



Matthew 23:16–22

16 “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the

gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Justin Mof-fatt)

When I was a kid, telling a lie felt like a little thing. We called them 'fibs', which cute-ified lying. In fact, if a preacher wanted to help people see that we were 'sinners', they would ask people to raise their

hands if they'd ever lied, and, since everyone had, everyone raised their hands, which, in that moment became sufficient proof that we were all sinners. And we'd all breath a sigh of relief. Yes, we had done the wrong thing, but only in a little way. Not like the really bad people.

But the truth is: lying is huge. It is devastating. Always is. Always was. It decimates lives. It destroys marriages. It makes a mockery of our justice system. Nations can't function when lying is habitual. It riddles life with distrust. It is poison. Of the worst kind. The kind that doesn't just make you sick, but kills you.

Which is not surprising, since a lie is at the core of the Genesis account of the Fall; a twisting of truth from the serpent,

who Jesus, in John 8 calls, the ‘father of lies’. And deep down we know that lying isn’t right.

It is a measure of our deep belief that lying is a problem that we go to lengths to cover them up and to minimise their evil: along with outright lying comes deception, secrecy, boasting, false witness, twisting facts, half-truths, and exaggerations. We even lie about lying!

Here is another way to minimise lying: declare when a lie is OK, and when it’s not OK. The old classic way was to lie with your fingers crossed behind your back. Really, as kids, we used to claim that one! But we have adult versions too. For example, one can lie to the media, but you can’t lie ‘under oath’ in a court. Think about that. I’m

glad, because courts especially are entirely undermined by lies, and would actually function properly if everyone always told the truth.

But why is lying under oath in a court considered more grave than lying to the media? Bill Clinton is the gold standard as I make this observation. Clinton was asked about a comment he made and he famously said, “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.”

Jesus continues his sustained attack on the Jewish religious establishment in our passage today. The teachers and the Pharisees had developed elaborate ways to minimise sin by declaring:

If you swear by the gold of the temple,

you are bound to keep the promise you make. If you swear by the gift of the altar, you are bound to keep the promise you make.

But, if you swear by the temple itself, you are free to be loose with the thing you promised. If you swear by the altar of the temple, you don't have to worry too much. You've got your fingers crossed.

Jesus says: Blind Guides. Blind Fools. Blind Men. You get the picture. The guide is meant to see the road ahead, the dangers, and the important sites on the journey. The religious leaders are guides, but they can't see the right path ahead. They'll lead people away from God.

Jesus says: Woe to the blind guides. This

is the third 'woe' and there are more to come. They will be judged by God. What they are doing here is that serious.

Jesus says: Your 'swearing' games are just games. They are designed to make sure that you don't actually tell the truth. They are designed so you can get out of a promise you make. Whereas Jesus said way back in Matthew 5:37,

'All you need to say is simply "Yes," or "No"; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.'

Or, in the older translations:

"...let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'"

Tell the truth. That's the point. Jesus also says: you appear to have your priorities wrong anyway! The temple is more important than the gold of the temple; the altar in the temple more important than the gift on it. The real thing that matters is that you know that God hears it. 'The One who dwells in the temple' matters more than the temple. The One worshipped matters more than any part of worship.

Jesus died to rescue us from our lying, in obedience to God the Father in heaven. That One hears all your words and your promises. How important are our words? How careful are you?

Even in the dark US Presidential TV Series 'House of Cards', the most conniving of them all, Frank Underwood says to the

President's Chief of Staff after she breaks a promise she made to him, because 'circumstances have changed':

"The nature of promises is that they remain immune to changing circumstances."

If Frank Underwood can get that right, so can we.

Think

Do you minimise a lie, justifying it in your mind? Do you have an adult version of 'crossing your fingers'? A more sophisticated one, but still the same minimising effect? Do you make promises you can't keep?

Or do you use your words carefully? Do

you examine what circumstances may be ahead of you to test whether your promise is flippant or not? Do you seek to tell the truth? In love of course. Truth and grace go hand in hand, for grace is what gives truth-telling its depth and colour.

Pray

Be honest with God about the way you use your words. Ask him to reveal your sin. It's not like he can't hear what you have said and promised. That's the effect of verse 22: He sits on the throne. Above it all.

That God who sits on the throne loves you. Christ stepped down from his throne to save us. Which means you can be honest about your sins and failings; recognise

their horror, and then, because of Christ, know that his love and grace towards you is bigger and more powerful than your sin. That's the truth. So pray to him. His beauty trumps our ugliness. His death is the antidote to the poison. His truth sets us free.

If you have destroyed a relationship by lies, or someone has done that to you, ask that the grace of God may fill your life with peace, and ask him to give you the courage to make amends to those who you may have wronged, or forgive those who have wronged you.

Pray for those you speak to regularly: flatmates, colleagues, family. Pray that they will be lifted up by your words, not torn down. Pray for truth, and always, pray for more grace.