

10/23/2011 WITHOUT ULTERIOR MOTIVES

Scripture Lessons: 1 Thes. 2:1-8; Matt. 22:34-46

by Rev. Dr. Bruce A. Jones

One summer when I was about 12 years old, we visited my cousins up in Quakertown, Pennsylvania for several days. My cousins, Biz and Steve, were hearty, outdoorsy types, and one afternoon they invited me to go fishing with them. I had never been fishing since my dad never fished, and I was more of an athlete and I liked sports. Anyway we walked down to their favorite fishing hole, and we fished for a couple of hours. They taught me how to cast, and we were using lures, and they even outfitted me with one of their older rods, a Zebco, if I recall correctly. My cousins were having some success and caught two or three small fish which they tossed back into the water.

I was completely “skunked” – which means, I didn’t catch a thing. Just before we decided to pack it in, one of my cousins caught a really nice little bass. It was great fun watching his battle to get the fish ashore. He decided to take this one home.

Now I think he felt sorry for me, seeing as I was his guest, and he and his brother had caught all the fish. So on our way back, he said to me, “Why don’t we tell our parents that you caught the big fish.” I wasn’t a very assertive person back then so I sheepishly agreed. When we got home, he burst in the door and said, “Hey everybody, look at the fish Bruce caught.” So at first I was only embarrassed. It’s hard trying to look victorious and proud, when you know the whole thing is a sham. My parents were all excited, my aunt was all excited, they rushed to get their cameras and they had me pose with “my” fish on the front porch of the house.

Later on, after all the excitement had calmed down, I think Steven was sort of wanting all that attention, and perhaps he hoped I would ‘fess up, and give him the real credit. So he asked me why I didn’t tell the truth, and just confess that it wasn’t really my fish. I said, “I don’t know, it just seemed hard after they were making such a big fuss over it, and besides – this was all your idea.”

I am sure that Steven set the record straight with his parents as soon as we pulled out the driveway to head home. But I never could muster the courage to tell my parents that we had lied, and that I had not caught that fish. It literally haunted me for years. Someone asked me, if I ever told my parents later. I said, “Well, no, but my father reads all of my sermons, and this is not the first time I’ve shared this story.”

Deceitfulness and lying is, unfortunately, something we run into throughout our lives. We hate it when we are lied to, and we try really hard not to do any lying ourselves – unless telling the truth would get us into trouble, or might cause us to lose the sale, or would make us look smaller than we really want to be.

It is not uncommon in today’s world for all kinds of people to misrepresent themselves or to ‘shade the truth’ a little. It starts at the top and works down. Politicians in the public eye are often caught saying things that are contrary to speeches they’ve made or ignoring promises they have made. The phrase “politically expedient” often describes why a person changes their positions or denies any responsibility for things that happen. We also see it in sports stars, who swear before congress that they never knowingly used ‘performance enhancing substances’ and yet years later the real truth comes out and we are shocked or angry.

Salespeople are notorious liars. They will say whatever it takes to convince us that their product or service is the best choice for us.

But if we are honest - you and I have a hard time being honest 100% of the time. It is hard really to always, *a/ways* tell the truth, and we get a little confused about that whole “speaking the truth in love”

bit. What that means is, we need to be honest and straightforward in our relationships, but we don't need to be brutally honest. While we might think it is the truth, we usually don't go and tell people to their faces that they are fat, or ugly, or mean. This would be truly hurtful. We instead try hard to accept everybody and get along with everybody.

The test then, between not being brutally honest and downright lying, is to look at our motivation. Did we not say what we could have said because we wanted to be kind and loving, or because we wanted to hide the truth and deceive them? Our motivation, our attitude, and our intent are very important factors in determining if we are being sinful, or if we are trying to spare someone's feelings. We must speak the truth lovingly and without ulterior motives.

When the Pharisees came to question Jesus, they were hiding their true intention, which was to trap him so they could discredit him. Jesus, of course, saw right through their ploy. They asked him which was the greatest commandment. And remember they had 613 commandments – and not surprisingly, most of them are “Thou shalt nots.” They were thinking that if Jesus selected just one, they could accuse him of diminishing the importance of the others. But instead, Jesus picked two other instructions which are not actually commandments but are far more all-encompassing: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.** And Jesus didn't stop there, because that coin has two sides. **The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**

If we love God – who is truth – then we ourselves must love truth and honesty. Loving our neighbors – means that we must care about them, care about their feelings and care about being honest and loving with them. There is no room for us who are Christians to have any other motivation than loving kindness and transparent honesty.

Interestingly, that's exactly what Paul talks about in his letter to the church people of Thessalonika. Paul wrote, **We had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.**

His final statement points directly to Paul's true motivation for sharing the gospel. He wrote, **We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well.**

We all know that we should present ourselves honestly to others. And whether we are in a work context, in a relationship, or in any other setting, people expect us and need us to be straight-up and honest with them. They judge us and value us based upon our trustworthiness. Therefore our witness, our testimony, and our sharing of the gospel with others is actually predicated on the witness, testimony and gospel they see and hear in our words, our actions, and our lives.

Perhaps you don't expect to hear a message in church on lying. Perhaps you think this is such a ‘no-brainer’ that it is a waste of time. But we are finding more and more in our world, that people do not distinguish between those who call themselves Christians, and those who are truly Christian. Christians have been caught lying or saying things that are not very loving. And non-believers cast all of us into the same bucket of hypocrisy. Therefore we must distinguish ourselves, as people get to know us. We want

them to say, "he or she is a real Christian, not like those who only claim to be Christian." We are what we live, not what we call ourselves.

The world is constantly watching us, trying to figure us out, and if we don't stand out from the rest of the sinful world, we discredit our own reputations, we discredit our faith, and we smear the name of Jesus in the view and experience of non-believers. We have no idea how many people use the bad behavior of other Christians to declare that Christianity is empty and only for a bunch of hypocrites.

I am committed to help all of us make a better witness than that. I want all of us to take much more seriously the way we talk, the words we use, the tone with which we speak to people and most importantly, that we never lie to someone. You and I are models. You and I give testimony every single day. And our co-workers, our neighbors and friends, and yes, even our own children are watching to see if we mean what we say, and if we live the faith we claim with our words. It is not a simple exercise. It takes effort, self-discipline and courage, to not take the easy way out, but to stand up and say with sincerity, what the truth is.

The litmus test is our intent and motivation. If we strive to be caring and honest, loving and truthful, always for the benefit of others; it will become very evident in everything we do and say. That is my prayer for all of us. So let us always be working on this, remembering that we may be the only true example of Christ that other people will see. Amen.