

## **“On Integrity and Becoming Truth-Tellers”**

### **The Way of Jesus**

**Downtown & Lexington**

**September 27th, 2020**

Good morning. Open up your Bibles to **Matthew 5:33-37**. We’ve been going through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ first and most famous sermon. **He has all of this piercing insight into the human condition**. So far He has taught from the OT law about murder and shown how hatred in our hearts is the real problem. **He has taught about adultery and divorce and shown how lust of the heart** is a massive problem causing hell on earth, as Bailey taught last week. And in today’s passage, **He’s going to diagnose a problem that causes hell on earth**, and give us a solution.

Follow along with me.

#### **Matthew 5:33-37**

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.”

**Here Jesus is following the same pattern He’s been using in this teaching**. Rather than scrapping moral concerns from the Old Testament given by God, **He has been turning up the volume on them**. Applying them in new and deeper ways. In this passage, **He’s going to go in on the issue of integrity**.

Just to make sure we’re on the same page, here’s how I would define **integrity: a state of whole and undivided moral uprightness gained by a fierce commitment to truth in word and action**. It’s being the same person around different groups of people, the same person when no one is watching. **It’s seeing right as right and wrong as wrong, no matter who is doing it**. It’s having what you say you are line up with who you actually are, **and what you say you will do line up with what you actually do**.

**To understand what Jesus is doing here, we need a little bit of context**. He’s about to talk about the idea of taking oaths. **This is stating the obvious, but the pre-modern culture of ancient Israel was radically different** from the society we live in today. So many things about our current world would absolutely freak them out: **drones, airplanes, iPhones, or just telephones for that matter...the Kardashians...**I could go on and on.

**We all realize this to some degree**. But sometimes you learn something that really just drives it home like I did recently. **I was reading something a while back, and somehow I had this “aha” moment and I was like, “Wait--Jesus never had coffee!”** Being a typical uninformed American, I just thought coffee had been around forever. Nope. Just since the 1500s or so. **Now theologically speaking, Jesus is the most complete human who’s ever lived**. Not lacking in anything whatsoever. **But I did get unreasonably sad when I realized He never had coffee**. It really messed with my mental picture of His time with the disciples around a fire in the mornings.

**Anyways, you get the point--vastly different culture we’re talking about here**. So thinking about our subject for today being oaths and integrity, **it’s important to realize how their culture operated**.

**They did not have the legal documents we have. Signatures were not common**. They did not have the bank accounts we have, or direct deposit. **Papyrus and ink were hard to come by**, so business contracts

were rare. **They were an oral culture, not a written and contractualized culture. Most business dealings were verbal.** So oaths played a crucial role in their lives and business dealings. It was the only method they had to certify that what they were saying was true, or that they would indeed do what they said they were going to do.

**From a legal perspective, there also wasn't DNA evidence.** There were no fingerprints. No video cameras. So in doing any sort of business or agreement, or any legal proceeding, **someone's word was absolutely vital.**

**Imagine if you were in a relationship with your mortgage lender,** but there was no such thing as contracts or direct deposits. **And all you had to prove your reliability was your promise.** Your word. So you say *"I take a solemn oath to you, corporate, soulless Bank of America...that I will pay you \$1000 on the 15th every month for the next 30 years."*

**Based on what you know about human beings...**in a society where there are few legal documents and valid ways to prove an agreement had been made...**when someone's word was all they had to go on and rely on...**what do you think sometimes happened? **Do you suppose that people sometimes simply didn't pay what they had said they would?** Do you think it's possible that lenders would at times lie about what was owed to them and what amount had already been paid back?

**Basing a business deal off of words seems comical to us.** Like, "If all you have is someone's word, then you're the idiot." **But for them, oaths were serious, serious business.** It was the primary method through which they could ensure people would operate with integrity.

**It was their version of a ratified promise. A contract.** Oaths were needed because something we learn about humans from chapter 3 of the Bible is that we are deceitful. We're manipulative and cunning. So oaths were one way to root out the corruption and deceit inherent in the human heart. They restrained the evil our deceit causes, and allowed business deals to happen and society to function. **An oath allowed a manipulative, deceitful person who is not always trustworthy to essentially admit that, and to say** *"But in this thing I'm taking an oath in, I will surely do this."* Their culture took them seriously, and God took them very very seriously.

**Depending on the seriousness of the interaction, people would take an oath by this stratified system.** Jesus will go on to mention taking an oath by your own head, by Jerusalem, by earth, by heaven, and at the very top was taking a vow before God. That was when you knew someone was serious.

**Consider these words from Leviticus:**

**Leviticus 19:12**

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

**In other words, if you try to certify your speech by swearing to God, you better keep that oath.** Swearing by God in their culture was not a flippant gesture by someone who was probably lying, **but a calling down of the wrath and judgment of God upon themselves if they did not do what was promised.** It meant a LOT more than when someone in our culture swears to God.

**Here's Deuteronomy 23:21:**

### **Deuteronomy 23:21-23**

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

**So again, if you vow or take an oath before God, you better keep that.** Lest you want to rain down the wrath of God AND the person you wronged.

**Unsurprisingly, people did not like the prospects of having the wrath of God called down on them.** Because what if you don't end up keeping the bargain? What if you are kind of lying in a small way? What if circumstances changed and you couldn't make good on your promise? **So they developed the stratification I mentioned earlier.** We won't swear to **God**, instead, we'll swear to **heaven**. We won't swear to **heaven**, we'll swear to the **Earth**. We won't swear to **Earth**, we'll swear to **Jerusalem**. I won't swear to **Jerusalem**, I'll swear by **my own head**.

**So what was intended to be a method to restrain evil and ensure people operated according to their word**, over time, became this complex system. Rabbi's had different thoughts on which oaths were binding and which ones maybe weren't binding. **In short, what was meant to be a means to train people to grow in integrity eventually became a system sinful people sought to manipulate**, thus defeating the purpose.

**So that's the problem. People are still acting like fallen humans. They lack integrity.** And the system or instructions God ordained in the OT were insufficient to turn them into integrity-filled image-bearers. **So Jesus has a solution:**

### **Matthew 5:34**

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all...

**Again, for us, this feels anticlimactic.** Like *"Yeah, I was already not doing that, so I'll just keep it up! This part of the Bible is easy."* **But this would have struck them.** Not take an oath? How do I make people believe I'm telling the truth? How do I conduct business? How do I operate in this society without this? Let's keep reading...

### **Matthew 5:34-37**

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.

**He just does away with all of it. The whole system.** All the stratified layers, the questions, the schemes. He aims for His followers to be the kind of people who don't need any of it.

**He says that the point of oaths was to turn people into people of integrity**, so let's just do away with oaths altogether **and actually be straightforward people of integrity.** Don't swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or even your head, because all those are indirectly connected to the God who created them or dwells there. **He ends with this: instead of continuing in this rubric of oath-taking**, be radically different from your culture and **simply let your yes be yes, and let your no be no.**

**What Jesus is teaching here is that, if you are a Christian, your word should be better than a contract. (SLIDE)** Your “yes” should be more rock-solid than someone else’s oath. **Your agreements and promises should be more secure than any signature** or threat of punishment could ever produce.

You might have one, **but you should not need a contract requiring you to pay your mortgage or your rent. Because you said you would.** You agreed to, you don’t need paper and pen. You might put your hand over a Bible in a courtroom, but you don’t need to. **Because you will tell the truth. Potential consequences of breaking your marital covenant may loom over your head, but you shouldn’t need the threat of consequences to keep you from an affair.** **Because you said you would be faithful.** And your word is better than a promise.

You might have any number of more binding agreements, **but if you are in Christ the reality is you should be growing into the kind of person who doesn’t need any agreement other than your word.** Your yes means yes. Your no means no. Jesus says that anything more comes from evil, it opens the door for manipulation and deceit. **When Jesus says “anything more” that means no more overpromising, half-truths, coded language, contingencies, hedging, or legalese small print inside of your mind.** Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. If you can’t say yes or no, don’t say either.

**Notice the weight of Jesus’ word choice.** He doesn’t say “anything more than this is unhealthy.” He says anything more is \*evil.\* **This lines up with what Jesus teaches about Himself and about Satan. In John 8 Jesus calls Satan the father of all lies, so every untruth in some way is traced back to Satan’s effort to dismantle God’s intentions for the world. In John 14 Jesus says that He is “the way, the truth, and the life.”**

**So Jesus is Truth, Satan is untruth. Jesus is reality, Satan is unreality. Jesus is whole and undivided, Satan is divided and duplicitous.** And the connection being made here is that the words we speak are continually lining up with one or the other. **Our speech picks a side. Our words either correspond with reality by being truthful and clear and direct and meaningful, or they help build unreality by being manipulative, obfuscating, false, or confusing.**

**All throughout Scripture one of the descriptors of God is that He is faithful. He keeps His promises.** He does exactly what He says He will. **So as Christians when we don’t operate with integrity or keep our promises, we are actually lying about God.** We’re misrepresenting Him. When our words and actions are unreliable, we are conforming more to the image of Satan than the image of Jesus. **We are never more like Satan than when we lie because lying is synonymous with spreading Satan’s kingdom.**

**Jesus came to rescue us from the chaos of untruth and disorder and all the games that our dishonesty requires.** Let your yes be yes, He says. Let your no be no. Let your speech perfectly and clearly align with your intentions and with reality.

Jesus is teaching here that: **Integrity is central to honoring God and the flourishing of humanity.**

You cannot honor God or faithfully follow Jesus without learning to walk in integrity. **Jesus is so pure and undivided that He exposes anything that’s false.** Lies and manipulation have no place in His presence--His very being melts them away and cuts us to the heart. **You will always hide and run from God when you refuse to walk in integrity and insist on a double life.**

**And integrity is central to human flourishing.** We already know this from experience. **It's highly likely that some of your biggest wounds in life came from a lack of integrity in someone close to you,** whether that be a parent, a spouse, or a friend. Integrity is essential for any human relationship to work, to be healthy and whole.

So the questions this text asks of us are: **Are you a person of integrity?** Do your words line up with your intentions? **Does your yes mean yes? Does your no mean no?** Do you say what you mean? Do you mean what you say? **We don't have the same specific mechanisms they did, but the heart issues are the exact same.**

**A good bit of the marital counseling we do is exactly this.** A couple gets to a place where words don't have meaning anymore. **One spouse says something, and the other doesn't give it any weight.** The couple is talking, but it's hard to know what is actually true. And of course, intimacy is impossible when trust is broken and when every word is questionable.

In any healthy relationship, **I have to believe what you say and trust that you will be honest with me.** That has to be a mutual agreement parties have together. **If I wonder if you are going to do something, my litmus test should be "Well have you told me you would?"** And if you've given me your word that you will, then I have no doubt. **Because you said you would. I have to be able to trust you. You said you would, so I believe you will.** That's how relationships are built. Breakdowns happen when that's not in play.

**If that doesn't happen, we have no hope of a meaningful relationship or community.**

**Take our membership covenant as an example.** We set a high bar for membership up front, because we believe the Bible does. We clearly lay out our expectations. We believe that us all committing to do things like submit ourselves under the authority of Scripture and abiding in God's Word and confessing sin and tithing and serving are the kinds of things that will shape us into the people God designed us to be. **We all give our word at the end of that class that "Yes, I will do these things."** And we re-up them every year or so. Us giving our word before God and to each other **is what allows us to become a beautiful, counter-culture, God-honoring community.**

**But if I printed off a list and handed it to every missionary member** at our 3 churches right now and said **"Okay grade yourself using this list,"** I bet a good chunk of us would have some that we're like, **"Uh oh...I said I would do that, huh?"** That's dangerous for a number of reasons, **but today's reason is because you said you would.** And your lack of follow-through is at least one point of evidence that you are becoming the kind of person who is lacking in integrity.

**And I would bet if you had access to someone's life who stopped following Jesus and left our church,** you could go back to that member covenant and say **"They stopped doing this one years ago, and they stopped doing this one, and this one..."** And over time, **a lack of integrity came to fruition in their life.** If we are going to have a healthy church we are going to have to be people of integrity. **And integrity starts small and is wide-ranging. For example:**

- **Are there chores you've agreed to do that you don't do?** That's a lack of integrity.
- **Are there responsibilities at your job that you intentionally shirk** because you don't like to do them and just hope someone else will? That's a lack of integrity.

- **Do you over-promise and under-deliver?** That's a lack of integrity.
- **Do you owe someone money, and you don't have a plan in place to pay them back?** That's an issue of integrity.
- **Do you act and speak completely differently around different groups of people?** Are you one person with that group and another person over there? That's a lack of integrity.
- **Do you have a bad habit of bailing on things? Halfway committing to something, knowing that if something better comes along or if you just don't feel like it, you'll ghost or back out last minute?** I would imagine many of us have people in our lives who will commit to doing something or being somewhere, and all of a sudden you notice some telltale sign. **But instead of engaging forthrightly, maybe they go quiet on the text or GroupMe thread. They haven't told you yet, but you know *exactly* what is going to happen.** They are not going to be where they said they would. **They may tell you 5 minutes beforehand, if at all. That's an integrity issue.** Of course, things come up every once in a while, **but if you are following Jesus you should not be known for being flaky and non-committal.** It should not be the case that other people know what you are going to do before you tell them. **They should not have to text you and say "Hey I'm sensing your telltale signs, can I go ahead and assume you won't make it?"**

As we wrap up today, I'd like to end by giving you two different ways we might need to apply this to our lives, based on some insight we have in pastoring our people for 15 years or so. **#1 is actually some communication training** that we do in premarital counseling that is very applicable to integrity, and **#2 is a personality typing** that may expose some ways we need to apply this.

### Tool # 1: 3 Steps for Integrity in Communication

Most of us know that communication can become this awful, tiresome guessing game where you always wonder if someone really means what they say or if you can trust their words. So here's what we encourage people to adopt as their 3-step plan for integrity in communication.

#### 1. Say what you think.

Simply put, it's not someone else's job to read your mind. **Not your spouses, not your best friends, not your boss's job.** It is no one on planet Earth's job, including your very own Mama, to read your mind. **If you ever utter the words "You should have known what I wanted," you are wrong.** No, they shouldn't have known. **Because you didn't tell them.** This is on you. If you didn't tell them, it's your fault. No hints. Say it clearly, out loud. With words.

#### 2. Say what you mean.

Your words should correspond with reality. **So if you say something, it needs to be because you mean it and intend to stick by what you said.** If you don't actually mean the words you are saying, don't let them come out of your mouth. **If your inner reality and true feelings are one thing, but the words you use create a different reality, then you are on team Satan** and cause confusion and chaos in your relationships with your double-minded speech. No matter what your motive was.

**We've seen this a lot with people who leave our church or a LifeGroup over conflict.** When follow-up conversations happen the person says, *"I'm leaving because of this thing that happened two years ago."* **And often the other people involved are like, "You mean the thing we had all those conversations about, and reconciled over, and where you said with your words that we were good? That**

*thing?” And the person will be like, “Yeah, that thing.”* Because they didn’t mean what they said, and they didn’t say what they meant. And heartache follows.

### **3. Trust the other person to speak the truth.**

This is simply the concept that, **if we are in a relationship together, we commit to base our responses and actions on the actual words we say.** Not what I think you may have meant, not what I know you must feel or must have meant, but cold hard words. **If you say you are good with something, I no longer worry about it because I believe you.** There are no games, no trying to guess what the other person is thinking or if there is a hidden meaning behind their words. **If they say it, then trust it’s exactly what they meant and go on happily about your day and think about something pleasant.**

**Now, real quick...how amazing does this sound!** If we could all do these 3 things, how joyful and free would we be? **We’d have so much time left over to think about pleasant things.** We’d avoid so much drama and confusion and what-ifs. **This is what Jesus is saying.** Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. **Then on about your drama-free blissful day in the glory of reality.** This is what we are called to. This is the freedom Jesus wants us all to walk in. Okay, now Tool #2...

#### **Tool #2: Good vs. Kind**

**This is oversimplified personality typing and I know you are way more complex than this,** but certain thinkers have given a spectrum of people on a range that runs from “Good” on one side to “Kind” on the other side. **Good people care about what they think is the truth, and they tell it like it is.** Kind people tend to elevate people and their feelings above the truth, in an effort not to hurt feelings. **Both sides have weaknesses, they are just different,** and a good summation of them would be **Good people stand toe to toe with you, while Kind people tend to tiptoe around feelings.**

**To illustrate these two categories is very easy for me because all I have to do is tell you about my two daughters.** My oldest daughter Sully is kind with a capital K. What this means is that she is by nature very concerned about other people. **She is overly considerate of others, and overly concerned about other people’s feelings.** When she was 4 or 5 she had this cute but cringe-worthy moment where she came up to my wife and said, *“Mommy, I love you so much there’s no room for me!”* **She has one particular friend who has a habit of asking for Sully’s things,** like jewelry or toys, and we noticed that every time Sully would play with this friend **she would come home missing something.**

**Now many people need to be taught to care about others more than themselves.** But with Sully, we are having to teach her not to give away all of her things to that friend. **Because she would. And when we talk to her about it, she says “But what if she gets maaaaad at meeee?”** With Sully, it can be really difficult to draw out what she truly thinks and feels. There are all these layers of complexity because when you ask her something, she’s trying to navigate what you may be thinking and feeling, what you want to hear, and everything gets shaded by that. **So it can be a herculean effort to figure out what she truly thinks.**

**Our youngest daughter Isla on the other hand. You never have to wonder what she thinks.** She would be way more on the Good side of the spectrum. I have no worries whatsoever about her giving away her things to a persistent friend. **I would, however, worry about the persistent friend.** Isla has two older siblings, and I fully foresee there being times where I ask her to go handle some business for them. **For Isla, what’s right is right and what’s wrong is wrong, and she is not worried in the**

**slightest about your feelings.** She may not even be aware that you have feelings, and if you do **they are small and inconsequential things compared to what she thinks is the truth.**

**Sully will apologize for things that are not her fault whatsoever.** Isla will refuse to apologize for things she absolutely should. When she was a toddler, **she'd literally sit in timeout for 30 minutes when all she had to do to get out was apologize.**

So we have different challenges. **We will have to teach Isla how Jesus motivates her to care about others more than herself,** and definitely how to admit wrong. But we have to teach Sully that she has a self, **and that operating in the truth is vital to being healthy and the truth sometimes hurts feelings.**

**All that to say...a large swath of you hearing this identify more so with Sully than with Isla. You're kind.** And that's beautiful in so many ways. You care about others so well. You are gentle. You lead in so many capacities. **But when it comes to our topic for today, being people of forthright integrity, being kind often puts you at a disadvantage.** Because in the words of Sully, *"What if they get maaaad at meeee??"*

**And so what happens often, especially in church circles where certain virtues tend to get highlighted over others, is that kindness can actually lead to cowardice.** Being kind can elevate being non-confrontational or avoiding hurt over the truth. **And it can cause you to not say things you need to say.**

**I say this, by the way, as Sully's father. The one who gave her most of the Kind genes she has.** The one who has been guilty in too many ways of exactly what I'm talking about. And I've seen the heartbreaking effects of a "Kind" personality that in reality isn't kind, **because it forsakes the truth to save feelings, and actually ends up causing harm.**

**Now, good people, you have plenty of issues too and maybe we'll come after you in another sermon,** but here's the word I would have for my fellow Kind people today: **Kind people don't often realize we're doing this, but we actually practice lying all the time.**

Kind people often don't say what we mean because we don't want to ruffle feathers. We avoid saying the hard thing because we don't want the drama. **We acclimate ourselves to people-pleasing so much that we become liars without even realizing it.** Honestly, we can almost even spiritualize lying in some misguided attempt to love others.

**What our Good friends realize that we often don't is that there is a profound difference between peacekeeping and peacemaking.** Peacekeeping is what Kind people tend to do. We just try to sweep things under the rug and keep the tension down. **But sometimes you have to go to war in order to get peace.**

**When the gospel actually frees us to be peacemakers.** To be direct, forthright, and truthful with one another even when it hurts. Knowing that Jesus has given us the resources we need to deal with anything. **We can forgive, forbear, reconcile, and come out stronger on the other side.** Then we can have true peace won through necessary conflict, not a fake peace built on pretense.

And just to be clear, fellow Kind people...**there are many voices out there that would try to get you to put your foot down.** A stereotypical trajectory is for a Kind person to get hopped up on pop-psychology



for a year or two, and then come out with guns blazing. I've learned that when a person does that, you better watch out. I don't want that for you...I don't want you to put your foot down. I want you to walk in integrity. We are still called to speak with gentleness and kindness... just in very direct and forthright ways. **Sometimes telling it like it is means you are a jerk. But sometimes it means you are full of integrity.**

**Jesus' call to live lives of integrity is for all of us, but let this be a special challenge to those of us in this camp of being Kind.** The health of our relationships is dependent on yes truly meaning yes, and no truly meaning no. On our words corresponding with reality, not what we would like reality to be to avoid tension. Without intending to, we can contribute to chaos and unreality with the hollowness of our words.

**So let our words be weighty. Let them ring with the truth of God.**

And let all of us grow to be people of integrity. **We have a God who keeps His word, who keeps His promises.** The most important of which was to save us from sin, Satan, and ourselves through a Messiah. **And He kept that promise with the blood of His own Son. He did exactly what He said He would do, at the greatest possible cost to Himself.** All to buy us from the darkness of unreality and deceit, and transplant us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. **Let's join Him in that Kingdom of light, with every word that we speak.**

**Pray.**