



Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No

As a culture, particularly in the West, we have become accustomed to explaining, justifying, and rationalizing. If you really stop to think about it, we are almost fearful to simply, and gently provide a truthful response (speak truth in love, See. Ephesians 4:15). If someone asks a question and we have a simple yes or no, we often fail to stop at yes or no – it is as if we are not saying enough with our yes or no. For example, if we receive an invitation to dinner and cannot attend, our natural inclination is to explain the ‘why’ – we have other plans, a conflict, and there is the inherent pressure – a misguided social contract that our reason/response needs to not only be supported and important but, often more importantly, understood by and further agreed to, as sufficient, by the other person. The social contract is misguided because the necessity finds its origin in the brokenness of human relationship propagated from the fall. I would propose that our discomfort with the practical spiritual discipline, of ‘let your yes be yes and your no be no,’ stems from our insecurities, self-protectionistic tendencies, and other derived behaviors and attitudes that originate from the flesh and not the Spirit. Consider, a simple example, I reached out to a friend and asked if they were available for a chat during a specified time. The response was, “sadly, I am not able to make that time work today.” “No worries,” was my response. Note, there is no reason – no explanation – no elaboration - nor would I propose there needs to be one. There did not need to be additional sentences about the ‘why.’ But, you ask, why not?

We live in a culture, particularly in the West, where we have become very accustomed to a ‘why’ explanation. A need for an explanation is self-derived. The Spirit does not need a ‘why’ explanation. As you read throughout the Bible, first it is imperative to note that Jesus never defended himself. He never provided a ‘why’ explanation as it pertained to His actions. He provided explanation, as it was relevant to teaching and instruction, but not as a measure of ensuring others were comfortable with His responses. Second, think about your own need for an explanation? What is the ‘root’ or source

of that need? If you deem it rude, that is a flesh response. If you feel unsatisfied, that is a flesh response. I had a friend from the South say “feeling a need to explain the ‘yes or no’ is a Southern cultural belief – rooted in the desire to please people. Scripture speaks clearly that God knows and sees our heart (See, Jeremiah 17:10, Psalm 139) suggest that we need to please God and not man, and God does not need an explanation as He sees all. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 reminds us, “but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.” In 1 Samuel 16:7, we read “but the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” In Acts 5:29, “but Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” In Jeremiah 17: 5, “thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.”

The struggle with the ‘need to know’ behind the yes or no – to know ‘the why’ often stems from a desire to avoid the pain associated with the possibility of hurt feelings, disappointment, disappointing people, not speaking authentically and the conviction (if from God) or the condemnation (if from self or others), tangled feelings, preoccupation with self (although this is often hidden and masked with a concern for others), perceiving or feeling an obligation to provide an explanation, and a host of other flesh-derived feelings and fears.

The context for the ‘practical spiritual discipline’ of let your ‘yes be yes and your no be no’ comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:37, in the context of 5:33-37 where the emphasis is on the Christian and taking of oaths. Think about it this way. A friend says, can you come to dinner. You say no. They are dissatisfied and continue to ask you, why, so you provide an explanation. I have to spend time with my dog. Your friend is now offended because your friend hears you say your dog is more important than she is so your friend continues to push you for more explanation until you say, I really have to be home with my dog (what you are saying without saying the word is ‘I swear’ (really trust me, believe me, hear me). This is the essence and root of the issues – mistrust, distrust, unbelief, compounded with it is not ‘right’ with your friend so your answer is not enough – it is not enough.

It is never necessary for Christ's people to swear an oath before they utter the truth. Their word should always be so reliable that nothing more than a statement is needed from them. As Turner notes "if one's heart is right with God, upright speech will transparently represent what is in one's heart; perjury and false witness will not occur."¹ God is in all of life, and every statement is made before him. Your statement will refer to anything you say. I have translated the Greek fairly literally, but the meaning may well be a "Plain 'Yes' or 'No' is all you need to say." That would suit the context. Another possibility is that the words signify much what James says: "Let your 'yes' be yes, and your 'no' no" (James. 5:12), that is, your statement should be thoroughly reliable and thus make an oath unnecessary. Some interpreters suggest that a doubled "yes" or "no" (which is more than the single word) is the limit of what is permissible, but it is unlikely that Jesus would engage in such casuistry, especially when he is opposing that of the Jews. Anything more than these expressions is of the evil one. This may mean that it originates in evil or, more probably, that it comes from the devil (so Lenski).²

In other words, if we speak authentically, speaking truth in love, as we suggested in the opening of this blog, and which is commanded by Paul we do not need to provide more. Lloyd-Jones in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (which I recommend as a must read) writes "its main intent was to place a bridle upon man's proneness, as a result of sin and the fall, to lying. One of the greatest problems with which Moses had to deal was the tendency of people to lie to one another and deliberately say things that were not true."³ I would propose that the reason we feel compelled to ask for explanation and are not content with a 'yes or no' is because of, first, our propensity to not speak authentically – to lie, and secondly, from our lack of trust in what people say to us, and thirdly, because of our own flesh-driven need to not only know and understand but to be the judge and jury on whether the response is acceptable to us – really your dog over me! Lloyd-Jones continues "He (Jesus) forbids all oaths in ordinary conversations. Indeed, I go further and would remind you that He says no oaths or **exaggerated avowals** (an affirmation of the truth of what you believe) **are ever necessary**. It must either be yea, yea; or nay, nay. He (Jesus) calls for simple veracity, the speaking of truth always in all ordinary communications and conversations and speech. 'Let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these comes from evil'" (p. 237).

¹ Matthew, Baker Exegetical commentary on the New Testament, David L Turner .

² Leon Morris, The Gospel according to Matthew, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 125.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. (Grand Rapids, MI; W.B. Eerdmans; 1976), 232.

The conclusion on the topic of oaths and the rejection of the need for Christ's people to swear an oath is found in 5:37. The question may be asked, 'if oaths are not permitted how do you support the truthfulness of your statement, or is there even a need to support the truthfulness of your statement?' The answer is really summed up in the last question - there is **no need** for a Christian communicating truth to another to support or defend the truthfulness of their statements. In fact, the antithesis of it is we reject the cultural need out of hand. In the Greek there are doublets of yes and no 'yes, yes,' 'no, no.' We can interpret this to mean at best, we repeat the initial statement only ('yes' or 'no' without more) and anything beyond the bare assertion diminishes the consistent truthfulness to which Jesus calls us and in fact as we see at the end of the second phrase is the product of an evil impulse – our fleshly need to know, understand, and more important be OK with the actual response. Really your dog over me!

The challenge is to really 'deep dive' and self-examine your intent and motive in providing explanation. If you are speaking authentically (which must be a first priority) then why explain? If you really listen to your explanations can you see the self-rationalization: 'but really, I have to;' or 'no, I need to'; or 'please believe me because my explanation is really good;' or 'I swear this is why.' You may not be saying thee words 'I swear' but can you hear them implicitly if you are willing to shine the Light of Christ (a truth light) deep within? I would exhort, as did Paul, that we not let the culture define our behavior and practices. We not let our Southern hospitality, or conditioned behaviors, or personal beliefs or fears drive our behavior and practices. I would challenge us to change the paradigms and choose to live authentically (which requires a deep self-examination of intent and motive, a cleansing of self, an awareness of susceptibilities and problematic habits) and speak truth in love. Imagine the simplicity and peace that flows from a 'yes' or 'no!'