

Series: *WHEN NO ONE'S LOOKING—September 17, 2006*

**KEEP YOUR PROMISES
Matthew 5:33-37; John 8:44**

I. INTRO

- A. Couples stand in front of all their friends and family and say words like, “I love you as I love no other. All that I am, I share with you....With this ring, I pledge to you my full devotion and complete loyalty—today, and for the rest of my life.” And a marriage is born.
1. The founding fathers of the country of which I am a citizen signed a piece of paper—**The Declaration of Independence**—and signed it with these words, “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor.” And a country is born.
 2. A young Dad and Mom stand in front of a group like this, holding a little red-faced squalling, pooping bundle of life and vow to raise that child to know and love God and give him every opportunity to follow Jesus. And a family is born.
 3. It happens all the time. A witness raises their right hand; “I swear to tell the truth, the **whole** truth...”, people sign business contracts, we sign credit card agreements and loan applications, promising that we will pay the money we owe. Friends promise to never share secrets they’ve heard. Parents promise children vacations, treats, rewards.
 4. Children promise parents that they’re just going to the playground, that’s all. Teens promise parents that there are adults supervising the party they’re going to. Our answering machines tell people we’re not available—but we’ll get **right back** to them if they’ll leave their number...
- B. We are promise-making people who live in a promise-making world. But the truth about us is that sometimes we’re promise-breakers. And when we break promises, when we say something that isn’t true, our trust stock goes down in a world that’s already suspicious. Trust is hard to gain—it’s hard slugging to gain the trust of someone in our culture. But it’s easy to lose; you can lose it in the twinkling of an eye. And then you have to start over

-Here’s the deal. Everyone on this planet wants to be liked, trusted and respected. And that’s what God wants for us too. Being trustworthy—and a truth-teller builds a great foundation for a great life. My prayer today is that you and I will move one step closer to that life.

II. DISMANTLING OUR OWN CREDIBILITY

- A. When you talk about truth-telling and promise-keeping, it’s hard not to remember some of the recent images on TV. Like Bill Clinton’s strained face, “I did **not** have sexual relations with that woman!” And the classic line, “Depending on what the meaning of **is**—is.” How many times has that been replayed?
- Martha Stewart once wrote a great tribute to honesty in an early version of Martha Stewart Living—and she moaned about the fact that truth-telling didn’t have the respect

it used to when she was a child. She said, “We must remember and teach our children (and perhaps our political figures)—one essential: the truth shall make you free.” But Martha wasn’t free. She routinely misrepresented the kind of family she grew up in, her father’s occupation, who she dated in college, what she earned as a model, the size of the parties she threw, how much of her own writing she did, and why she sold her Imclone stocks (Keyes).

-Welcome to the **post-truth world**. I read a book recently by Ralph Keyes entitled, ***The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life***.

-Keyes says that we tend to downplay the deterioration of truth in world. I mean, the words **lie** and **liar** sounds so harsh and judgmental. So, we come up with euphemisms for **lying**--like:

- *poetic truth
- *imaginative truth
- *virtual truth
- *alternative reality
- *counterfactual statements
- *fact-based information
- *exaggeration

-We don’t **lie**, we:

- *embroider the truth
- *soften the truth
- *manage the truth to make it more palatable
- *embellish the story to make it more interesting
- *guild the lily
- *present the truth in a favorable perspective
- *are lenient with honesty.

-My favorite was a British politician who said he’d been “economical with the truth.”

1. Just so we’re on the same playing field, I’m going to give you a few categories—and when I’m done, I want you to raise your hand if you’ve ever done this.
 - *If you’ve ever embroidered the truth on how tall you are, how old you are, how much you weigh, the grades you got, whether or not you smoked pot, had sex, cheated on a test—or your taxes.
 - *If you were ever **economical** with the truth by pretending to know someone you’d never met, or to have read a book you’d wish you’d read, but didn’t—or rounded out the stats on your resume—or lenient with honesty in a way that made you look better, or less guilty, than you really were? Raise your hand right now and **swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God**. My hand’s up too. That’s good, because it’s easier speaking on this topic if we’re **all** a bunch of liars!
2. The question is—**why?** As I examine my own life—I’d have to say that ego plays a part in it. I weigh a solid 170 pounds or more—probably more. We don’t have a scale in our house so we can never be accused of lying. For some stupid reason, it’s easier to say that I weigh “about 160-165”—which is about what I weighed in high school.

-Sometimes the truth about failure or stupidity is embarrassing. I'd like to be more noble, more self-controlled, more virtuous than I am.

-I think **fear** plays a part. The fear of loss—loss of respect, loss of position, loss of someone's love, loss of money. Truth **costs** us.

-I think, in our culture, image management is **huge**. We want people to be impressed with us.

I mean, in a culture that puts a huge emphasis on looks and stuff and success—lying, or “truth enhancement” becomes the short-cut. We live in a world where people not only have cosmetic surgery done on their bodies, that do cosmetic surgery on the truth; they cut out the unsightly stuff, and do implants where they need some bulk; you know—jobs they never had, goals they never scored, deals they never sealed. Truth relaxes if you give is a good massage!

3. The underlying philosophy behind this kind of lying is what has become the byline of post-modernism: All truth is relative. This is my truth; that's **your** truth. And we're not exempt. 73% of Christians interviewed either agreed strongly—or somewhat agreed with this statement: ***There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in two totally conflicting ways and both could still be correct.***
4. Another reason Keyes' lists for the erosion of truthfulness is the lack of face-to-face accountability—especially in urban areas, and with the acceleration of electronic relationships. How will a customer you'll never see again, or a stranger on the street—or in a chat room know if you've lied to them? -In fact, he said that one of the biggest motivators to telling the truth and keeping your promises is living in a small community where you have to face these same people again and again.
5. Another huge factor in our culture are the mentors we've chosen. Keyes lists lawyers, politicians and Hollywood. Watch TV and you spend time with the greatest collection of liars ever gathered—advertisers.

B. Now, why am I making such a big deal about the truth issue in our culture when the title of the message is **Keep Your Promises**. Well, I'll tell you why. **Truth** is the foundation for keeping promises. There is no such thing as a liar who keeps his or her promises. If you lie to get the money, the sex, the self-esteem, the job, the grades—whatever it is you want, you won't hesitate to make promises based on lies—promises you only intend to keep if they work in your favor.

-If you cut a lie open, I'll tell you what you'll always find at the core. Self—and all of its ugly sisters; selfishness, self-centeredness, etc. We think we can take short-cuts to get where we want to be, so we lie and break promises.

1. Now, let me tell you the irony of the short-cut. At heart—at our core—we long for respect and admiration. We want other people to love us, trust us, and believe us. And we want others to entrust the truth about themselves to us—and believe we won't use it for to our own advantage.

-We want to be able to trust others in our relational world. We want banks to believe us when we say we'll repay the money we borrow. We want parents to believe us if we're kids. We want kids to believe us if we're parents.

-If you marry, you want your spouse to know they can trust you, whether it's in using the computer or handling the money. You want their **trust**. We want the

love and respect of others—and we instinctively know that trust is somehow a part of that.

2. I just need to say, trust isn't just a **part** of love and respect; it's the foundation for it. Intimacy of every kind is based on trust.

-And that's why not telling the truth and breaking promises is so fundamentally stupid. It ultimately annihilates what we crave. A lie, a broken promise can set you back **years** in a relationship.

-So, why do we do it? We do it because **we've** been deceived into thinking that it will be less painful—and that we can get away with it. But we never do.

3. Jesus once told a tough crowd where lying comes from. He told a tough crowd, **You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. 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 NIV).**

-So, lets be clear—if you lie, whose team are you on? Just asking. God is the ultimate truth-teller and promise-keeper. The devil, or Satan, is a liar. We're in the mess we're in because the first humans listened to his lies and chucked the amazing life they had.

-Friends, we were **made** in the image of a truth-telling, promise-keeping God. He put this world together **based** on truth. We sometimes may not **like** the truth, but we **crave** the truth.

- a. What do you think would happen if trust began to break down in the medical world? Where physicians and hospitals began to embroider the truth to get more business—diagnosing people with illnesses they don't have? I mean, the auto repair industry sometimes does that, right?

-Think about our world:

*We **trust** that when we deposit money or invest money—it will go where it's supposed to go.

*We trust that when we buy insurance, the insurers will actually pay up of there's damage.

*We trust that when we take the things most precious to us—our children—to a school, someone will be teaching them well—and look out for them.

- b. Now, with this in mind, imagine living in a world of total skepticism, where your first instinct, no matter where you went or what you were told, was that you were being lied to, that no one would keep their promises. Civilization would collapse. The more truth that's told, the more promises that are kept, the more integrity that exists—the better the world we live in.

-At the very bottom level, telling the truth and keeping your promises is treating others the way you want to be treated. It's called—**character**.

III. **UNDER-PROMISE; OVER-DELIVER**

- A. A friend, Jon Ison, once used a phrase I've never forgotten—a phrase that ought to be the bottom line in every business. It was: **under promise and over deliver**. Just to keep you awake, let's do a short quiz on this:

*Movie trailers--**over** promise or **under** promise?

- *Political speeches? **Over** promise or **under**-promise?
- *TV ads? **Over** promise or **under** promise?
- *Resumes: **Over** promise or **under** promise?
- *First date: **Over** promise or **under** promise?

-Let's up the ante. Are any of you married? When you got married, did you **over** promise or **under** promise? I've thought about that a lot. I've thought—"What if my life was like that—that I under promised and over delivered?"

1. Anyone know what happens if you over-promise and **under-deliver**? It's called disappointment. Do it a lot and it's called scamming.
-Integrity, at the core, is being that same person, whether or not people are watching. It's when your heart and your inner life match your outer life. Integrity is not just being **known** as a sincere person who tells the truth and keeps their promises—it's actually **being** a person who tells the truth and keeps their promises.
2. Jesus addressed this issue of keeping your promises in his best known message. It's called the Sermon on the Mount. He said:
"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matt. 5:33-37 NIV)."
3. Now, what is Jesus saying here? Don't ever make any promises? No, not at all.
-Let me compare it to a game most of you are familiar with. **Simon Says**.
*Simon says touch your nose.
*Simon says grab your ear.
*Simon says stand up.
*Simon says cross your heart.
*Simon says grab your leg.
*Simon says grab the hand of the person next to you. *Let it go.
***Simon** says let it go.
*You can sit down. **Simon** says, **Sit down!**

-In Jesus culture, making promises was a little like "Simon says." For example, someone would say, "Could you lend me some money? I promise I'll pay you back tomorrow!" So, tomorrow, the person comes to be repaid, and the person says, "Oh, no—I didn't **swear by Heaven** that I'd pay you back!"

-See, if someone didn't know the code words and secret handshakes—**wink! wink! Nudge, nudge!** You were a set-up for a good whopper. Jesus said, "If you are in fact a person of integrity, you shouldn't **need** a bunch of extra words and security cameras and retina scanners to make sure you're telling the truth! If you don't want to make a deal or a promise, do something very unusual. Say **NO!**
-**No** is a complete sentence. So, let's practice. Say **no!** Try again. **No!** Say, "**Are you kidding? NO WAY!**" And if you want to promise, say, **Yes!—and then**

DO IT. Even if you groan and say, “Why did I say yes?” Keep your promises—even if they cost you!

-Why? Well, because someday you’re going to need someone to trust you—and that trust will be worth everything you’ve ever paid to keep a promise. In fact, I’d say that what you want most—love, respect, believability, trust—is directly connected to whether or not others can trust your yes to be “YES!” and your no to be “NO!”

B. Let’s talk about some specific areas of promise-keeping and truth-telling.

1. The single most important truth-telling and promise-keeping we do in our lives is with God. The single greatest area of untruth in our world is our unwillingness to confess our sin to God and tell Him we need Him. The book of 1 John says that if we either say or imply that we don’t have any sins to confess—we call **God** a liar—because He says we do.

-Another issue—sometimes when our lives are a mess, we pray **foxhole prayers**. In our desperation, we make promises to God—about what we’re doing to do if He hears us, helps us, saves the life of someone we love. Sometimes we promise God that we’ll follow Him—if He’ll just wash our past, fill our hearts, and give us heaven. But we don’t. It’s like, “Thanks, God, ol’ Buddy, ol’ Pal. **See ya later, Dude!**”

-I think, at the core of this, is our lack of trust in God. Strange, isn’t it, that we would call into question the One whose word is rock-solid and flawless; the ultimate promise-keeper. That even though we all admit that we’ve lied—more than once—we would choose to believe what we think rather than the One who personifies truth.

-The point is not to just stop coming to God because we’re so embarrassed—but to just admit truth and ask for help; “God, I struggle with trusting You—maybe because you’re invisible, but mainly because I’m fickle. I’ve made promises to you I haven’t kept. Would you put steel in my backbone—and **help** me!”

2. Another area where you will make tons of spoken—and unspoken promises—and it’s with your friends. Did you ever think about the fact that when you tell a friend—or any human something, there’s an unspoken promise that you’re telling them the truth. When you listen to things that friends tell you, there’s an unspoken promise that you will treat their words and reputations like you’d like to have yours treated.

-It’s so easy in friendships to exaggerate your experiences to make yourself sound better or wiser or more courageous than you are. Don’t be dumb! People find out! If you want good friendships that last a long time—tell the truth and keep your promises! Do what you say you’ll do, be where you say you’ll be; don’t do what you say you won’t do.

3. Guess where else you and I will make lots of promises over a lifetime? When we borrow money—whether it’s from a bank, a friend, or on plastic. When it’s from bank or on plastic, you’re **renting** the money. And if you can’t pay the rent, you have to give it back! And if you don’t, your financial reputation—we call it a credit

rating--will get smeared. Friends, listen to me—class—**classsss!** This is an area where we need to under-promise and over deliver!

-This is upstream work. Last year in North America there were more people who went bankrupt than who graduated from college or university. So, before you sign, make **sure** you can **keep** your promise!

4. Another area of promise-keeping. It's the promise you make when you take a job. You promise, with your resume, to be actually able to **do** the job—and to get remedial help when you can't. You are promising to work hard—to give it your best shot; to listen carefully to what you're being asked to do, and then agree to it. -When you sign a contract, you agree to be loyal to the leadership. When you agree to manage people, you're promising to not use them to make yourself look better—but help them excel. And if you're doing the hiring—you're promising that you're giving people a job they can actually do and still have a life. Keep your promises!
5. I want to talk to you about two other promises we make—marriage and parenthood. Now, what I say here won't be as broad, but I think it applies both to those who are married—and those who might be some day.

-When you stand before family, friends, and God and take marriage vows, you have to understand that this is probably the biggest, most comprehensive, most costly promise human beings can make to each other.

-When I sit with couples in my office who on the cusp of doing this, I sometimes catch them looking dreamily into each other's eyes as if to say, "Other people struggle with this, but **not us! We're in love!**"

-I need to tell you—feelings don't cut it when it comes to making this promise. You need time to find out exactly who this person is before you promise to share your life, your family, your parenting, your money and your bed with them... **as long as we both shall live.** I mean, there's enough disillusionment in finding out you got more than you bargained for—but if you find out that you got **less... THAT'S** a problem.

-I have two thoughts on this issue.

- a. First—and this is **way** too late for some of you--take your time. What's the rush? Are you afraid they're going to get off the hook? Better now than after you marry. **Take your time.** Repeat that after me so I know you get it. **I WILL TAKE MY TIME!** Thank you!
- b. Second, keep your promise. If you'll look back at the vows you took, you'll notice that there's no fine print. Your promise was unconditional. Sickness, health, poverty, plenty, joy, sorrow.

-You didn't promise that you would **receive** love for the rest of your life. That would be cool—just sit back fight with someone over who can love you the most! You promised to **give** your love, your loyalty, your full devotion—whatever life brought.

-Sometimes keeping the promises you've made means visiting a counselor and saying, "We're having trouble feeling good about our promises."

- c. Now, I realize—keeping promises like this takes **both** people. You can't make someone else keep their promise. But you can do everything possible—the work, the forgiving, the asking God for grace and power—to keep **your** promise—even when it costs you far more than you ever dreamed you'd pay. Keep your promise.
6. One more promise that affects a narrow slice of this group. It's keeping our promises to our children. See, **having** a child is the same as **promising** your commitment to them—that you will love them in a way that they feel it; that you will give them hands on care. That you will help them find out what's important in life; that you won't just develop their brains and talents—you'll nurture their souls. Oh, and, by the way—it's not just an 18 year commitment. At 80, you won't still be feeding them—hopefully—but you will still be their parent. That's the deal.
- a. Most parents start out well on this—I mean, babies are cute, cuddly. Over time, you realize that having children is very inconvenient; and raising them in a way that's **not** about you and your ego needs and your money will stretch you to the limit of selflessness.
- b. Most parents recognize that they're handling an eternal soul; a soul that can in many ways be influenced to love and worship God or ignore Him. So, we dedicate our children to God, sometimes have a big party—and our **intentions** are good. But in real life, it gets a little murky. We find that the decision to form a child's soul—and let others help—has real consequences. When push comes to shove, lots of stuff gets between us and our promise. Hockey, soccer, cottage country, convenience, sleep—and sometimes just plain laziness.
- c. Something else that sometimes figures into this. Getting ahead. Sometimes parents convince that the stuff they can buy their children by overworking compensate for being, in some measure, an absentee parent. Simple answer to that. It can't. They want **you!** So...keep your promises! Someday you'll be glad you did.
- C. Can I give you just a few pointers on keeping promises that may help?
1. The Bible, particularly the book of Proverbs, teaches; **Be really careful what you promise. Under** promise; **over** deliver. Take the time you need to think through what you're promising—especially big ones. Make sure your motives are clear; make sure you have a reality check on what you're promising, and check people's references so you know **who** you're making your promises to! And while you're at it--check **God's** references—and see if He can be trusted!
 2. Second thing in being honest/making good promises? **Keep your promise-making away from image management.** When your ego gets wrapped up in the stories you tell, how you present your side of a struggle, the kind of stuff you buy and promise to pay for—it's a recipe for dishonesty and promise breaking. Pride—the need to be right, the need to look better than you are--is a set-up for a credibility gap!

3. **Be accountable.** Be quick to confess lies and dishonesty and broken promises. Don't make excuses. And don't wait—you may wait too long. And if you have children, confess your failures to them too. They're not stupid, you know. They know the truth, so own it. It won't diminish you in their eyes; it will give them the courage to do the same! And in a world like ours, they'll need it!
4. **Make sure you regularly feel the pain of honesty.** Pain is a pretty good motivator for making keeping promises and telling the truth. Anyone ever made a promise that made you wince when you had to keep it? Keeping your promises is sometimes extremely inconvenient and messy; sometimes it's downright painful, whether it's in a marriage, a job, a friendship, a financial deal. Don't take short-cuts—because, in reality, there **are** no short-cuts. Whatever you may save in money, time or hassle, you'll pay for with your conscience and your sense of self-respect. Pain isn't bad—God uses it to grow us up.
5. **Finally, live in a community of people—like this one.** People who will love you. People who will walk with you. People who will be close enough to know whether or not you're telling the truth and keeping your promises. Churches aren't for perfect people; they're for people who will be honest about their failure—and people who need others to keep them honest and truthful!

-And I am accountable to you. I'm not perfect. I'm tempted to bend, inflate, cut, and otherwise spindle and mutilate the truth to keep myself out of trouble and looking good. Don't let me do that. I **need** you! And you need me too.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

A. You've probably heard me talk about a little church I served in Emporium, PA—a tiny church on the corner of a busy street. Well, God blessed, and that little church way outgrew its facilities. So, we started looking for land. Now, you have to understand Emporium—it's in a valley, with mountains and woods going up on either side. There **wasn't** much flat land available. We looked everywhere—until, one day this old crusty guy who wasn't a part of any church asked one of our leaders, "Hey, I hear your church is looking for land. How come you haven't asked me?"

1. Well, everyone **knew** why they hadn't asked him. He'd been asked again and again and again to sell the land next to him—right on a main road—and he'd refused. So we asked—and he agreed—and sold the church 11 acres for \$1000 an acre!
2. One day when we were in the middle of raising that money, I found out why. A guy visited the church from out-of-town who used to own a beer distributorship in town. One night, totally broken, he'd come to that little church, called the **Jesus Saves** church because of the tacky, flashing sign outside. And his life was totally transformed.

-His business, unfortunately, went bankrupt and he had to move. But he promised himself...and God...that he'd pay everyone back. So through the year, he'd save his money—and then make his annual trip to Emporium, look up a creditor, and

pay them back. Little did Norm Drum know, one year it would be his turn. This guy looked him up at his plumbing business and handed him over \$5000 in cash.

-Norm was so stunned, he burst into tears—this crusty old guy. When he regained control, he said, “I thought this money was long gone. Why’d you do this.” And he told Norm the story of being at the end of his rope, and about coming to the little **Jesus Saves** church—and meeting Jesus—and being changed. And that’s why Norm had this soft spot for that little church that desperately needed land. This is what that church looks like now.

- B. I can guarantee you that keeping your promises will have way more impact of people than you’d imagine cause, see, we live in a world that’s forgotten what that means. So, with God’s help, tell the truth—be a trustworthy person, and keep your promises---even when—and especially when—it hurts.