

Are you Truthful?

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Date: 16 March 2025

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[0 : 00] Well, lying is a normal, even expected part of life in the world these days, so it can often be hard for us to separate the truth from the lies.

I don't know if you knew, but the 2016 Oxford Dictionary word of the year was post-truth, and it's defined as an adjective relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

In other words, deciding what is true is based on feelings more than on facts. That's post-truth. And I guess that's why we so often hear people talk about my truth these days.

And then in 2017, the Collins Dictionary word of the year was fake news. I don't know why the dictionaries call it word of the year and then give two words for word of the year, but never mind. Fake news is defined as a noun. It is false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting. And so these days we hear about fact-checking because we've got lots of misinformation and we've also got disinformation.

[1 : 17] Well, basically all we want is the correct information. We just want to hear the truth, don't we? The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We hate being lied to. We hate being deceived, whether from public, government, authorities, but also those who are close to us.

And yet if we're honest, we have to admit that we probably struggle with telling the truth ourselves. And so while we condemn the lies in the world out there, we are also comfortable with twisting the truth when it suits us and when it is to our advantage.

And so in our text today, Jesus emphasizes the fundamental importance of truthfulness. What we say and what we promise matters.

And we know this. Truth matters in every single relationship we have with our spouses, with our parents, with our children, with our colleagues, with our employers, with our employees, if we have them.

And also with our church family, our words matter. The truth of our words matters. And it's not just in a relationship with others that our words and our truthfulness matter.

[2 : 34] It also matters when it comes to our relationship with God. Jesus wants us to keep our word. That's clear from our reading this afternoon.

And so the question is, are you truthful? Are you truthful? That's the question that Jesus essentially challenges us with in these few short verses.

Because in raising the subject of oaths, it's clear from the context that the bar for truthfulness had been lowered in Jesus' day by the religious teachers.

And so what Jesus does here is he raises the bar even higher. And so we'll see how Jesus expects his people to simply speak the truth. And so we'll look this afternoon at three points as we look at these verses.

The first is living the truth, verse 33. The second, distorting the truth, verse 34 to 36. And the third, speaking the truth, verse 37.

[3 : 34] Living, distorting, and speaking the truth. First of all, living the truth. Let's read verse 33 again. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the oaths you have made.

Okay, Jesus again here picks up on the way that the scriptures have been distorted. And we see this all the way through chapter 5 from verse 21 through to 48.

Because his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount follows a similar pattern in these verses. He uses the same basic phrase six times. I wonder if you've noticed that.

Jesus says, You have heard that it was said, da-da-da-da. And then he says, but I say to you. And so the contrast Jesus makes is not between what the law says and what he says, but between what

the law says and how the Jewish religious teachers have wrongly interpreted and applied God's law to life.

And so Jesus is drawing a distinction here between the written law of God and the human man-made teaching of the religious teachers. So Jesus is not contradicting the law.

[4 : 54] So the six times he says, you have heard that it was said, but I tell you, it's not a contradiction between the law and what Jesus says. But what Jesus is doing is essentially deepening the application of God's law.

Taking it from what could be a surface level and pushing it down deeper, drilling it down into our hearts. And if you've been here, he's done this already, hasn't he? He's done it with murder, with adultery, and with divorce.

And now Jesus tackles the subject of oaths. And so there's a connection to the ninth commandment. So up on the screen, it says there in the ninth commandment, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

It's from Exodus chapter 20, verse 16. But verse 33 in Matthew chapter 5 is not a direct quotation from the Old Testament. It's more like a summary of several verses from the Old Testament where God's people should keep the oaths they've made.

Verses like Leviticus chapter 19, verse 12. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

[6 : 04] Or Numbers chapter 30, verse 2. When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he must not break his word, but must do everything he said.

Or Deuteronomy 23, 21. If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it. For the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Okay, so they're all saying here, they're all saying that if you make a vow to the Lord, then you should keep the vow. And if you don't keep it, then you will be guilty of sin.

Because you've made the vow before God. God holds you accountable to what you've said. He's a witness to it, so you should not break your vow. Now, of course, it's bad if you promise something and you don't do it.

But it's even worse if you promise something before God and you don't do it. And so swearing an oath and not keeping it was basically to misuse God's name.

[7 : 09] And so from a straightforward reading of God's law, the demand for truthfulness is clear. That's the intention of all of these commands that come in the Old Testament.

They're all about living the truth, aren't they? Living a life of integrity, keeping your word, being trustworthy. Oaths and vows were all designed to encourage this truthfulness.

I mean, just think of some of the vows that we make today. Marriage vows would be the most obvious. Also, some jobs require people to take oaths. Doctors take the Hippocratic oath.

Soldiers swear an oath of allegiance. Oaths are required in government, law, the civil service. Because we want those in public positions to be truthful and not to tell lies.

I think the standard oath in a Scottish court is, do you swear by Almighty God that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Or in church, ministers take vows.

[8 : 17] So do elders. So do deacons. Vows of ordination. Church members take vows of membership. And so Jesus is not saying oaths are bad in and of themselves, because they've got this goal of helping people keep their word and live in truth.

They exist because our sinful human nature means that we veer towards untruthfulness when it suits us. Dan Eerly picks this up in his book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty*.

It's subtitled *How We Lie to Everyone, Especially Ourselves*. And Eerly is a professor of psychology and behavior. And as far as I'm aware, he's not a Christian, and it's not meant to be a Christian book, but it basically disposes, sorry, it describes our propensity towards dishonesty.

And so the research for the book highlights how we are prepared to be dishonest, we are prepared to lie, we are prepared to cheat, if given the temptation and given the opportunity.

And it's just that we don't want to admit that we do this. And so he says, So on the one hand, he's saying we want to see ourselves as honest and honorable people, right?

[9 : 48] We all do. That's how we want people to see us, not the opposite. But he says, So we lie to the extent or as much as we can get away with so we can still be honest and honorable people.

Eerly says, And so he calls this balancing act the fudge factor, where we lie but convince ourselves that we haven't because we somehow managed to justify all of our lies to ourselves and to others,

as if it's okay for us to lie in this instance, because, well, we kind of had to. But it's basically lying to ourselves, isn't it? That's what he's saying. And this is nothing new, because Jesus is indicating here in these verses that this is part of our sinful human life. Human nature, where we're willing to deceive and to break our promises whenever it suits us. And this was the issue in Jesus's day.

And that's the context here for the words that he says. And so when it came to oaths and when it came to vows, the issue was over whether they were binding or not binding, and when they were binding and when they weren't binding.

[11 : 22] And this all comes from the Mishnah, which was basically a compilation of Jewish oral law. And in the Mishnah, there was a section that was dedicated to oaths.

And it examined when oaths should be binding and when they shouldn't. And so the Jewish rabbis basically had a system which made a mockery of oaths.

And so they taught that oaths may or may not be binding depending on how you swore them. And so, for example, if you swore by Jerusalem, it wasn't binding.

But if you swore towards Jerusalem, it was binding. Or if you swore by the temple, it wasn't binding. But if you swore by the temple's gold, it was binding.

Or if you swore by the altar of sacrifice, it wasn't binding. But if you swore by the gift on the altar, it was. Nice and simple, right?

[12 : 26] Of course it's not simple. It wasn't simple, but these pedantic distinctions created loopholes that undermined the truth and allowed people to get away with deception.

And so the oaths basically became completely pointless in Jesus' day because the Mishnah and the Jewish rabbis and teachers had all of these loopholes so you could just never be sure whether anybody was telling the truth whatsoever when they made an oath or took a vow.

And so they gave this religious-sounding justification for lying. And that was never the intention. Of the oaths in the first place. God wants his people to keep their word and to live in truth.

So that's the first point, living in truth. Let's move on to the second, distorting the truth in verse 34 to 36. Let's read those verses again. But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great.

And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Okay, by saying here, but I tell you, Jesus goes further and he goes deeper than the oaths to the truthfulness that the oaths were intended to produce.

[13 : 55] So what Jesus does here is he gives a correct interpretation and application of the Old Testament laws concerning all of these oaths. What he's doing is he's getting to the heart of what they were supposed to do in the first place.

And as he does this, he shows just how radical our obedience is supposed to be. And so Jesus is opposing the wrong interpretation by the Jewish teachers who'd managed to introduce these loopholes in order to avoid telling the truth.

And so Jesus is not saying we should refuse to swear an oath or take a vow. What he is against is the practice of his day, which was to swear an oath by something lesser than God.

And you would swear by something lesser than God so that you could get out of keeping the oath he'd just sworn. The Jewish teachers had devised what was basically like a two-tier system for oaths, where there were different types of oaths, allowing you to swear by different things, which meant that there were different levels of how binding the oath was.

And that's why Jesus gives examples of this in verse 34 and 35 and 36, where you could swear by something lesser than God.

[15 : 27] So like tier one is God, the most important, and then tier two is basically everything else that you can swear by.

So less important. So you could swear by heaven, as Jesus says, or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or by your head. And it was a way of swearing an oath, but because God's name wasn't mentioned, wasn't attached to it, then you could claim the oath didn't matter so much.

The oath isn't as binding because God's not mentioned in it. And so, for example, somebody could swear an oath by heaven that they would pay back the money that they owed somebody else.

I swear by heaven I'll give you that 50 quid back. I'll do it by the end of the month. And so the one who owed the money, was owed the money, would say, well, okay, where's my 50 quid that you promised you would give back to me?

You swore an oath that you'd pay me. And the one owing the money could say, well, yeah, I did swear an oath. True. But I only swore by heaven.

[16:43] I didn't swear by God. If I'd sworn by God, then of course I need to fulfill my vow, but I didn't swear by God, so tough luck. I can't give you the 50 quid. I said I would.

And so the guy who's owed the money is just left like, wait, what? Nobody could be sure because this was a religiously manipulative way of playing fast and loose with the truth.

And Jesus won't stand for it. That is what he is against here. Get rid of oaths if that's how you're going to use them. That's what Jesus is saying. They're pointless. They're a waste of time.

And so what Jesus does here is he forces people to reflect on what they're actually saying when they make an oath. So if they think they're swearing by heaven alone, Jesus says, it's God's throne. If they think they're swearing by the earth alone, Jesus says, it's God's footstool. If they think they're swearing by Jerusalem alone, Jesus says, it's God's city.

[17:50] If they think they're swearing by their head alone, Jesus says, remember, that's the head God gave you. He owns it. He even chose the color of your hair and the number of your hair.

It belongs to God. So see how Jesus traces it all back to God. God is a witness to everything, which means no oath can ever be taken, no vow can ever be made, no promise can ever be uttered without it being said under God.

God sees, God hears, therefore God knows. It's like everything we say is spoken in God's presence. And even if his name is not mentioned, he's aware.

Just imagine it diagrammatically for a moment. It's like a triangle. Picture a triangle where the word God is written at the top of this triangle. And everything else that's written on the inside of the triangle is all oaths and vows and pledges and promises.

But they're all underneath God, aren't they? And so what Jesus does is he smashes this deluded belief that you can somehow take an oath and if you keep God out of it, then you don't need to do it.

[19:08] And he's saying just because God's name is not mentioned, it doesn't mean that you can fool God, even if you can fool other people. God is well aware of what we say.

And more importantly, he knows the motivation of our hearts behind what we say. And so whatever comes out of our mouths, whether it's an oath or it's a promise, and whether God's name is mentioned or not mentioned, the fact is this is God's world.

And we are God's creatures. And so we can't escape from God, nor speak as if he doesn't hear, nor keep our deceitful intentions in our hearts hidden from him.

God is not far from any one of us. And that's why Jesus is saying you cannot be fast and loose with the truth. And so when Jesus says, do not swear an oath at all, he is not against oaths per se, but Jesus is against using oaths in order to distort the truth.

Because that's not how his kingdom operates. And so that's not how those who belong to his kingdom should operate either. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist and dissident, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, basically because of what he wrote about the truth, the truth of the evil Soviet regime.

[20:41] And he wasn't liked for it by the Soviets. But in his acceptance speech, he said this, the simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie.

One word of truth outweighs the world. Because the truth is powerful, isn't it? It really is powerful. That's why Jesus calls us to live the truth, not to distort it.

And that's our second point. First, living the truth. Second, distorting the truth. And third, speaking the truth. So there's no point swearing by oaths when our hearts are prepared to deceive.

Because the oaths just mean nothing. And so Jesus tells us here how to speak the truth in verse 37. All you need to say is simply, yes or no.

Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. There's such a simplicity in what Jesus says here, isn't there? One simple, clear, no-frills word is enough.

[21:56] Yes or no. No. That's it. That's all you need to speak the truth. So Jesus is teaching us that our word is our bond.

We should be so true to the words that we say that there's absolutely no need for oaths. Because we're always speaking the truth. If our yes means yes and our no means no, then there's no ambiguity in anything that we say.

Where what we say is simple, clear, and true. Which is completely counter-cultural these days, isn't it?

And that's why people often feel the need to prefix their words with a short phrase to assure other people that they are in fact at that moment, in that time, speaking the truth.

So we use phrases like TBH. To be honest, truth be told, as a matter of fact, NGL, not going to lie.

[23 : 04] And you can even put a religious spin on it, saying, well, I swear to God. Like the alcoholic in Glasgow City Centre who asked me for money and I said, what are you going to use the money for?

He said, I swear to God, I'm not going to use it on drugs or on alcohol. I swear to God. Or we can say, as God is my witness. Now, why does this happen? Why do we use these phrases?

Why do we hear these phrases every day? It's basically because there is an underlying assumption in the whole of society that people's words cannot be trusted.

And so Jesus commands the truth on every single occasion so people know we're people who say what we mean and mean what we say, who speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And so we don't need all of this flowery language around about our words to convince people that we're not lying. They should know we're not lying. We should be people who speak words that are as solid as an oath or a vow.

[24 : 16] And so when we say, I'll do it, we do it. When we say, I will be there, then we are there. When we say, I will get it done by this time on this day, we get it done by that time on that day.

If we say, I'll keep it to myself, then we do keep it a secret and don't pass it on. Or when we accept an invitation or when we make an appointment or when we embark upon a course, then we stick to it and we do what we have said we will do.

And so the challenge for all of us is, well, does our yes really mean yes? or at the back of our mind or in our hearts, is there some kind of get out clause or excuse that if it just doesn't suit us or there's something better we should do or we can't be bothered, then we'll forget about what we promised we would do.

It's challenging, isn't it? Is our speech truthful? Because it's easy to speak in a way that can mislead others, if it helps us, that can give a particular spin on something, a spin that suits us, that can discredit someone else, just with a few of our words.

There are multiple ways that we can basically lie and deceive, but Jesus is saying, that's not my way. That's not life in my kingdom because what we say with our lips basically reflects the state of our hearts, doesn't it?

[26 : 00] And so by obeying Jesus in the short, simple, clear command, we are committing ourselves to living our whole life in truth.

Jesus says, anything beyond a straightforward yes or no comes from the evil one. or comes from evil. In other words, it's the devil himself who is behind all untruth.

Listen to how Jesus describes the devil elsewhere. In John chapter 8, he says, there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

And so when we lie, we're not just following the example of the evil one, the devil, we're actually doing his dirty work for him.

And according to Jesus, this happens particularly in the excessiveness of our speech. I think you realize the older you get that it's far better to say less words than to say more words because you're more likely not to be saying things that are wrong or false or misleading.

[27 : 13] And so Jesus is emphasizing just how serious truthfulness really is. And it's interesting, and I don't think it's surprising, but at the end of the Bible, the last book in the book of Revelation, it says that everyone who loves and practices falsehood is excluded from heaven.

That's how serious truthfulness is. That's how much it actually matters. It matters for our life here and now, but it matters for our destiny in eternity.

And interestingly, as we apply this to our church life, truthfulness matters in our witness to Jesus. Because we said earlier, we do live in a world that is full of lies and is full of deception, whether it be from governments or from big tech or from news outlets or whatever else it comes from.

The church of Jesus Christ is called to be a people who live by the truth and speak by the truth. And so we are to be a credible witness to the truth and beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so when we speak about Jesus to other people, they should be able to trust what we are saying and know us as people of integrity. Because in a world of fake news, we have got the best news to share.

[28 : 46] It's good news. It's life-transforming news. It's world-changing news. Why? Because it's true. Because it's true.

Because the good news of Jesus is a true message that rescues people from the lies of the evil one so that they can come to know the one true God.

And so what's going to motivate you and me to keep speaking the truth? Well, it's by remembering the one who said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

And by remembering what he has done for us through his death on the cross. Because when Jesus was on trial for his life, it's interesting, he submitted himself to oath.

In Matthew chapter 26, we read, the high priest said to him, I charge you under oath by the living God. Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.

[29 : 52] You have said so, Jesus replied. And then what happened after that? Well, you know the story, don't you? Jesus was crucified. And so Jesus was considered worthy of death for speaking true words that were considered to be blasphemy by his accusers.

And so he was soon crucified for all of our sins, even though he never did or said anything wrong. And that's how seriously God views all of our sins, including our speech.

It took the Son of God to go to the cross and be crucified in order that we can be forgiven. Jesus had to die there for us.

And so if the perfect Son of God was prepared to be put under oath and condemned to death and crucified for you and for me to take the punishment for all of our wrong deeds and all of our wrong words, then should we not speak the truth in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Of course we should. And so may we always live the truth and simply speak the truth for and because of Jesus.

[31 : 18] Let's pray together. Thank you.