

Handling the Truth

Matthew 5:33-37

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Well, good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good to be with you. If you're a guest or a visitor, we're glad that you would join us this morning, and you're joining us in the midst of a sermon series in the Sermon on the Mount, and so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew, chapter 5. We've been in the Sermon on the Mount for a couple months now, and we'll continue on into the new year, actually. We'll take a break during Advent, but we're in Matthew 5 this morning, and as you're turning there, just a reminder that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching about what the kingdom of God is to look like, and as his kingdom people, how we are to live, how we are to go about our days, what we're to do with our hands, how we're to think with our minds, what's supposed to be in our hearts. This is what it means to be kingdom people, and it's important for us to hear what it means to be kingdom people, because there are all sorts of kingdoms around us, right? And all these kingdoms are trying to vie for our affections. They're trying to promote certain qualities and virtues, and yet the virtue and the qualities that we are to embody are the ones that Jesus demonstrates here in the Sermon, and so that's why we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount.

And for the last number of weeks, I don't know about y'all, but as we've been going through the last few passages, the last few teachings that Jesus has, they've been personally very challenging, right? Like, Jesus has talked about things like living as the light and pointing others to Jesus. He's talked about putting aside anger, not just that gets played out with our words and in our hands, but the anger that inhabits our hearts. He's called us to put aside lustful desires and to pursue love and purity, and at the end of the day, we might be like, whew, that was a lot, right? Well, this morning, there's more, because this morning, we have Jesus's fourth antithesis statement. So you remember we're in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is giving us six antithesis statements. This is where he says, "you have heard it said, but I say to you", and this one this morning is calling us to pursue the truth with our words, so with that in mind, let's read Matthew 5, beginning in verse 33.

"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 the 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." (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you, we thank you for your word, and we ask that as we come to it now, that you would meet with us, that you would open our eyes, and that you would allow the words that I speak to be completely truthful, and that our hearts would be attentive to your word, and that by your spirit, you would teach us what it means to be your people. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, in 2001, George O'Leary was awarded his dream job. This was a job they'd been working for for many, many years. George O'Leary in 2001 had been, he had finally achieved what he had been longing for, what he had been desiring. You see, in the years prior to this, he was a successful football coach. In the early 90s, he was a defensive coordinator, he was an NFL coach, he actually led Georgia Tech to a national championship as their head coach. But for all of the great things that he had achieved at Georgia Tech with the San Diego Chargers, he wanted something grander, something greater, something more golden. And in 2001, that dream materialized. Because in 2001, he was named the head football coach of Notre Dame. This is what he had been working towards. This is what he had desired. This was his dream job, and now it was his.

But if you know the story of George O'Leary, then you know that that dream turned into a nightmare. Because a few days after he was announced as the head football coach of Notre Dame, it was revealed that he had lied on his resume. He had lied about his playing career. He had said he had lettered, and he had had all this success on the field, when in reality, he logged zero minutes in college. Well, this was announced, and he apologized, and he repented, and they overlooked it. You know, they said it was fine. But then a few days later, it came out from the investigation of a news reporter that he had lied on another part of his resume. He had said that he had been awarded a master's degree from a university that never existed. It sounded like it should. It was a university of New York of something or another. It sounded real. But he had lied. And so now, after just a few days after being given his dream job, he was forced to resign. He was forced to resign in humiliation and shame.

Now, what's interesting about this story isn't simply that George O'Leary lied on his resume. I mean, he repented. He confessed. He admitted it. He didn't try to skirt the issue. What was interesting was the way that his brother responded. His brother was interviewed in a newspaper, and he said this. He said, "Is anyone trying to tell me that resumes are truthful? In the America we live in, the willingness to lie on a resume is an indication of how much you want the job." You hear what he's saying? Fabrication, deception, outright lies. Those are indicators of the level of desire you have for this thing. That these are just indicators of the lengths that you would go to get this job, to get your dream. I mean, that's the kind of drive we want in our employees and in people, isn't it? Someone who's willing to even lie to get the job done. Now, I have to tell you, when I first read that, I was taken aback at how bombastic, how audacious he was, right? The ambivalence to truth, his attempt to spin lying as something good. And I imagine many of you are feeling the same way. Like, to come right out and say that? Resumes, they're just filled with lies, and that's perfectly fine.

In fact, it's not just fine, it's good. But, you know, though this happened over 20 years ago, it's not very hard for me to imagine someone saying this today, right? Because what do we see around us? We see political leaders who speak untruthful things all the time. We see students who are saying that the assignment that they created through AI was their original work. We see lives in this world that are filled with lies and deception, with untruthful things. In fact, fudging of the truth is so common in social media that it's hard to know whether we can believe anything we read anymore. I mean, what is one of the top hits after a debate, after a speech? It's the fact check, right? We just assume there's going to be deception, so we need the fact check afterwards. This is part of the world that we live in because our world has a problem with truth. And we look for ways to get around the truth. It's not new in 2025, it wasn't new in 2001 when George O'Leary did it. It's actually been around even in the time of Christ. You see, that's what Jesus is addressing.

Looking for a Loophole

He's addressing the ways that the people around him were looking to get around the truth. They were looking for loopholes. That's what we see. They were looking for ways around the truth, around the vows that they made, around the promises and oaths that they had made. So, we read in verse 33, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn." Now, remember, these are the antithesis statements. "You have heard it said, but I say to you." And in the other antithesis statements, Jesus is quoting or clearly alluding to a particular Old Testament passage or teaching. But here, it's not a specific quote. Instead, it's a summary. In verse 33, it's a summary. It's a summary of Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21, and Leviticus 19:12. And these passages are focused on the vows that we make and the importance of keeping those vows.

Now, to Jesus' hearers, they would have had no problem with this. Of course, we have to keep vows. Of course, we're supposed to do it. But then Jesus goes on, and he corrects their improper interpretation. He says, "But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the 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." So, what was going on here is that people were taking oaths and vows, but they were looking for ways to get out of the oath that they had made. And so, what they would do is they would take their oath, and they would make it with regard to something that has no authority over them. And so, they created these little word plays, these little distinctions.

So, for instance, if you made an oath by Jerusalem, well, that wasn't binding. But if you made an oath toward Jerusalem, well, now it's binding. If you made an oath by the temple, you didn't have to keep it. But if you made an oath by the temple's gold, you were required to keep it. And so, you had to actually listen, like, did they use the magic word or not, right? Did they make it by or toward, right? What are they making it by or toward? You had to listen, because people were trying to find ways around the promises that they had made. They were creating these loopholes to get around their oaths. It's kind of like the kid who crosses their fingers. You know what I'm talking about?

So, imagine for a moment, you know, you have some cookies at your house. We love cookies in the Pennylegion home. Mead working at Rookie's has been wonderful for us. So, we have cookies at home, and we're all eating the cookies. But one child, perhaps, maybe is enjoying them a little more than everyone else. And so, they've devoured all the cookies except one, and you're wanting it. So, you say, "would you please not eat this? Please save it for me or for one of your siblings", right? "Will you promise to do that?" "I promise." And so, later in the evening, after you've eaten dinner, right, you're ready to sit down and relax, and you're ready for that cookie. You go into the kitchen, and there's the box, and you open it up, and all that's left is crumbs. And so, you go to your child who really enjoyed the other cookies, right? And you ask them, "did you eat it?" And of course, there's chocolate on their face, and there's no denying it, right? And you say, "but you promised." "Well, I cross my fingers," right? If you cross your fingers, you can get out of any promise, right? Y'all remember that.

Adults, you remember this as kids? Kids, you've probably tried this on your parents, right? And when I was a kid, actually, if you cross like two fingers like this, like the second one canceled out the first, it had to be an odd number. So, then you would like cross your legs under the table, right? And it's like, no, you didn't see the third crossing, so I'm good, right? I don't have to keep it. That's what the people of God, that's what the Jews at Jesus's time were

doing. They were basically crossing their fingers so it didn't matter what they said, they didn't have to keep the promise. They were looking for loopholes.

And Jesus is saying, not in my kingdom. The people of God don't play fast and loose with the truth. We don't look for loopholes. Instead, we're going to be a people who keep the truth. Jesus says in verse 37, "let what you say be simply yes or no." Some translations, maybe you're more familiar with other translations translating of this, where it says, "let your yes be yes and your no be no." You see, what Jesus is saying is that we're to be a people who don't look for ways around the truth. We don't sidestep it. We don't get around it. Instead, we live lives, our lives are to be lived with such integrity between what we say and what we do that we would never have to take an oath.

Keeping the Truth

Now, I imagine for some of us there might be a quote, like, we don't have a problem with saying we need to be truthful. But maybe we have a question about this statement that Jesus makes in verse 34. "Do not take an oath at all." Because it sounds like Jesus is saying don't ever take an oath, don't ever take a vow. And there have been some throughout church history, some traditions, some denominations that would say that. That's what Jesus literally means. And so, if you get called into court and you're a witness, you don't take an oath, right? You ask for an exception because of religious grounds or something like that. There are traditions that believe that. But clearly, we don't, right? Because, I mean, the Shaughnesseys just took vows this morning, right? And when we have officers, they take vows. And when we ordain people, they take vows. And when we get married, right, we take vows and oaths. So, is basically our tradition, our practice just, you know, we've been in contradiction to Jesus' teaching? Well, no, I don't think that's what's going on.

Now, I don't think Jesus is talking about never taking a vow regardless of situation. And the main reason why I don't think that is because God himself makes vows. God takes oaths. So, think about Genesis 22 with the blessing of Abraham. God made an oath to Abraham. Or God made an oath in Genesis 9 that he would never destroy the world by flood again. Or in Psalm 16 and Luke 1, God made an oath concerning the Redeemer that would come. And in Psalms 132 and 95 and 119, there are covenants that God makes that he seals with his oath. So, God makes oaths. And this isn't one of those, like, do what I say, not what I do sort of things, right? God doesn't do that. No, what I think is going on here is that Jesus is saying that our lives and our words should have such integrity that no one would ever need to ask us to make a promise. Would never need to ask us to make an oath. Would never need us to never need to ask us to make a vow. Because we were so truthful, they would presume it always. That we would never need to say, on my mother's grave or on my child's head, that we could simply say yes and mean yes. No and mean no. And not look for loopholes or a way out. That we would simply be people who keep the truth.

And we would keep the truth because every word that we speak comes under God's authority. That's what he says in verses 34 - 36. This is what he's getting at. Jesus says, he refers to heaven as God's throne, the earth as his footstool, Jerusalem as the city of the king, and that we can't even make our hair white or black. He's saying, don't think that that's a loophole, right? Don't think that you're invoking some sort of way out by taking a vow or making an oath towards these things because they belong to God. In other words, Jesus is saying you might think that by swearing by these things, you've found a way around your promise. That you're not held accountable. But they all come under God's authority. Even our heads, right? We can't make one hair white or black.

Now, I know there's dye out there. Like in our modern day, we have dye and there's *Just For Men*, right, guys. But that's not the point. That's not what Jesus is getting at. What he's getting at is the reality that we have no ability in of ourselves in the power of ourselves to change our hair. We know this. Some of you, you may not be able to see it because we're far enough away, but I'm starting to get some grays. They're there. Kat cuts my hair and whenever she cuts my hair, she likes to point it out. A little bit more silver on the ground, right? It's there. She likes to poke at me and it's fun. She's my wife, so she's allowed to do this. But maybe I get tired of her poking at me, right? Maybe I get tired and so I don't want to go gray. So tonight, before I go to bed, I'm going to close my eyes and grit my teeth and I'm just going to say and will, stop going gray, right? Of course, I'm going to wake up and there's probably going to be more gray, right? Because I stress myself or whatever. But in the morning, nothing will happen. Why? Because I have no authority or power over the color of my hair.

What Jesus is teaching is that no matter what we might invoke, we are always invoking God because he is over us all. And he is over everything. Dan Doriani, one of my professors in seminary said, "whatever you swear by is related to God in some way. All oaths call God as our witness, for he created and sustains all things, even our hair and its color. And so let your yes be yes and your no be no." And friends, in our cultural moment, this means not only speaking the truth with words that come out of our mouths, but it also means speaking the truth with the words that we type on our screens. And I think that's a little bit harder for many in our culture. Because it's easy to zing something out there, right? It's easy to retweet. It's easy to repost. Some soundbite, some video clip. And it sounded really good and it sounded maybe right or right enough. And we want to make sure other people get to read it and they get to hear it and they get to see it. And maybe I'm the first one of my friends who sees it. So they get to, you know, be thankful to me for getting it out to them.

But do we really know if it's true? Do we take the time to figure out if it was? Did we actually listen to the whole soundbite in its full context or just take it out of context? And so what this means is that for the sake of promoting truth, we actually need to do our homework. And we need to ask questions and we maybe need to be slow to speak and slow to retweet and quicker to listen. Because friends, I'm just going to be honest. There are voices in our world and there are voices in the broader church that have spoken so many white lies online and only bits of truth and embellished so much that I basically question everything they post. And it shouldn't be that way for God's people. Then no, our words are to be full of truth. And that means we promote the truth.

Jesus says in Matthew 12, "On the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." Every careless word. And I have to tell y'all, after the last few weeks, divorce, lust, anger, I felt a lot of weight from those sermons, personally. And, you know, thinking about those things, like I didn't love the condition of my own heart. Maybe y'all resonate with that. And so leading up to this week, I actually said to a few of y'all, "Man, I am ready to talk about some words", right? Like lust, divorce, like let's talk about some truth, right? But then I hear the integrity that Jesus is calling us to and I feel the weight again. Because the truth is, is we've been careless at times with our words, haven't we? And we've looked for ways to get out of what we've said and we've metaphorically crossed our fingers. And if that's you, which I imagine it is, I imagine it's all of us to some degree. I want us to finish by reminding us not just about our need not to get around the truth by finding a

loophole or by simply being people who promote the truth, but I want to remind us about the truth keeper.

Looking to the Truth Keeper

Because Jesus always spoke the truth. He always spoke the truth. And speaking the truth came with a price, right? I think that's actually one of the reasons why we have trouble with the truth, is because we know it'll come with a price, right? People might think that we're crazy. It might mean that we lose a relationship. It might mean that we might harm a friendship. It might mean that people think that we're antiquated in old fashion or that we believe something that isn't scientific, whatever that may or may not mean, right? And so we withhold the truth or we maybe skirt around it. Because we know it might come with a price. But y'all, telling lies comes with a price as well. And that price will be found. George O'Leary did. He found out. But Jesus spoke the truth. And he took that price.

He spoke the truth to the Pharisees and they had him arrested and sought his death. And they spoke, he spoke the truth to the Romans and they had him beaten and crucified. And Jesus spoke the truth and he paid with his life for that truth. And Jesus, what is beautiful is that he paid the price for our lack of truth. He paid the price for our sin, for our lies. And friends, that is the good news of the cross. That is the beauty of the gospel. And that is what motivates us to be people of truth. That Jesus, the truth keeper, he, he went to the cross for our sin. And he went willingly. We're told he went for the joy that was set before him. And he went to save and redeem us. Even us. Jesus spoke words of truth then, but what is amazing is he speaks words of truth now. He speaks them over us.

You see, the truthful words of the gospel is this, that your sin, it is greater than you even recognize. And Christ's grace is greater than even our sin. That is the beautiful truth that is declared in the cross. That is the wonderful truth that Jesus declares from the cross when he says, forgive them. That is the beauty of the gospel. And so for those of us maybe at times who have difficulty with the truth, confess your lies, repent of your falsehoods, turn away from your attempts to skirt the truth, and instead rest in Jesus's truthful words of grace that he speaks over you. That his grace is sufficient. That it is enough. That he is the one who empowers us to be people of truth. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your true and abiding word. We're thankful for Jesus who is the way and the truth and the life. And we pray, Father, that we would rest in his truthful words. That we would look to him who has given his life for all of our sins, for our white lies, for our fudging of the truth, for our missteps, and our ways of breaking promises. Father, we thank you for his grace, for even us. And we pray that that grace is what would empower us, would motivate us to be people of truth. And so we ask, Father, help us, strengthen us, make us a people of truth, and do all this for the glory of Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. And God's people said together, amen. Amen.