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Mark Baker
Discipleship and Ethics

Ethical Exhortation:

Read Matthew 5:43-48

What is God's story and is it ours? Which narratives have we become attached to as we read the news and try to make sense of it? Who is our God? On whose side is this God of ours? Which group(s) do we assign divine favor to? Condemnation to? In the deep recesses of our hearts and minds, what do we wish upon those enemies of ours? How much of our conception of peace has become dependent on the sacrifice or decrease of those seeking ends or proceeding in ways and beliefs different than our own? Is this the promise and voice we hear most clearly?

Jesus' words, His teachings to love one's enemy, these haunt us; give us pause; point in different directions; point inwards; even as we would rather separate this illuminating truth from our own political constructions and rhetoric. As reports and images bombard our individual and collective consciences each week, preying upon our fears and doubt, we are actively taught who our enemies are and what retributive justice is due them. "Look at the inhumanity of ISIS these reports say. Consider threats to liberty, Christianity, and humanity itself at the hands of 'those' persons." Who "those" persons are differ for each of us personally. Be these the uncompassionate rich, oppressive government, proponent of a competing gospel, upsetter of social norms, or irreverent law-breaker, we would rather our politics, thoughts, available means of response to injustice, not have to correspond to the story of God, of Jesus' revelation of God's higher ways and "complete" demonstration of love (v. 48). Let it not be the proverbial 'straw man' or hypothetical-yet-unimagined 'other' that is addressed this morning, but the real-life adversary we will inevitably encounter this week.

We allow Jesus' words to be but a blip on the radar of God's story when neglect consideration of this story's origin. For God's story begins in the eternal peace and relationship inherent to God's own being. This Triune God creates all and calls it good; indwells humanity with God's own Spirit; fashioning it as God's own handiwork (Eph. 2:10); creating it in His own divine image (Gen. 1:27). Humanity is then honored in the invitation to partner with God in caring for and bringing order to the whole of creation. It is this God of creation, who forms and gives value to both ourselves and our enemies, who calls us to love these enemies.

Scripture tells us of a God who pursues and provides for the world when, in abandoning the higher way and pattern for living/being, relationships are destroyed. When a sense of nakedness and shame ensues (Gen. 3:7) and brother-murders-brother (Gen. 4:8), it is the voice of God which reaches time-and-time again into our world; calling individuals and peoples; speaking words of promise, deliverance, and instruction. God's action and voice exhibit His love for enemies. This God calls us to love our enemy.

We might do well to sit with the angry prophet Jonah. Who sits despondent outside of the city, the stronghold of Nineveh, a symbol of the adversary of God's people Israel, and hears God ask, "is it right to be angry?" (Jon 4:4) Do we do well in denying to our perceived enemy, the very mercy we so desperately need and are called to bear witness to? It is this God of loving-kindness who seems to disregard the boundaries we erect and frees us to seek the wellbeing of our captors (Jer. 29:7) who calls us to love of enemy.

It is this God then, who appears ultimately in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. This teaching appears with such a vivid backdrop. The revelation of Jesus is the

coup d'état of Scripture's testament to the mission of God. That God would come and dwell as and with the fallen creatures He loves. Jesus bursts onto the scene declaring and modeling the way of God's coming kingdom (Matt. 4:17) which He is about the business of establishing. To meet the creation that has rejected God, God lowers Himself into the mess (Phil. 2:6-8), the vicious cycles of violence and oppression, in order to free and reorient. This is God's response to those who, confused and rebellious, have made themselves enemies of Him.

God renames us and lavishes His love upon us (1 John 3:1) even in the midst of our wayward proceedings. This initiation of God demonstrates His love for us. Jesus is willing to lower Himself step-by-step out of love for His enemy. Finally, these enemies, who like us struggle to recognize the ways of God as we systematically construct dividing lines which label friend and foe, lash out at the Savior come to love them. Jesus endures ridicule, shame, and torture at the hands of those He came to free. He allows Himself to be held captive by those he will unshackle. This is the Jesus who disarms the disciple who would use a sword to defend Him (Matt. 26:52); reequipping this follower with a spiritual armament for battle of a different sort and for an alternative kingdom. This is the Jesus that prays from the cross for those whom Him there. This Jesus who recognizes a higher truth is Him who calls us to love our enemy.

It is the power of the enemy that is broken in Christ's resurrection even as the dignity of this adversary is recognized and upheld. It is Christ's resurrection which empties the power of death and draws attention to the original message and power of God.

Through Jesus provision is made for our restoration. As enemies of God and one another, God not only saves us, but invites and enables us to participate in the kingdom of heaven presently. Our status as co-creators with God is reoffered as the result of God's indiscriminate grace and the very power of the Spirit of God (our helper and advocate) is promised and bestowed upon us as the means by which this grand task will be accomplished in and through us.

God desires to show His love in new ways in our midst as His redeemed people. We proceed in bearing witness and giving glory to His divine mission as dignified, dignity-instilling emissaries of our dignified Creator. Certainly we are invited to the task of bringing near those who are far (Eph. 2:13); naming as friends (John 15:15) those enslaved to the cycles of revenge; rejecting the swords offered to us regardless of when or where they are offered; and exposing calls for blood, division, and all claims that we may be made satiated and whole by acts of hatred to the perfection of Christ, story of our inspired and useful Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16) and discernment given us by the Holy Spirit. As we pray the Lord's prayer that Jesus modeled for His disciples, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," let these words not only remind us of Christ's exemplary life; but recognize that ruminating upon these phrases has the power to transform our very beings by the power of God's transformative Word (Matt. 6:12). It is by the power of this Spirit that heaven breaks out on earth. To the revelation of God in Jesus, to an empty grave and an eternal victory, new-life eternal, may we readily and gladly attest. We are called to know Christ. Therefore, let us actively welcome the embrace of our wounded Savior as His wounded people.

The transforming Spirit of God, living and active in our midst, empowers us to embrace, bless, show hospitality to, offer kindness to, those persons afflicted with the same malice that crucified our Lord...that would have us crucified. Let us mature in Christ together to the point of being able to smile upon the cemeteries that might hold our bodies. Resting secure in the sealing power of the Holy Spirit, and becoming increasingly confident that death does not have the final word, may we boldly tell the story of the One who broke the power of tombstones (1 Cor. 15:55) and indiscriminately calls all to life abundant (John 10:10). Will we, this very morning, and each

morning hereafter, accept the invitation to beat our weapons of war into life-cultivating tools (Isa. 2:4) for use in a kingdom of peace side-by-side with sisters and brothers of every tribe and tongue (Rev. 7:9)?

Church, let us bow and name as Lord Him who loves our enemies to the point of binding the wounds our swords and words inflict. Surely God's action saves us and others from ourselves and claims us as His own. God's voice bids us accept and bear witness to God's own self-sacrifice by living new-lives of collective-sacrifice. Let us, therefore, by the indwelling of this Spirit, and as a community defined-by love, call our reimagined-enemies to share in the hope of this new Jesus-centered reality by joyfully serving these together.

Let our reclaimed-story, going from this place, be none other than Christ's gospel, a salvation story, that is rooted in love for enemies; proven in the midst of these; divinely-written on our hearts (Jer. 31:31); and by God's power and grace active in and extending through us this week.

(Word Count: 1496)

Bryan Taylor

Ethical Exhortation

Due: September 17, 2014

M. Baker

Laying Bare before God: A Look at Lying

Our world is funny and full of paradoxes that continually boggle the minds of adults, as if they cannot quite figure out those things that a child seems to learn naturally from infancy. Some of the most basic and foundational principles for guiding children seem to disappear when one enters adulthood; lying, for instance, is one of those principles. Every child is told that lying is wrong – even the smallest, little white lie – but, for some strange reason, adults pick up the habit as if it were second nature. What was once a childhood taboo has now become an adulthood necessity. Why is lying even an issue? Or, for that matter, why does dishonesty seem to reek of untruth and deception, if adults make it a common habit in their everyday lives?

To answer these questions, it may be more appropriate to start back in the Garden of Eden. These words – lying, dishonesty, untruth, and deception – all stem from one core and integral moment in history in which a decision was made to go against the fundamental nature of God. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed the word of the Lord and ate of the forbidden tree, they felt ashamed and naked. They hid from the presence of God and attempted to clothe their bodies as they felt exposed for the very first time. Yes, it is true that Adam and Eve went against the express command of God, but on top of that – for the first time in history – they now understood what it meant to be revealed as opponents to God.

Prior to this act of sin that left Adam and Eve feeling quite exposed before God, they knew Him. They walked regularly with Him in the Garden of Eden as part of their normal conversational habit of getting to know Him. After that profound decision to disobey the Lord's command, Adam and Eve felt what John would later describe in one of his letters: "Whoever says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person." (1 John 2:4) God's fundamental nature is truth and anyone opposing that nature quickly finds that they have stepped a little bit farther away from the presence of God. As Adam and Eve

would come to realize, they had contradicted the truth of God and no longer wanted to bask in His presence. God designed us to have communion with Him, in His presence, but that cannot happen if we do not know Him intimately as John explained.

Man's reaction to God's truth is sudden and immediate shame. We may not announce the shame of our indiscretions, but we know that it is there. As the Psalmist writes, "My sin is always before me." (Psalm 51:3) We feel a profound sense of abandonment as we rest in our sin. "But," one might ask, "What does this have to do with lying?" It has everything to do with it! Lying is an attempt to cover up that which is hidden underneath. A child who is caught with their hand in the cookie jar will quickly attempt to divert attention from their action by giving a brave smile and telling the parent that they were ensuring a proper seal on the lid. A teen who has been out smoking will spray cologne or perfume on their clothing to hide the fact that they were doing something inappropriate. A colleague who has been asked to remark on a friend's performance in the workplace will have a tendency to error on the side of good performance in the hope that it will benefit a friend. What each of these scenarios has in common is the fact that there is a hidden or underlying agenda that is covering or overshadowing the truth. That attempt to hide the truth is exactly what Adam and Eve did when they recognized their sin.

God always exposes that which man attempts to cover up. In John 4, Jesus approached a woman at a well and asked her to get her husband and bring him back to the well. The woman responded that she had no husband and Jesus affirmed her and went even farther: "The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." (John 4:18) Jesus was not interested in letting her sin and shame remain hidden. Instead, He exposed it as a way to peel back the person that she showed on the surface and get to her heart underneath. God did the same with Adam and Eve and has been attempting to communicate to the heart of humanity from the beginning of time. Instead, we have pushed back and declared that we wish to remain hidden in our sin. And, in that nature, we have put on a false sense of identity.

Any lying, dishonesty, untruth or deception is an attempt to cover over who we really are and what is underneath the superficial surface of our everyday lives. Lying to the checkout clerk at the grocery store is an attempt to make us look more dignified than we really are; falsifying our timecard at work is an attempt to cover over our laziness; and, telling a spouse that they look good in an unflattering outfit just to appease them reveals the lack of love in one's heart. For any lie given, there is something hidden underneath the surface of the untruth.

One might ask the question, "Is it ever OK to lie?" And, just as simply, a response can be given. However, a quick response to that question may not help the individual understand what is really at stake when they lie. Instead, a return back to the story in John 4 might be more appropriate. Before the woman at the well realized that Jesus was altogether a different kind of person than anyone she had ever met, she asked what she could do to receive the water welling up to eternal life. Jesus had begun to paint a picture for her of an eternal water source that would never again leave her dry and parched. He then linked that eternal water to the way in which one worships the Father (God) in spirit and in truth. One can only worship God by first plunging into this welling up water source. Jesus then revealed that He is this welling up water source.

As a result, Jesus left us with a picture of what it means to live a life that is truly fulfilled in honest and unadulterated worship of God. In the middle of all humanity, there is a water source that draws everyone in to be fully satisfied and fulfilled. But, in order to partake of the water, one must first become exposed to their sin. That can have a chilling effect, especially when we consider the cool and refreshing water that is in store for us. The option is always there:

plunge in or remain parched. On the surface, most people would think, “Well, that’s an easy decision.” When faced with the reality of letting their sin first be exposed, they quickly hesitate.

When Adam and Eve realized that they had sinned, their first response was to clothe themselves. Our natural instinct is to cover up that which we want to remain hidden. However, when we come face-to-face with a decision to follow the lordship of Jesus, He requires that we take off the lies and deceptions. Only by entering bare and exposed, can we fully appreciate the refreshing nature of the water.

To that end, what would it look like if we were uncovered? How would our lives be profoundly different without a mysterious cloak covering up our deep and darkest secrets? What would life be like if we continually exposed the truth in love? I urge us to consider jumping into the water. I urge us to lay bare before the Lord, the God of all creation.

When we think of the words that we use and the actions that portray our lives, we do not often consider exposing ourselves, because it hurts and is uncomfortable. I think, however, that there is a profound sense of freedom from speaking the truth, as it should be done in love. Some of our lives have never before tasted this freedom from the well of Christ’s overflowing water, and that is precisely the point. With our lives covered in lies and deception, we are afraid to enter into proper communion with God. Think of the virgin, who is scared to lay bare on the night of her wedding. There is fear that her groom might hurt her; there is a potential feeling of inadequacy; and, there is most certainly a desire to remain covered in the shadows of her wedding chamber. Our groom, however, has conquered those fears, taken away our inadequacy, and is gently drawing us from the shadow and into the light.

Knowing that there is a great sense of comfort from Christ as our groom, we are therefore free to have unadulterated communion with Him. Take hold of His hand as He offers you a freedom that you have never before known. You have no need to live in the shame of deception, but are free to speak openly and honestly. Therefore, I urge you to speak with the authority of the truth, because you can! Choosing to speak the truth will become less a decision and more an outpouring of Christ working from within you; so, let your honesty come from your feelings laid bare and know that in the love of Christ, you will blossom forth into the person that you have been made to be!