

Truth Matters to the Master

From the Series, “The King and I – Matthews Tells Us About the King of the Universe”

By Phil Brainerd

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Introduction

Do you like mental puzzles? There’s an old puzzle that involves two doors. According to the puzzle, you’re a prisoner. One day, you’re taken to the courtyard of the prison and shown two doors. One door, door number 1, has a tiger behind it. He’s very hungry. The other door, number 2, leads to freedom. Choose the right door, and you’re free for life. Choose the wrong door, and you die a terrible death.



At first, this looks like a 50/50 choice. Your life depends on your decision – those aren’t good odds. However, to help you, there are two men who will tell you which door to choose. You may ask either of these men one question.

But there’s a problem: One of them always tells the truth. The other always tells lies. You don’t know which is which. If you ask the first man which door leads to freedom, and he’s the truth-teller, he’ll send you to door number 2. If you ask the second man which door leads to freedom, he’s the liar, he’ll send you door number 1, the tiger. - You don’t know which of these men is telling the truth. So again, you’re at 50/50.

At first glance, it appears you’re stuck. You can never know who’s telling the truth. But of course, this is a puzzle, so there has to be an answer. There may be people reading who will spend the next hour scratching their heads trying to figure it out. And I don’t want anyone to be distracted. So, I will give you the answer.

Here it is: You can ask either man what the other will say. So, you ask, “Where will the other man point me when I ask which door leads to freedom?” The truth teller knows that the other man is a liar, so he’ll say, “He’ll point you to door number 1, the tiger.” The other man knows that the first man always tells the truth. He knows the truth teller will send you to door number 2, so being a liar, he’ll also point you to door number 1. That means you can open door number 2 and walk to freedom.

Why does this work? You can do this with certainty, because you know with certainty the character of the two men.

Why are we opening our discussion with this puzzle? Because sometimes, it's very important to know that some people can be depended upon to tell the truth. It's also important to know that some people always lie.

Let's read today's passage:

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

Today, the stated topic that Jesus brings before his disciples is the business of taking an oath.

Recall how we're looking at these topics. Something is important to the Master. He tells us that it has come under attack. We look at:

- How it has come under attacked in the past.
- How it was attacked in Jesus' day
- How it is under attack today.

Let's dig in.

I. What has come under attack?

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. (Matthew 5:33)

As we said, Jesus wants to talk about the business of taking an oath. Let's ask: Why would anyone want to take an oath? Well, because an oath is a way of making sure that someone is telling the truth. An oath is thought to guarantee that someone is being honest with you. If you say you're going to do something, and you add an oath, you're going to do what you say, supposedly.

This sounds great, but why do we need this? Why do we need an oath? We need oaths, or we think we need oaths, because **Truth** has come under attack. Let's find out how.

A. Truth came under attack in the Garden.

Truth first came under attack in the Garden of Eden. We've been there many times together, so I won't retell the story. If you go to Genesis 1, you know that God created the heavens and the earth. He then gave the earth to Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were given both the privilege and the responsibility to rule the planet. They started in the beautiful garden of Eden. They were surrounded there by every evidence that God was loving and generous.

Then, the Serpent, or Satan. For those of you who remember the story: Did the serpent come into the garden as a terrifying monster? Did he come with lightning and thunder and storms and earthquakes to scare poor Adam and Eve? Did he come with terrible weapons? Did he come waving a fiery sword?

No. He came with words. Nothing else. Just words. But these were not just any words - These were lies.

I'm going to give you my definition of a lie:

Lie: A lie is when someone misrepresents reality for the purpose of deceiving people.

Here's an important note: ***The Satan is a really good liar.*** In our opening illustration, we said it's helpful to know that someone is a liar. That's Satan. Here's what Jesus said about Satan:

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44-45)

Satan is such a good liar, that he was able to make paradise look like a prison. He was able to convince Adam and Eve that the God who had just given them paradise wasn't to be trusted. And so, Adam and Eve fell into sin. Through them sin entered the human race.

It's important to understand this: ***Because of this, we are all born in sin.***

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:5)

One way to look at this is to say that we are infected with sin. We're born with it – there's no escaping it.

One of the effects of sin is that it causes us to lie. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the condition of the whole human race:

9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. (Romans 3:9)

So, Paul says, everyone, the whole world, including him, is stained with sin. We all, Paul says, are under its power. That means you and I both start our lives under the power of sin. What effect does this have on us? Let's read on.

10 As it is written:
"There is no one righteous, not even one;
11 there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.
12 All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one."
13 "Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit."
(Romans 3:10-13)

I once heard a comedian tell a story about his daughter. She was just to the point where she could walk and push things around. On a counter in the kitchen was a cookie jar. Cookies were only given out when Mom or Dad felt there was a good reason. One day, this Dad walked into the kitchen and found that his daughter had pushed a chair up to the counter. She climbed up on the counter and opened the cookie jar. She had just pulled out a cookie when he caught her. He looked at her and asked, "What are you doing?" The little girl looked stunned for a second, but she regained her composure. She turned, held the cookie towards him and said, "I was getting this for you."

After telling the story, the comedian asked, "Who teaches children to lie?" The answer: No one has to teach children to lie. All humans are born in sin, and sin manifests itself in the telling of lies - And it manifests itself early.

So, we all start out under the power of sin. One of the ways that sin manifests itself is in lying.

B. Truth has come under attack even by otherwise faithful people.

This has shown itself to be true even in people of faith. Even faithful people can fall into the sin of attacking truth. One example of that is the man called Abraham. Let's discuss that.

Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, started his life in what we know today as the nation of Iraq. He was called by God to take possession of a promised land. The land eventually became known as Israel.

Abraham started in a place of safety, comfort, and prosperity. God called him to take a great risk and leave all of that. Abraham started with faith and followed God's call. But along the way, something went wrong. Abraham arrived in the land, but soon after a famine broke out. He decided to go down to Egypt for a while.

Here's what he did while he was there:

10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." (Genesis 12:10-13)

Abraham was afraid. Did he trust God for protection? No! He decided to tell a big whopping lie. And he asked his wife to participate.

What was the result of this?

14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels. (vs. 14-16)

At the start, this appeared to work. That's why it's so tempting to lie. Even people of faith can be sucked into this sin.

We won't read the whole story, but eventually things went bad. Pharaoh found out about the lie and wound up kicking Abraham and his whole family out of Egypt. Abraham was fortunate that God protected him. The Pharaoh could have done much worse.

C. Lying Results in the need for oaths.

Everyone has experienced the problem of lying. Sadly, everyone has lied about something at some point in their life. Because this is so common to the human experience, we have come up with something to help: Taking an oath.

There are at least 3 reasons why we take an oath:

1) We don't trust people in general, so we require it for special things.

For example, when we need information in a trial, we make people take an oath: "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" When I was young, they would add, "So help you God?"

2) We intend to do what we say, and we want people to know that we're serious. More about this one later.

3) (This one is sad) Some people take an oath when they don't really intend to be honest. Taking the oath makes it look like they're serious. More about that one later, too.

Why is God concerned about lying?

D. The Reason God is concerned about this attack

The story of Abraham is important because it represents a turning point in human history. God chose Abraham to represent him before all the nations of the world. This is important: He didn't choose Abraham because Abraham was perfect. Abraham was sinful. That manifested itself in lies and other sins. Because Abraham was sinful, God used him to show us some things. One of those things is an attribute of God. Here it is: ***God is True.***

Listen to what the apostle John wrote: "Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. (John 3:33)" Here's what Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6)"

God demonstrated this one day in the life of Abraham. God made a promise to Abraham that he would watch over him and his descendants forever. In those days, when great leaders made promises to each other, they would take an oath and add symbols. Some of these were serious and dark. One thing that could be done was take animals, kill them, and cut them into pieces. The leaders would then both walk between the pieces. This said, "if I break the oath, may what happened to these animals happen to me."

God didn't need to take an oath when he made this promise to Abraham. Recall though that sometimes people take an oath because they want people to know how serious they are. God wanted to do this, so he was willing to walk between the pieces of the animals. So, God instructed Abraham to take animals and prepare them the way I just described.

Normally, both leaders would walk through the pieces. There was a problem here. Abraham was sinful. God knew that he would never be able to hold his end of the bargain. So, after Abraham arranges the pieces, here's what God did.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:22)

God put Abraham to sleep. Here's what God did next:

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, (Genesis 15:17-18)

Because Abraham was sinful, God took the oath himself. There was nothing Abraham needed to do to secure this gift. It was all from God, and God alone. Theologians call this the great Abrahamic Covenant. It is to be secure through all time. Only God is required to fulfill oath he took.

So, we have learned that the truth has come under attack. It came under attack in the Garden. It has come under attack by all humans, because all are born in sin. It has even come under attack by people who are considered great people of faith, because no human is perfect.

Why is God concerned about attacks on truth? Because he is true.

In our series, remember that God wants to offer wonderful and perfect gifts. Among them, he wants us to be like him.

So, how did the truth come under attack in the days of Jesus? Let's read again:

II. Truth comes under attack in the days of Jesus

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' (Matthew 5:33)

Recall that there are several reasons for taking an oath. One was distrust. The second was a desire to show people that you were serious about something. As we've learned, God did that himself. Because of this, there were statements in the Law making provision for different kinds of oaths. Here's one example: "It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. (Deuteronomy 6:13)" So it was permissible to take an oath, but you were to only do it in the name of the Lord. The phrase that Jesus gave was a summary of several different such statements.

But something happened over the years since those statements were first given. Something bad. Let's read on.

34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. (Matthew 5:34)

In the days of Jesus, people were making oaths in things other than the name of the Lord. Why would they do that? Well, remember the third reason for giving an oath? Some people take an oath because they've made a commitment, and they don't fully intend to carry it out. I say "fully intend" because sometimes people intend at first to fulfill a commitment, but when things get hard they easily give up. In other words, those commitments aren't serious.

If you swear in the name of God, that's serious. You had better come through on your commitment. But to make to make less-than-serious commitments sound serious, people came up with all kinds of different things.

Imagine that someone makes a commitment to you. You ask, "are you serious?" They reply, "I swear by heaven!" That sounds serious. But it's not the name of the Lord, so the person making the promise doesn't really need to follow through. This is an excuse to be something less than honest and committed.

Or they might say, "I swear by the earth that I stand on." "I swear by the great city of Jerusalem". "I swear by my head". That all sounds serious, but in reality, the person who swears by these things wasn't fully committed to acting on what they said.

This was deeply offensive to God. He is true, and he loves truth.

To all of this, Jesus points people back to the real standard. If you going to make a commitment, it is to be made in the name of the Lord. Don't claim the name of heaven, because that's where God sits on his throne. He created the earth – it belongs to him. Jerusalem wasn't just a great city, it was the city of God. And who made your head? You head and everything else about you was made by God.

All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:37)

Jesus was in essence saying, "God is truth. If you want to be a disciple, you must love the truth. You must hate lies." So either say, "yes" when asked to do something or have the courage to say "no", if you think you can't do it. Anything else comes from guess where? The evil one – the father of lies. Jesus warns us to avoid being like him.

A quick note: As we said, the Law made provision for oaths. Jesus has a way of stating things firmly, but he's not overriding the Law of Moses. In fact, God on more than one occasion took an oath to demonstrate how serious he was. So, Jesus isn't saying you should never take an oath. Rather, Jesus is saying don't take a frivolous oath. Don't make a promise when you don't fully intend to keep it. So, if you have to go on a witness stand, it's permissible to take an oath.

IV. Truth is Under attack today.

How is truth under attack today? Well, the same sinful people that populated the world when the Scripture were written are still around today. So guess what? Lies are all around us. It's hard to know where to start. So let's start with the most Biblical starting place: ***Ourselves.***

Let me give just one example. A while back, a friend of mine dropped off some clothing at a charity. He put the clothes into a couple of bags. When you do this, a lot of charities will give you a receipt. That way, you can take the donation off your taxes.

On this day, the worker who receives the bags was in a hurry, so they gave my friend a blank receipt and told them to fill it in himself. My friend found himself tempted. Instead of a couple of bags, he could have written in ten - Or more. He also could have added more expensive items. No one would have known. If he did that, he could have taken a much bigger write-off.

But my friend is a Christian. The IRS might not have known, but God would. To my friend, that's all that mattered. So, he wrote on the receipt, "two bags of clothing".

We've said that much of what Jesus said was already stated. In this case, the standard is given in a song sung by many Hebrew people when they worshipped at the synagogue.

1 Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?

2 The one whose walk is blameless,

who does what is righteous,

who speaks the truth from their heart;

3 whose tongue utters no slander,

who does no wrong to a neighbor,

and casts no slur on others;

4 who despises a vile person

but honors those who fear the Lord;

who keeps an oath even when it hurts,

and does not change their mind;

(Psalm 15)

Conclusion

Let's pull this all together.

We learned in our opening illustration that sometimes it's important to know who tells the truth, and who tells lies. Here, we are met with a challenge. Which of the two men in the puzzle are you most like? The man who can always be depended upon to tell the truth, or the man who can be depended upon to tell lies? How much is your word worth? If you say you are going to do something, does it happen? If you make a promise, do you keep it?

Do you love truth? I hope you do, because truth matters to the Master.

As always, there is grace. If you are something less than perfect, God forgives. You only need to ask him.

Here is the pattern for a disciple: The disciple knows the standards of God. They are high. The disciple keeps those standards before their eyes. But we don't aim for those standards because they earn us points that will buy our way into heaven. We don't aim for those standards because we think we're better than others.

We aim for those standards because in doing so, we please God. We aim high, because we know that God wants to give us a special gift: The gift of being like him. When we aim for those standards, when we achieve them, it's an opportunity for us to know and experience our Creator. When we fail, we know that we are forgiven.

As a final note, it's good to know that we can fully trust God's word. It's all true. Jesus said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)" He also said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:32)" Like the honest man in the puzzle, God's Truth leads us into freedom and life.

So, today we've learned that Truth matters to the Master. Truth matters, because God is true.

And remember our motto:

For the Master to be your master, what matters to the Master must matter to you.

May God help us as we seek to be like him.