

Thinking About Integrity Like Jesus

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[0 : 00] Matthew 5, verses 33 to 37. And Jesus says this, Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no.

Anything more than this comes from evil. This is God's holy word. Tonight, we are carrying on with Jesus as He preaches His sermon on the Mount.

The last few weeks, we've been saying that Jesus is preaching, He's speaking in a day when people are trying to minimize the reality of human failure.

[1 : 13] And we're on these six commands that Jesus picks up on. We're on the fourth tonight. And we've said before, our idea maybe, just maybe, is that these are just sets of rules.

Rules and more rules. Or on the other side of that, maybe perhaps we obsess over them, and we'll say, you know, I'll be more Christian.

I will be more spiritual if I just keep these commands down to the letter. Jesus comes to these two extremes, we've said the last few weeks, evasion and obsession.

And He says it's neither. This is just, for you, Christian, He says, this is just about living the life that you have been given. In a world full of disorder, in a world full of, you know, what we said the last few weeks, anger and lust and wrong desires, broken relationships, tonight a lack of trust.

In that world, God's ongoing work is to undo that. And He will undo it at the new creation. And you, if you are a Christian, have been called to take part in that work.

[2 : 25] We are called to support life, to illustrate true, beautiful life, as it's meant to be. And tonight we're thinking especially about integrity and keeping your word and being honest.

And with that, again, perhaps we stray towards evasion rather than staying in the middle where Jesus wants us to be. With the last three commands, with the last three sections on anger and wrong desires and having a correct view of marriage and relationships, relationships, and tonight, meaning what we say all of the time.

The question is surely, surely we can relax a wee bit. That's the story in the Screwtape Letters, this book that Cody was mentioning earlier.

Satan comes and he says, a little bit of bad is okay. You don't need to do as Jesus says all the time. It's attractive. It's appealing. Just a wee bit of bad is okay and you'll get by.

If you're a Christian, you have been called to live this restored life. And the only reason you have this life is because Jesus kept his word.

[3 : 40] I know some people here are Gavin Orland fans. He's an American pastor and theologian and he's got a great podcast. And on his podcast he says, you know, as Christians, we are allowed to have happy thoughts.

We have been given happy thoughts. And one happy thought is this, that Christ, before time, before creation, the Son of God, he knew your name.

He thought of you specifically and he said he would go and die for you. The plan of the triune God from before time was to save sinful, broken people and give them real, true life.

If you're a Christian, you're called to that. And the reason you're called to that is because Christ kept his word. He fulfilled what he said he would and he saved you.

So, how do you support life? How do you, how do we fulfill our purpose in the world? We do it by imitating Jesus. We do it by keeping our word and being people of integrity.

[4 : 48] So, just two points tonight on that. Two points from these verses that we read. Firstly, we are, every single person, we are all in the presence of God all the time.

And the second point, how to mean what you say. In light of being in the presence of God, how to mean what you say. So, firstly, we all, every single person, all of us tonight are in the presence of God every single time we speak.

Jesus in this section is, he's picking up on a serious issue in his day and we read it there. It seems like quite a foreign issue to us, I think, perhaps more so than the last three commands.

We don't usually swear oaths or make vows apart from in court or at our wedding. It's a pretty foreign idea. Jesus is speaking in a day when it's a big deal and it's a big problem, he says.

So, in verse 33, he follows the same pattern that we've seen the last few weeks. You have heard it said, he says, you shall not swear falsely but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

[5 : 57] But I say to you, do not take an oath at all. Jesus is again, for the fourth time in a row, correcting this idea that we can minimize the reality of our human failure.

He tells him, you know, you think you can but you can't. You've been trying to make it really difficult to mess up. You say you're going to take oaths, well, I'm telling you, don't take any at all.

Why? What's the problem with taking oaths? What's the point Jesus is making? The practice of taking oaths properly, according to the Pharisees, is not built around any one command, but it's a pulling together of loads of different commands in the Old Testament, and you don't need to turn to them, but I'll read just two or three.

Leviticus 19, you shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God.

Numbers 30, verse 2, If a man vows a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word.

Ecclesiastes 5, When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it. There are so many more, but the one common feature that you'll have heard in each of these commands is swearing an oath in the name of the Lord.

[7 : 18] You make a vow to God, and Jesus is summarizing, in this verse, Jesus is summarizing their interpretation. Of the commands, when he says, You shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

They're meant to be a sign that your word is binding. Vows were a sign that in your heart you really, really meant what you said. Swearing was a sign that you were going to, without question, tell the truth and stick to it.

And what did the Pharisees do? They took all of these commands and they said, Well, only if you swear in the name of the Lord is your word binding.

Only if you use his name when you say something are you going to have to follow through on that. Documents and tracks, loads and loads have been found outside of the Bible from the time that Jesus was speaking in.

And there are these reports that oath-taking was a part, it was a big part of day-to-day life. So you could take an oath publicly in front of many people, you could take an oath or make a vow privately with just one person.

[8 : 26] Swearing was the same and books and tracks, pages and pages were written by these religious rulers to offer people loopholes when they made these vows.

Formulas, sets of rules were created by taking Leviticus 19 and Numbers 30 and saying that, you know, there are things that you can say that will mean you don't really have to keep your word.

You don't really have to follow through on this. If you follow this chart and you read the verses there, if you swear by heaven or by Jerusalem or by the hairs on your head, then you're fine.

You don't have to keep your word. Just as long as you're not swearing in the name of the Lord, you don't have to keep your word. We see the problem.

I think God is identifying a problem of the heart in the Old Testament when he gives these commands. He says, you know, people are deceitful. But what do the Pharisees say?

[9 : 29] What do they say? We can work around it. If we are deceitful and that's an issue, we can work around it. Oaths are meant to promote truthfulness.

Let's use them to give us an opportunity not to be truthful. And so, Jesus says, if you swear in the name of the Lord and that's the only time you're going to tell the truth, don't swear an oath at all.

Don't make a vow at all. That's Jesus' point. Don't take them at all. Why? Why not take oaths? You are always, Jesus is saying, in the presence of God, whether you say it or not.

Heaven is his throne. The earth is his footstool. Jerusalem is the city of the king. Even your head is not your own. It's God who changes one black and one gray.

He does that. From the most public speech to a relaxed conversation, to the most careful language, to the most careless, flippant language that someone really believes.

[10:38] He hears it all. You are always, Jesus is saying to them, in the presence of God when you speak. And every word you speak is before him. By his name or by the hairs on your head, you are speaking before God.

And again, we don't take oaths. We don't make vows daily. And we read these words that Jesus is saying and we think that's a detached problem. That's a foreign problem to us.

In verses 34 to 36, Jesus is saying, no, this is a problem for everyone. This is a problem for the heart, for every person. You might not swear by heaven or by your head, but God hears every word you say.

Do we speak well? Do we mean everything we say? We are always in the presence of God. Every word is before him. We can put it another way.

This week, the next seven days, when you think about the people that you're going to meet with and the things that you'll probably say to them, you will not be able to measure the truthfulness of your words.

[11:53] There are no levels to truthfulness, one preacher says. whether you really, really mean something or you just say it flippantly and the person believes you, there is no difference.

You know, you could be in a court, you could be swearing that you'll tell the truth. You can say to your friend, yes, I'll be there. Do you tell the truth about the most serious things and relax a bit on gray areas?

Do you tell your friend or your flatmate or your husband or your wife or your child or your parents that you'll do something for them, that you'll buy them this gift or whatever it might be and never do it?

Do you speak with people in confidentiality and you know it's confidential and they ask you not to say anything and yet you go out and speak about it anyway?

Jesus says there are no levels to integrity. There is no level whatsoever to truthfulness. You can't swear by the Lord for one thing and your head for another.

[12:59] It's not at all about sticking to your word in one sense and not in another. No, everything you say is before God. Everything you say is by His name.

you can think about any crime or police drama that you watch on TV or Netflix or wherever it is and in almost all of them one key character has all the vital information about this case that's being investigated and they say yes, I will tell you the truth as long as I'm not on the record and so they meet in some dim, shady lit street or they go to the station and the cameras are turned off and maybe whatever is said is true in the program but it's not a recorded truth.

It's not under oath and so, you know, it usually means you get five more episodes out of this show because the police have still got to prove it anyway. Jesus is making the point that, you know, we can look at it in the same way.

Jesus is making the point that recorded or not recorded truth, the meaningfulness of your words he is saying does not depend on the situation.

Your words are always meaningful. Your words outside the court are as real and as binding as your words in the court. The Pharisees, you know, they can't use formulas to escape that and nor can we.

[14:28] One more thing here and we'll go on to the last point. Words are a big deal. Jesus makes that point over and over and over again in Matthew and in the other Gospels.

Paul and James constantly bring us back to that in their letters as well. Words are a big deal and you think, okay, you think, you look at the news and you think on an international level there is constant scrutiny between countries or between a leader and his country or his people today and throughout history.

bring that down to a personal level. Bring that down to you and your sibling or your parents or your family or social group. Where does tension come from?

Does it come from your words to one another? Promises maybe that you don't keep? Good things that you speak about but never follow up on? Not being honest?

Why? Why is there such a breakdown on a social and an international scale? Because words are important. Words are deep and we don't always mean what we say.

[15 : 40] We hide the truth and we're dishonest. Jesus says, don't treat your words lightly. There is no level to integrity. You are always before God.

You are constantly in his presence and everything you say is before him. everything you say leads to joy or leads to breakdown in your relationships.

Do we mean what we say? Will we be people of honesty? He's asking. Will we be people of integrity with his kingdom life that we've been given?

Secondly then, in light of that, in light of being in God's presence all the time, how to mean what we say? Jesus doesn't complicate it at all in this passage.

Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil. Mean what you say, Jesus says. You don't need oaths.

[16 : 42] Just think about what you're going to say and mean it. It's probably helpful at this point to give a couple of situations where we don't follow up on this.

There are quite a lot but just a couple. There are circumstances where you can't keep your word. You know, emergencies come, things happen and you can't follow through on what you're saying you'll do. Other factors impact on what you've said.

Altogether, apart from the 99% of the time that you can keep your word, there are genuine reasons why we can't follow through. And we know that. Another thing, we take oaths in the courtroom. And this has historically been where a lot of Christians come and they say, well, Jesus says we can't take oaths so we're not going to be in the court. When Jesus says take no oaths and simply let your yes be yes and your no be no, he's not saying you can't take oaths at all.

[17 : 49] The whole reason oaths exist is because humans are prone to dishonesty and the world knows it. So, you know, telling the truth, telling the truth in the court is a serious issue.

And unfortunately, you know, you can't just walk into the court and say, can you just believe me? Here, I'm a Christian. You know, I'm going to tell my truth all the time. No, you shouldn't need an oath as a Christian, but the external world asks that you would take one.

He's only telling you, Jesus is only telling you not to use them for loopholes. It's simply a case of being truthful or not. There are many more, but Jesus' point is not to throw them out.

You know, he takes one before he dies. Paul takes them in his letters. Jesus doesn't throw them out, but he just says, you're meant to be honest all the time, no matter who you're speaking to.

Okay, apart from that, apart from that, Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Are you speaking to your children and you promise them something?

[19 : 02] When you say yes and you are completely within your power to follow through in that, are you serious about that, Jesus asks. You know, when you phone into work sick, and you say you can't come in, is that really a yes?

Or are you fit for everything else in the day? When you say to someone, I'll be praying for you, will you be praying for them?

What's the difference? Your child, your boss, your friend in church, you know, it feels like keeping your word has more or less impact in each of these situations. No, no, Jesus says, there are no levels, there are no levels to integrity.

There's no point in swearing by heaven or by the earth or Jerusalem or your head. Your words are always serious. It doesn't matter who you're speaking to.

All your words are before God. They're all binding, like your yes, be yes, and your no, be no, he says. Be a person of truth, be a person of integrity, and fulfill your purpose as a Christian in the world.

[20 : 20] One more thing, and then we can finish more positively, I think. To mean what you say, to speak with integrity, to be upright and honest about what you're going to do.

It's about bringing joy into other people's lives. joy and not hurt into your relationships. In Hebrews 6, the writer, he's reminding us what God has promised to Abraham, and what he's promised to his offspring, that they would be blessed.

And it says, God swore this would happen. By myself, I have sworn, God says. And, you know, we've said that taking an oath, saying I promise, making a vow is a signal that us humans aren't always good at keeping our word.

And so, if God cannot lie, why swear? Why swear by his own name? When we swear, you know, we're saying that we're dishonest.

We're saying that our words are weak. When God swears, he's saying that our faith is weak, not his words, but our faith. And in pursuit of our encouragement and joy, even this week, in pursuit of building you up in your faith, in pursuit of our hope that we will one day be with him forever and ever, God says, I swear, I swear that will happen.

[21 : 59] He knows our faith is weak, and he says, you can really believe the promises that I've made. to all of Abraham's descendants, to us, to the church, you can really believe these promises.

He keeps his word, he swears, God means what he says to us. We mentioned at the start this covenant that was made by the triune God before time, the covenant of redemption has been called.

God promised before time to save his creation and the people who would reject him. In John 10, Jesus speaks about this charge that's been given to him by the Father to die and rise again.

It was an agreement. It was a word that Jesus kept. Tonight, if you are wondering why telling the truth and being people of integrity is such a big deal, if you are not a Christian and you wonder why honesty is so important, it was because of the integrity of Jesus.

It was because of him keeping his word and leaving his perfect home and living out this life of tears and loss and mocking and abandonment and death.

[23 : 23] It was because of that. It was because he kept his word that you can be saved. Knowing God, knowing God tonight and being forgiven for every broken word or promise you've made, having real joy in your soul is possible because Jesus kept his word.

Truth, honesty, integrity is at the heart of God's relationship with man. Will you believe in him? Will you trust him?

And if you have done, do you believe tonight if you're a Christian that God keeps his promises every single day? I wasn't sure if I had time at this point, but this afternoon I just looked at a list of all God's promises, or not all of them, but many of them in the Bible.

And there are so many. I'm just going to list a few here that were helpful to me as I look to this. 1 John 1, verse 9, if we confess our sins, John says, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This week, think about Matthew 11, Jesus' words, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

[25 : 00] Matthew 11, verse 9, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

Revelation 21, verse 4, one day, one day, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

2 Corinthians 1, 20, for all the promises of God find their yes in Christ. God pursues your encouragement and your joy and faith every week.

He will do it this week by keeping his word. He brings lost people home and he keeps them there. He means what he says.

His promises are all yes in Christ. A few things just to think about this week and we'll be done. Just four things you can ask yourself.

[26 : 13] Do you treat your words more or less seriously depending on who you're talking to or what the situation is? Is your speech flippant or idle in some place and more serious with someone else?

Do you make the effort to really mean what you say? If you say you'll do something for your boss or your friends or your children, will you?

If someone asks you to pray for them, will you? Is your yes a yes and no no? Will you remember that keeping your word and being honest and being a person of integrity is about building up joy in other people's lives?

No matter how young or old. Will you remember that it's about being a faint picture of Jesus and helping others see him?

Will you remember that God is a God who keeps his promises? promises. We are all oath breakers, the Bible says, but Jesus will never cast any out.

[27 : 40] We heard that at the start. There is forgiveness with him for every broken word said to all who trust in him. He will never turn any away.

Will you this week hold on to his promises? Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would help us to be people of our word.

Help us as we think about this kingdom life that you've given us. Faint pictures of Jesus. Help us to be people of integrity, people who keep our word and mean what we say.

Help us above all Lord to hold on to your promises to us. That even tomorrow as we get up we will know that we are in the arms of a loving Father. Help us and be well as we ask for Jesus sake.

Amen.