

## **Pako Morning Service: 19/03/2017**

Scripture Readings: James 5:7-12; Mat 5:33-37; Sermon: "Tell the truth."

Congregation, a teacher was listening to a young male student explaining why his homework wasn't completed. When the student was finished, the teacher made the comment, "Young man, if you are going to lie, you need to get much better at it and better than the teacher listening to you now!" Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, people have been telling lies. In the OT, liars are often mentioned. Psalm 63:11, "But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God's name will praise him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced." Psalm 116:11; "And in my dismay, I said, "All men are liars." In the NT, Tit 1:12, Paul writing to Timothy in the NT says, "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'"

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' central concern is that we speak the truth. Jesus knows that sinful human beings struggle with speaking truthfully. And we have all experienced it. Not all politicians and car salesman are liars. We say we will be home from work in time for tea, only to arrive 30 minutes late and the dinner is burnt. Keeping within the context of our text, nearly half of people who promise to love, cherish and care for their spouse until death do them part, break the promise.

Congregation, Christians must make sure they never develop a credibility gap. If truth cannot be expected from us, then from whom can we expect it? Everything that a Christian does and says is important. It is important because all of life is lived in the presence of God and under His watchful eye. It is important because we are representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is important because we are being watched by the world and can either have a negative or positive impact upon others.

In our text, Jesus tells us our talk should not be cheap. Be slow with your words for we need to speak the truth! Jesus doesn't want us to rewrite the law and include some loopholes. Just speak the truth. And Jesus reaches that principle by discussing the matter of taking oaths. Taking an oath is a convention designed to restrain lies and false promises. Today we reserve oaths for when we become members of a church or a military officer, or when we get married, or when we are called to testify in court. Oaths and promises and even contracts have the same goal. We want to encourage people to tell the truth and be true to their word.

Jesus says, you have heard it was said, "Do not (swear falsely) break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord." But Jesus now raises the level of obedience by saying, "Do not 'swear' or take an oath at all." Jesus is not suggesting that we should never take an oath. In fact, it was quite the norm in the OT, even in God's name.

Num. 30:2, "When a man makes a vow to the Lord...he must not break his word"

Lev. 19:12, "You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God"

Deut 10:20, "Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name."

Deut. 23:21, "If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it"

In the NT Paul regularly swears by God's name and calls on God as his witness. Rom 1:9-11, "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you."

Similarly, in 2 Cor 1:23, "I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth."

In fact, God himself swears not to send another universal flood [Gen 9:9-11]. God said to Abraham, "By myself I have sworn . . . I will surely bless you" (Gen. 22:16-17 ESV). He swears to send a redeemer [Lk 1:68, 73] and to raise His Son from the dead [Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27-31]. God took oaths to guarantee his covenants (Psalms. 132:11; 95:11; 119:106). Heb 6:17 remind us that God did this "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath." John Stott comments, "God doesn't take an oath to increase his credibility but to elicit and confirm our faith." In other words, because we have been told and heard so many lies, we have learned to be doubters. So, for our sake God takes an oath to guarantee his word.

Unfortunately, by Jesus' time the Jews had built up an entire legalistic system around the OT teaching of taking oaths so that they could obey the letter of the law. So, one rabbi said that if you swear by Jerusalem you are not bound by your vow; but if you swear *toward Jerusalem* then you are bound by your vow. Jesus mentions some of their modified laws in Mat 23:16-17; "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?" Likewise, vv 17-22; "If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by

it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it." The Pharisees, as we have seen before, were more concerned with obeying the letter of the law than with the spirit of the law. However, Jesus is interested in complete truthfulness. Jesus tells them that they are not to swear by the heaven or by the earth, for they are God's throne and his footstool respectively. They must not swear toward Jerusalem for it is the city of God, the great King. They must not even swear by their head (cf 1 Sam 1: 26; Ps. 15: 4), for they cannot so much as change the colour of a single hair. In other words, all oaths are solemn pledges to speak the truth.

There is no spin allowed. We are not allowed to exaggerate something so it will look better or embellish something to make it look worse. Anything beyond a simple yes or no "comes from the evil one" according to Jesus, or as John 8:44 calls him, "The Father of lies". James makes exactly the same point in Ch 5:12; "Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned."

When Christians claim to have the truth and to follow him who is the Truth, it is a rather sad reflection on our Lord when we lie or don't speak the truth fully. And we fail miserably in this area. From the halls of governments, to church governance, to our own personal lives, we are guilty. We stoop to telling stories with a certain slant, either so that we make our point more emphatically or even to present ourselves in a more glamorous light than what the raw facts really allow! And how many of us say we will do things only to renege on it for it has become personally inconvenient to continue with them.

Our culture encourages careless speech. Some years ago, a man's word was his bond. Today we say, "Talk is cheap," and "I want to see it in black and white" and even then, we try to find loopholes when it doesn't suit us anymore. Our Lord insisted that the OT pointed to being truthful in all matters, but sinful man somehow twisted it to benefit themselves. May we not be guilty of it, but submit to the authority of the OT and the Lord's teaching and may we always be careful to speak the truth.

Taking oaths is never ideal, but oaths can make us think twice before we speak, thereby encouraging us to be truthful. Perhaps that is why James also says that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. And why Proverbs 10:19 tells us that when there are many words, sin is not far away. One purpose of the law is that it restrains sin in us and the society around us. So here are some rules of thumb when it comes to taking an oath.

First, let us be so truthful that someone who knows us well would never solicit a vow from us. On the other hand, we may take a vow to grant assurances to someone who does not know us. Jesus spoke under oath at his trial (Matt. 26:63–64). Paul also took vows, calling God as his witness (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:10). Therefore, for the sake of people who do not know that we are reliable, we may take vows.

Second, for the same reason, we may take oaths and vows in the courtroom, or before entering military or political service. The alternative is that Christians would forfeit most of their influence on public life. They would also have to rethink many commercial transactions, since contracts resemble oaths.

There is a third, broader lesson, perhaps the most important. By permitting and regulating oaths, God permits us to get involved in the dirt and the mess of public life. He does not say, "Withdraw, lest your hands be touched by evil." We have already been touched by evil. Now we are the light of the world. In a "crooked and depraved generation" we "shine like stars in the universe" (Phil. 2:15). To take an oath is to get involved in the world of liars.

And in that world of liars we bring the transforming power of God to that world, and it may mean getting a little dirty there. In the OT, Joseph, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah got involved and got dirty, but also accomplished great things with God's blessing. Christians do not spend all their time in the ideal world. The disciple's goal is that his words be so reliable that people do not even think to ask, "Do you promise?" Jesus wants us to tell the truth. Proverbs 12:22 says, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful."

Sadly, sometimes we don't speak truthfully. Sometimes the fear of telling hard truths cause us to speak half-truths or a white lie. Sometimes we just tell people what they want to hear and not what they need to hear. Sometimes we shy away from telling family and friends what they are doing is sinful. We fail to keep our word because we fail to anticipate readily foreseeable obstacles to keeping it. We heighten our sorrows to gain sympathy. We exaggerate the hours spent at work. We puff up statistics to make an impression.

It takes a certain amount of courage to always be truthful. We don't like to make people feel bad and we don't want to be hurt or lose a friendship. We want people to like us, so we want to be bearers of good news. But sometimes bad news

is necessary. We don't want our doctors to be untruthful if we had a serious illness. Sometimes we need to caution someone because what they are doing is sinful, hoping and praying that they will turn in repentance. That is the loving thing to do.

Congregation let you yes be 'yes' and your no 'no.' No distortions, theatrics, embellishments or exaggerations. Let us not mislead our neighbours. Let us measure each promise so that we mean what we say. By telling the truth, we build trust. So why are the standards of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount put before us, after all, they are too high for us to attain. We have neither the pure heart nor the character that it demands.

Because Jesus' teaching drives us to the gospel. Our Lord's demands make us see that sin is so deep within, no one can kill it. We cannot surpass the righteousness the law demands. Therefore, we need our Lord's grace, we need to hear the gospel. We need Jesus' perfect righteousness and be clothed with it.

Our heavenly Father who is perfect promised to send a Redeemer and He did. And we give thanks that he has made Jesus known to us and clothed us with His righteousness by the conquering and quickening power of his Holy Spirit. May we delight in Him every day for all his goodness to us and may we also keep our promises! Amen.