises earlier in the *Good News Bible*; now hear Matthew 5:33-37 in *The Message Bible*:

“And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong. ”

If we, as followers of Jesus Christ, heed this call, we will find ourselves being more truthful to ourselves, to each other – and to God. I also suspect we might even get into trouble at times with our culture. But such radical truthfulness, when it is spoken in love and kindness, will also bring power to our lives and grace to our world.

When James talks about being truthful with each other, he knows we can do this because *God* is at the heart of all truthfulness. For we are believers in the God of Jesus Christ who is not only love but also truth. Recall Jesus words about himself in John 14:6: “I am the truth.” Because God is at the heart of all truthfulness, God cares about our language -- our saying yes and no clearly, our speaking what is true with one another and everyone else we encounter. That is why Jesus said not to use an oath or swear by something to try to make it more truthful. James would say we don’t need to be like we used to be or might have been when we crossed our fingers behind our backs because we knew we were being deceptive. We don’t need to swear on our mother’s graves or on a stack of Bibles or cross our hearts and hope to die when we talk to each other about being truthful. Maybe we should add another value to our list of stated values for our church: being truthful with each other. Or as Paul put it in Ephesians 4:15: “speaking the truth in a spirit of love.”

There was a time when a handshake between two people was all that was needed to seal an agreement. Today, unless the arrangement is signed on the dotted line, there is no seal or delivery. James would say to those in the church – to those who make a serious claim to follow Jesus Christ -- just say yes or no if that is warranted. Just say what is true. That way what you say can’t be used against you.

Of course there are issues that are private. Of course there is a need for legally signed documents in our business and political arenas. James isn’t talking about that. He is talking to the church. He wants the church – the followers of Jesus - - to be known as honest and truthful people. When we have to use more words with each other – such as “I swear to

God”-- we are admitting, whether we know it or not, that we have a strong tendency to be deceptive. Rather, we should simply be saying “You have my word” – or you have my yes or no, if that is the case. And that is what God wants to hear from us too! Not pious or careless vows that are soon forgotten and never kept but simple promises that prove to be as good as our word.

One commentator says: “Oath-taking is popular because people are congenital liars.” I would say people have a strong tendency to be deceptive. Maybe that is the same thing. Dr. Helmut Thielicke, German scholar and pastor who resisted compromising his integrity during the Hitler era in Nazi Germany, put it like this:

“Whenever I utter the formula ‘I swear by God,’ I am really saying, ‘Now I’m going to mark off an area of absolute truth and put walls around it to cut it off from the muddy floods of untruthfulness and irresponsibility that ordinarily overruns my speech.’ In fact, I am saying even more than this. I am saying that people are expecting me to lie from the start. And just because they are counting on my lying I have to bring up these big guns of oaths and words of honour.... [Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), p. 55.]

What can we do to promote truthfulness where a “no” is truly a “no” and a “yes” is truly a “yes” in our lives?

Let’s remember that Jesus believes words are significant – some would even say sacramental. Words are an outward sign of an inward condition from our hearts. In Mathew 12:34 and Mark 7:20-21, Jesus said, “For out of the

overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” So a continually truthful spirit that comes from the heart will produce an increasing genuineness and honesty of speech.

Let’s keep in mind that we will be judged by the words we say and how we say them. In Matthew 12:36 and 37 of *The Message Bible*, Jesus says, “Every careless word is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation.” In Jesus’ mind, our human words are significantly connected with God’s Kingdom and with eternity.

Let’s take God’s Word seriously. When Jesus prayed for his disciples -- and for us -- after the Last Supper and just before he and his disciples headed out to the Garden of Gethsemane, he said: “[Father] Make them holy – consecrated – with the truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Frankly, for followers of Jesus, regular reading and thoughtful meditation of the Bible is *not optional*. For in the Scriptures, we find the truth God wants us to live by. King David knew what God desired when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan about his affair with Bathsheba: “What you’re after [God] is truth from the inside out” (Psalm 51:6).

Let’s be aware that it is often from carelessness as much as intentional deception that we fail to speak the truth. So we must be careful about what we say. If it is not true, we ought to correct ourselves. If we have been giving the wrong impression, let’s straighten it out.

As usual, James has some straight talk for the church:

“And since you know that God cares, let your language show it... Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can't be used against you.”

Lord, help us to speak the truth always and always to speak it with love and kindness to each other and to all we meet!

May this be so for me and for you!

Rev. Chris Miller,
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