

“Let your yea be yea”

James 5:12 *“Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Otherwise you will be condemned.”*

Lies. We are constantly being told lies, and I think our society has become so used to it that we don't even recognize them as lies. “We're sorry, we are experiencing abnormally high call volumes. Your call is important to us, and someone will be with you as soon as possible.” Because I hear this every time I call, I conclude that the call volume is *not* abnormal, and the business has made a calculated financial decision to hire the minimum number of people to take calls without losing customers. The call isn't important, they're not sorry, the call volume is normal – I'm being lied to.

Or how about the the big red advertisement that says **SALE!** up to **40% OFF!!** You may find that there are one or two obscure items that are indeed marked down 40%, but most are not. The ad, though technically accurate, is essentially a falsehood in all other respects. This is a tiny example of the sort of deception that completely permeates commercial advertising. Copywriters make grandiose claims, and squeeze by truth-in-advertising laws by strategically inserting a few “weasel words.” The intent is to obscure the full truth.

Athletes stare straight into the camera and declare they never took performance-enhancing drugs. Powerful men say that all those women's accusations are completely untrue. Corporate executives say there was never any cover-up.

I could continue this rant for a very long time were I to mine the deep veins of deceit in politics, but I will constrain myself to one example that I heard on National Public Radio when ABC's White House Correspondent Jonathan Karl was interviewed by Steve Inskeep. Karl re-tells an anecdote from his book *“Front Row at the Trump Show.”*

“A journalist with Sports Illustrated is going – doing a story about a, you know, a golf tournament, one of his properties. And everywhere he goes, Trump is introducing him as either the publisher or the president of Sports Illustrated. This is Rick Reilly. And he finally – Reilly finally says to him, wait

a minute, why do you keep lying about who I am? I'm a reporter. And Trump's answer is, sounds better.”

What I find so disturbing about this anecdote is not the magnitude of the lie – it's not that consequential – but just how low the bar is set to justify telling an untruth. It sounds better.

Lies are such a big problem in the quest for justice that our legal system has a special procedure aimed at preventing them – the administration of oaths. There's an arcane ritual that involves the witness putting their hand on a Bible and reciting specific words. After this, the witness is “under oath,” meaning that they can be punished for perjury. This is practically the only way someone can be held accountable. If you're not under oath, you can tell all the lies you want.

For a very long time I simply accepted the Christian doctrine forbidding the swearing of oaths. The Bible says not to, as in the verse from James above, and in [Matthew 5:33-37](#). You were to “let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay” as the King James Version puts it. I never really understood the rationale. The Matthew passage talks about God's throne and God's footstool, and the hair on your head. The James passage just says if you swear you'll be condemned. (Fortunately, the legal system allows people to substitute “affirm” for “swear.” They must have had a lot of bother from people trying to follow the same Bible they were being asked to swear by. Some clever lawyer came up with “affirm,” and everybody was satisfied.)

What I now understand, and very much appreciate, is that this teaching is not so much about avoiding punishment if we take an oath, but about the value of integrity. Most of us were taught that lying is a violation of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, and therefore sinful. But when a lie is defined narrowly as a false claim made under oath, then just about anything else might seem to be okay. Matthew and James say that's not the case. What we say in plain speech should be as truthful as any oath would guarantee.

Being honest builds trust within the community. It also helps us to be more tolerant. If we are transparent, we are less likely to condemn others for flaws we would otherwise pretend we don't have in our selves. Churchgoers are often accused of being hypocritical – saying one thing and doing another, which is just another form of lying. We are to be exemplars of truth, both in word and deed.

