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## Words

**Text:** John 1:1-18

May one ever lie? Certainly, the strongest and earliest moral lessons we are taught in life have to do with the importance of not lying. This is a fact that says something about how easily and how early lying comes to us. It also says something about the desirability that one not lie. Not only are we taught not to lie, most of us are repulsed by lies, most specifically when we are the ones being lied to. We are filled with disdain for liars, and we try to exclude them from our company. We prescribe legal penalties for them in certain sorts of circumstances; perhaps, to some people's tastes, not enough circumstances.

Yet, anyone who suggests that we should *never* lie under any circumstances is usually met with a chorus of dissenting voices that argue that there are times that we should make exceptions to the rule. At least, this has been my experience. Whenever, for example, in a class in moral philosophy or theology I have taught Immanuel Kant, one of the few philosophers who argued that one should *never* lie, hands in the classroom immediately shoot up as soon as this fact about Kant dawns on the students. Students are more than ready to recite a list of reasons why we should lie, reasons that make it morally preferable and even morally imperative to tell a lie rather than the truth. The reasons include, above all, those of justice and achieving the best outcome with our words. To Kant and his strict moral view, for example, the question is posed about whether or not one should lie to a would-be murderer who asked us the whereabouts of his intended victim. Most people would say we shouldn't tell him, and that it is a morally superior thing to lie to him. The more contemporary version is the one where we assert the moral

superiority of the person who is hiding Jews in his house, and who lies to a Nazi who asks him if there are any Jews in the house. Kant, when questioned on such cases, for his part always held to his guns and thought that we shouldn't lie. Most everybody else, however, thinks in those circumstances that one should lie. Reasons of kindness and mercy are also often cited as exceptions to the rule. When asked by a terminally ill friend "how do I look?" do we tell her the truth and say that it doesn't look like she has much time left? Mark Twain once wrote a short story about two strict Calvinist aunts whose niece lived with them, and who refused to lie to her about her terminally ill condition. As Twain develops the story, their moral rigorism is portrayed as a virtue that is more concerned with itself than with caring for others and giving them comfort when they need it most.

There are, of course, ways to avoid telling lies without having to tell the awful truth. You can tell the truth in such a way that the hearer misleads himself. For example, the story is told that, in the third century when heretics were hunting down St. Athanasius, intending to kill him, a group of them actually came upon him in a boat rowing on the Nile River. Not recognizing him, they asked him if he knew of Athanasius' whereabouts, to which they received the reply, "He is not far from you." They thus set off down the river in hot pursuit of their quarry, leaving Athanasius to row quickly in the opposite direction. Or, consider the graceful art of evasion of a minister whose family was given a peach pie by a member of the congregation, a pie that proved utterly inedible and that had to be thrown out. Knowing that he had to thank the giver, and that he couldn't lie, the minister simply wrote her a note, thanking her for the pie, and adding that "pie like that doesn't last long around our house."

Even though in cases like these the one spoken to is deceived, few people would maintain that the speaker was actually lying. Where they would all agree, though, is that a genuine lie has

been told when someone knows or sincerely thinks something is the case, and then proceeds to speak in such a way as to deny what is the case. This is to say that there is a lie told when there is a gap between what is thought and believed, and what is actually said. But if all would agree that this sort of duplicity is a lie, still very few would say that lying is always to be avoided, again citing hard cases like Nazis looking for victims. Among those who would defend telling lies on such occasions are included some prominent Christian thinkers.

There was one Christian thinker, however, who did argue that one should never, ever, lie. That was St. Augustine. Augustine's reasons for his position ran something like this: Unlike others, Augustine was far less worried about the effect lies had on other people or about issues such as the outcome, good or bad, of lying or truth-telling. Outcomes were up to God, not us, he figured. What he was concerned about was what was going on in the soul of the liar. For Augustine, what we say is simply the outward expression of an internal thinking, a word conceived in our heart, as he put it. And as far as he was concerned, words of the heart are truths that start in and participate in God's own truth, in God's own Word, his only begotten Son. As St. John has put it, this is the Word that was in the beginning with God and was God, and through whom all things were created, and that is the light of all people, the light that the darkness has never overcome.

Since God is therefore the source of all truth whatever knowledge of truth we might have is therefore a gift of God, Augustine thought. It is, indeed, by the divine Word that God makes himself present to us. It is the way that we are linked to God and have life in God. Thus, Augustine argued, the reason one should never lie is because lying is fundamentally a matter of having *God's* Word in our hearts, and then denying it. It is a form of faithlessness. So, as Augustine saw it, truth, on the one hand, is a gift that God gives us, and that binds us to him. To

Speak the truth in our outer words is then to give witness to the giver of the gift; it is a matter of confessing him and of praising him. It is a matter of knowing and saying, in the famous phrase, “who we are and whose we are.” Lying, on the other hand, denies the gift. It is certainly a matter of denying the goodness of the one who gave it to us, as if we and not God were the ones who owned and gave the Word that created the world and that is the light of all people.

Thus Augustine’s concern is with the gift of God’s Word to us, and how we are to treat it. He is concerned with words and how we use them because words are not empty, nor merely conventional, but the means by which God makes himself known, and the way by which God brings us into God’s life.

Words *are* important to us, for the essence of the Christian faith is not just that there is a God, but that God speaks to us through his Word. God through the words of the Bible speaks to us and gives us a way to live, both in commandment and example. God also speaks as a shepherd consoling us, protecting us and guiding us and giving us peace. And God even speaks directly to us on occasion. For example, in the Old Testament the young Samuel was called to be a prophet by a voice that kept continually calling his name in the night until he finally answered. “Here I am, Lord.” Once he answered that call, he was responsible for speaking God’s words. So, too, the disciples. Jesus called them by name, and in time, they were to go out and speak powerful words of grace.

These are big, important religious ways of speaking. What is just as important, though, is to recognize that God also speaks to us in whatever truth, big or small, that we conceive in our hearts. Perhaps it is even more important to recognize this, at least insofar as that until we have learned to respond and honor the inner truth, even in little things, we may not be able to hear, much less respond to any great outer word spoken into our ears. That certainly seemed to be the

case with many who saw Jesus, heard him teach, and watched him heal, and yet who never got it, and who could never respond to his outer voice because they had never listened to his voice in their hearts.

To talk about God's inner word in us is to talk about something that perhaps borders on the mystical, and at its most profound levels that idea *is* mystical. But the idea works in a very everyday way as well. What things are, are what they are because God has made them by his Word and names them by that Word. Things are what they are, because they are what God knows them to be, and because of what God names them by his Word. As the psalmist says, "he determines the number of the stars, and calls them all by their names." For us to know things, then, no matter how imperfect our knowledge, is to let our minds share in God's knowledge, a knowledge that he gives us as a gift. This is true, of course, whenever we are explicitly religious, whenever we confess our faith and whenever we pray. But it also true whenever we see birds as birds, the ocean as vast and wet, and whenever we see people as people and not as things. God, by whose Word, each of these things is made what it is, speaks that Word to us whenever we see those things aright. Although we don't always get it right when we try to spell it out in language, surely a good deal of the point of Christ's death and resurrection and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit is precisely so that self-interested sin might be obliterated and we might be set free to see the world in God's light, and be drawn closer to him. Often we assume the shepherd's voice who calls our names to be an extremely personal and extraordinary thing. And it is a great act of grace whenever that happens. But the shepherd's voice also speaks to us in very ordinary things. To be able to see God's truth in things, and to recognize it not only as truth but as God's, and to be able to recognize ourselves as God's in ordinary things, is also a great act of grace and a great gift.

*This* is why it is so important to tell the truth. As Augustine saw so clearly, to tell the truth, particularly with a sense that Christ himself offers it to us, is to have a sense of gratitude for what he has created, what he has redeemed, and, in the very act of telling the truth, to have a sense of gratitude, joy, praise, confession, and also trust in God's creation and care of all things. It is to recognize the very ground of our being.

To realize that about what we say is terrifically important in the world in which we live. Certainly it is important in a world where few words spoken in the public square are ever uttered without what we call spin. Certainly it is important in a world where advertising, which is nothing less than professional and profitable lying, engulfs us. But realizing it is even more important in helping us to be different sorts of people than liars are.

Simply think about why lies are told. The point of the lie, particularly in the world of spin and advertising, is not simply its misdescription of the world. It isn't even that in lying one gets unfair advantage over the chump who happens to believe the lie, although unfair advantage, of course, has always been a reason to lie. It is that in lying one tries to take control of words and thus of the world. It is that in lying one assumes that one can create the world again in one's own image. In the book of *Genesis*, when God created the heavens and earth, he paraded all the animals before Adam so that he might name them. The modern lie and the modern view of language seems to be based on the assumption that each one of us gets to rename all the animals. Once we do that, once *we* say what things are, then we are the ones in charge of the world. The point then of lies and spin or advertising is, in this sense, not always a matter of deceiving, with the truth obscurely hidden but intact. It is a matter of recreating the world, of saying to everybody else, "this is really how it goes." As Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland* put it, "who's the master, you or the word?" To lie is to assume that we are always the masters, that we

are in charge of our own destiny, and indeed that we know better than the people we are talking as to what is really good for them and everybody else.

But here in this place, this place that exists because of the divine Word, the divine Word that was made flesh, the deep spiritual recognition is that it is the Word that is the master, not us. It is the recognition that the Word that was made flesh, and that is the light of all people, and that is the one who knows what is best for all of us. That means then not only do we speak in words of praise and confession, giving credit to the giver of the Gift of thought, it also means that we as a result of the way we talk have to live differently. For to recognize in our words that we are not the masters, not the givers, but the recipients of the world – and to give hearty thanks to the giver for that – is also to live differently. It means a life with very different sorts of virtues than one finds in a world where mastery counts more than anything else. In the world of the lie, where mastery counts so much, the virtues there are obvious: control, bombast, arrogance, infidelity, sneakiness, impatience and intolerance. On the other hand, in the world of truth-telling, in the world where we give thanks to the Giver of the Word, it means the virtues of faithfulness, trust, loyalty, perseverance, humility, gratitude. It means above all the virtues of faith, hope, and love which thrive only in the soil of truth, watered by the dew from on high.

Listen then for that Word, and learn to live. And now, come, let us take to ourselves that Word made visible in the sacrament of our Lord's Supper, and with our words give thanks.