

“Speaking the Truth”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 23, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Philippians 4:4-9

Matthew 5:33-37

Summer Worship Series: *A Curriculum of Love* – Week Twelve

In this final leg of the three – Loving our Neighbors - in our summer worship series, *A Curriculum of Love* we have, so far, explored how we tend not to see our neighbors as they truly are; how we instantly place judgments on them without even knowing it, projecting our prejudices and biases. We also explored how others do the same to us. We discussed how forgiveness means realizing that nothing we do is actually personal, because if we were truly acting out of our True Selves, we would never hurt each other knowingly and would instantly seek amends if we did.

As we work to love our neighbors, we continue, this morning, by considering how our speech can get in the way of us doing so. What comes out of our mouths reveals a lot about our blind-spots, ignorance, wounds, and trauma. In Michael Rosenberg’s book entitled “Non-violent Communication” he describes how so much of our communication is violent; how, when we get upset, we often respond in ways that raise each other's defenses. “You always do this!” we might say; or, “You never help me!” Such statements likely never lead to fruitful discussions because none of them are always true. In our fear, pain, and anger, we throw words and phrases around like weapons and, in response, we all get out our shields.

Jesus shows us another way: teaching us to be clear and honest in our speech; to say “yes” when we mean “yes” and “no” when we mean “no.” This level of honesty can be difficult because telling the truth has not always gone well for us. Many of us have had experiences where we say what we really mean and get scolded, yelled at, or punished for it. So, we learn to shape the truth, to couch what we mean so we don’t get hurt.

Over the years, our words start to become shields and swords of fear. This doesn’t mean that we are following Jesus’ advice when we say harsh things. There is a difference between gently pulling someone aside and telling them their zipper is down or they have food stuck in their teeth; and doing so loudly in front of strangers. Learning to speak clearly but kindly is a hard balance. If what we say comes from anything other than care or concern, it is no longer Truth.

Speaking actual Truth – not always what the other person wants to hear – comes from a desire to connect or correct clearly and kindly. This is where so much of our speech fails.

But Jesus' teaching and example continues to unfold in meaning. Sometimes we want others to think well of us so we overpromise and overcommit and say 'yes' when we would rather say 'no'. This doesn't help us nor the person we just agreed with. It would be better if they found someone who really wanted to accomplish the task with them.

Additionally, Jesus warns us against using words to manipulate others into doing what we want them to do. Controlling others is not loving them. Accusing is not loving. Watching what comes out of our mouth will more closely reveal what is truly in our hearts. We don't do this to feel bad about and judge ourselves, but to see what still needs to be healed within us. When we see our neighbors as full human beings – and choose our words clearly, honestly, and lovingly – it can make a huge impact in the world.¹

Today's gospel reading comes from a section of the Sermon on the Mount called the "Antitheses," as Jesus points to commandments from the Jewish Law and then suggests otherwise. "You have heard it said ... but I say to you..." We might mistakenly hear Jesus saying: *You previously have heard this commandment, but now I am setting a new one before you, for the law was inadequate, insufficient, and is thus now no longer applicable; here are a new set of commandments to replace the outdated ones you previously followed.*²

In this way Jesus, as he says earlier in the Sermon, does "not abolish but fulfill[s]" the Law (v. 17). No longer do traditional teachings on, say, murder and adultery apply strictly to the acts of murder and adultery themselves. Instead, they become doorways to examine the internal dynamics as well as external behaviors of one's life: anger, derision, and slander; lust, temptation, and speech.

Jesus' extension of the Law by the internalization of it is, perhaps, one of its most radical aspects; so that not only our behaviors, but attitudes and emotions also fall within its scope. Of course, this is not new to Jewish thinking: throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Law was intended to be taken to heart and not only outwardly observed. Here, Jesus is connecting the dots for his listeners from outward acts to internal orientation, from murder to anger, from adultery to lust. It is one thing to behave rightly. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love. It is easier to keep the commandment against murder than avoid the negative effects of anger in one's heart.

Thus, we might pat ourselves on the back for not committing murder but still harm and alienate others by our anger; or for refraining from adultery, and yet create intimate relationships with our work, sports, or the digital world; rather than with a spouse. Jesus

¹ Siri Strommen, *A Curriculum of Love*

² Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.com*

shifts our attention from the particular behaviors we must avoid to the interior orientations we need to cultivate.

Jesus offers a more radical ethic; one already hinted at in the list of Beatitudes that precede this discourse on the Antitheses. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart; all of these are called “blessed” not because they are the exemplars of Law, but because of their inward orientations of the heart. The righteousness of this way of life means more than following rules; it requires and empowers a life surrendered to God and neighbor.

Today’s reading has to do with the ancient custom of taking oaths. People would, in order to make a vow or promise more solemn, invoke the name of God – something like, *as God is my witness, I swear...* Remnants of this old practice remain today when witnesses in courts of law pledge to *tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God* or when people mutter under their breath, *by God, I’m not going to let them get away with that!*

The Old Testament Law condemned “false oaths;” that is, promising to do something in the name of God and then, not doing it. But Jesus condemns oaths of every kind, declaring, “Do not swear at all.” Why? Some people argue that what Jesus is against is the use of “swear words.” Although this idea is not entirely beside the point (many modern “curse words” originated in religious language), profanity is not the main subject of the text.

In the ancient world, an oath held approximately the same weight as would a modern-day signed contract. That is, just as it seems nearly unimaginable to engage in business today without signatures, contracts, and piles of paperwork, so too would have business practices of Jesus’s day been rendered nearly incomprehensible without the presence of verbal vows. Strengthening these vows by attaching them to something of great importance (for example, by heaven or earth) may have served a purpose not unlike the verification of a document by a notary today.³

Jesus may have seen and been concerned about the casual use of taking oaths. Perhaps people were attaching, *in the name of God* or *as God is my witness* to common transactions and promises in life – the pledge to buy a cow, the vow to visit a relative, the commitment to pay a debt owed – hoping to summon divine power to bolster life’s routines; assuming God could be controlled; harnessed to pull whatever wagon they wanted to ride.⁴

Jesus’ words erase this practice. *You do not control God*, he seems to be saying, *so do not swear at all*. His suggestion to let one’s “yes” be “yes” is essentially an encouragement to ensure that one’s spoken word is so authentic and so in line with one’s intentions that it is

³ Melanie Howard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁴ Thomas Long, “Matthew” in *Westminster Bible Commentaries*

already above question just on its own, even without that additional strengthener. In other words, Jesus is calling for his audience to demonstrate the highest possible level of trustworthiness and integrity; not only in their dealings with other humans, but also in their dealings with God.

As we read this passage, Thomas Long suggests, we can almost hear the familiar sounds of a child trying to bargain with a parent:

Jesus says, “do not swear at all.”

“Okay,” the child replies, “we won’t swear in God’s name, but what about vowing, ‘in heaven’s name?’”

“No, heaven is God’s throne.”

“Well, then, what about swearing, ‘in the name of the earth?’”

“No, don’t swear that way either. The earth is God’s footstool.”

“But surely we can at least swear by Jerusalem.”

“No, Jerusalem is God’s city. Indeed, everything is God’s and you cannot escape God’s holy presence. You do not control God; you do not control the world. In fact, you do not even control the color of your own hair, so do not swear by that either!”

“But, what can I say then?”

“Tell the truth. You are given power over your own words, so when you say ‘yes,’ mean it, and when you say ‘no,’ mean that as well.”⁵

To what are these commandments actually calling us? Not to a checklist of morality but to a flourishing of life. Not to a baseline of decency but into an embodied, transformative encounter with all whom we meet. Not to a sufficient set of hurdles for righteousness but to a path of wholeness with creatures and the creator alike.

Let us pray: *Dear God, please help us to speak the truth; to be kind; to be courageous and clear. May our words not entrap but free us and others; heal ourselves and others. In Jesus name. Amen.*

⁵ Long