

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Integrity and Honest Speech

Matthew 5:33–37

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage teaches that the people of God are called to a thoroughgoing truthfulness that makes oaths unnecessary. Jesus is not primarily issuing a rule about taking vows in court; he is exposing and abolishing a whole system designed to let people appear honest while reserving the right to deceive. The principle underneath is that a disciple's bare word should be so reliable that no reinforcement is ever needed. This is rooted in the nature of God, who cannot lie and whose every word is trustworthy, and in the truth that all of life is lived before his face, so that no word of ours is ever really spoken apart from him.

Help your class avoid a common distraction. Believers have sometimes argued over whether this text forbids all oaths absolutely, even in a courtroom. Note that Scripture elsewhere records God himself swearing oaths and Paul calling God as witness, which suggests Jesus is targeting the manipulative, evasive oath-taking of his day rather than every solemn affirmation. But do not let that debate become the lesson. The heart of the passage is integrity of speech, and that is where your class needs to live.

The formational aim is to confront a culture of spin, exaggeration, and managed half-truths, including the smaller dishonesties we have all made peace with, and to call students to become people of simple, complete integrity. This is intensely practical, touching resumes and reputations, promises to children and spouses, the stories we embellish and the commitments we make lightly. Press past mere avoidance of outright lies to the deeper wholeness of character that Jesus calls for, and ground that wholeness in the gospel, which both exposes our dishonesty and remakes us into truthful people who reflect a truthful God.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus dismantles the system of graded oaths by showing that everything people swore by, heaven, earth, Jerusalem, even their own heads, ultimately belongs to God (v. 34–36). What does this teach us about the impossibility of ever truly leaving God out of our words, and about living all of life before his face?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Trace Jesus' logic carefully, because it is brilliant. The oath-takers thought they could swear by lesser things, heaven, earth, Jerusalem, their own head, and thereby keep God out of it, leaving themselves room to wriggle. Jesus shows there is no such thing. Heaven is God's throne, earth

his footstool, Jerusalem the city of the great King, and you cannot even make one hair white or black. Everything you might swear by belongs to God. You can never actually leave him out.

Teach the great truth underneath this: we live all of life before the face of God. There is no neutral zone, no private sphere, no casual conversation that happens outside his hearing. The graded-oath system was an attempt to carve out space where our words would not fully count before God. Jesus says no such space exists. Every word is spoken in his presence.

Help students feel the weight and the comfort of this together. It is weighty, because it means our careless words, our exaggerations, our private deceptions are all spoken before God. But it is also clarifying and even freeing, because it ends the exhausting game of managing which words count. When you know God hears everything, you can simply tell the truth always, and rest.

Apply this against the compartmentalized way many of us live, honest at church, looser at work, careful in public, careless in private. Jesus calls for one integrated life lived consistently before the God who is always present. The truthfulness he describes is not a performance for certain audiences but the steady character of a person who knows God is always listening.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The impossibility of leaving God out of our words (v. 34–36)
- Living all of life before the face of God, with no neutral zones
- The graded-oath system as an attempt to carve out space God does not hear
- The freedom of simply telling the truth always
- One integrated life versus compartmentalized honesty

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that there is no word we ever speak outside God's hearing?
- How is living before God's face both weighty and freeing?
- Where are you tempted to compartmentalize your honesty by audience?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about whether you speak differently depending on who is listening or whether God feels near. Where would your speech change if you truly believed God hears every word, including the casual, the exaggerated, and the private?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses students to notice whether their speech changes depending on who is listening or whether God feels near. Most of us are more careful with our words in some

settings than others, more honest with those who can hold us accountable, looser with those who cannot. The question exposes that inconsistency.

Help the class see that this variability is itself a form of the very dishonesty Jesus condemns. If our truthfulness depends on the audience, then it is not truthfulness at all but reputation management. The person of integrity speaks the same whether before the elders or alone, whether the stakes are high or trivial.

Move toward one area where believing God hears would change their speech. Perhaps the exaggerated story, the private complaint, the casual half-truth, the words spoken when no one important is listening. Encourage students to invite the awareness of God's presence into exactly those moments where they have been loosest with the truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Noticing how speech changes by audience
- Audience-dependent honesty as reputation management, not integrity
- The same truthfulness before everyone, important or not
- Inviting awareness of God's presence into our loosest speech

Discussion Prompts

- Does your speech change depending on who is listening?
- Where would your words change if you truly believed God hears them all?
- What does audience-dependent honesty reveal about our hearts?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says the whole oath system, designed to make some words more binding than others, actually "comes from evil" (v. 37). How does the very practice of needing to swear extra-binding oaths expose a deeper problem of dishonesty in the human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Help students grasp the irony Jesus exposes. The very need to swear extra-binding oaths is itself evidence of a world full of liars. In a society of perfectly honest people, oaths would be pointless; everyone's word would already be reliable. The elaborate machinery of oaths exists precisely because ordinary words have become untrustworthy. So the system meant to guarantee truth actually testifies to the prevalence of falsehood.

This is why Jesus says it comes from evil. The practice assumes and even institutionalizes dishonesty, dividing speech into the binding kind and the kind you can break. It trains people to hear most words as unreliable unless specially reinforced, which is a profound corruption of how God meant words to work.

Teach the contrast with God's design for speech. Words were given as a gift to bear truth, to reveal rather than conceal, to build trust between persons made in God's image. The oath system perverts that gift, turning words into instruments that can sound true while being false. Jesus calls his people out of that whole corrupt economy of speech.

Apply this to the modern equivalents. We may not swear by the temple, but we have our own ways of signaling which words really count, I promise, I swear, honestly, to be completely honest with you, as if our other words were not. The very phrases reveal that we expect our ordinary speech to be doubted. Jesus calls for a life in which every word can be trusted, no reinforcement required.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The need for oaths as evidence of a world full of dishonesty
- The oath system institutionalizing and assuming falsehood
- Words as God's gift for bearing truth, corrupted by graded speech
- Modern verbal reinforcements that reveal we expect to be doubted
- A life in which every word can be trusted without reinforcement

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the very need for binding oaths expose a problem in the human heart?
- What modern phrases do we use to signal which of our words really count?
- What would it say about us if our plain word never needed reinforcement?

Question 4

Student Question:

Be honest about your own credibility. Do the people closest to you take your word at face value, or have they learned to wonder whether you really mean what you say? What has shaped their level of trust in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to assess their own credibility honestly, as the people closest to them would. Do family and friends take their word at face value, or have they quietly learned to discount it, to wonder whether a promise will be kept, to brace for the exaggeration? Our credibility is a fair measure of our integrity.

Help students reflect on what has shaped that trust or distrust. Credibility is built or eroded over time, through kept or broken promises, through honest or shaded accounts, through follow-through or its absence. The people who know us best have formed an accurate read on how reliable our words are.

Move toward repair where trust has been damaged. If someone close has learned to doubt them, the path forward is not protest but patient, demonstrated reliability over time, beginning with keeping the next small promise. Encourage students to consider where their word has lost weight and to begin, concretely, to rebuild it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Assessing our credibility as those closest to us would
- Trust built or eroded over time through kept or broken words
- Honest reckoning with damaged credibility
- Rebuilding trust through patient, demonstrated reliability

Discussion Prompts

- Do the people closest to you take your word at face value?
- What has shaped their level of trust in you?
- Where might you need to rebuild credibility, and how?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus calls for speech that is simply “Yes” or “No,” without the need for reinforcement (v. 37). What does it reveal about a person when their plain word is completely reliable, and how does this kind of integrity reflect the character of God himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the positive vision Jesus paints: a person whose simple yes means yes and whose simple no means no. This is more than the absence of lying; it is the presence of complete reliability. Such a person does not need to swear, embellish, or reinforce, because their bare word already carries the full weight of their character.

Teach that this kind of integrity reflects the character of God himself, for whom this lesson exists to display. God is the one who cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), whose word never returns void (Isaiah 55:11), who keeps every promise he has ever made. His yes is yes; in Christ all God's promises find their yes (2 Corinthians 1:20). When we become people of reliable speech, we image our utterly reliable God.

Show how rare and powerful such integrity is. In a world where words are cheap and trust is scarce, a person whose plain word can simply be relied upon stands out like light in darkness. Their reliability becomes a quiet testimony, a glimpse of the faithfulness of God, and often an open door for the gospel.

Help students see that this is not about a rigid, joyless literalism but about wholeness. The person of integrity is not anxiously parsing every syllable; they are simply whole, the same inside

and out, so that their words naturally match reality. That wholeness is the fruit of a life increasingly conformed to the God of truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reliable speech as the presence of integrity, not just the absence of lying
- God as the one who cannot lie and keeps every promise (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18)
- All God's promises finding their yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20)
- Reliable words as a quiet testimony in a world of cheap speech
- Integrity as wholeness, not anxious literalism

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about a person when their plain word is completely reliable?
- How does our truthful speech reflect the character of God?
- Why does reliability stand out so powerfully in a world of cheap words?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you made promises or commitments, to family, to the church, to God, that you have not kept? What would it look like this week to either fulfill your word or honestly make it right?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from honesty in words spoken to faithfulness in promises made. Many of us are not blatant liars, yet we leave a trail of unkept commitments, to family, to the church, to God, that quietly erode our integrity. The question asks students to bring those to mind.

Help them think across the range: promises to a child that were forgotten, commitments to serve that were dropped, vows made to God in a hard moment and then abandoned, debts of word or deed left unpaid. Psalm 15 honors the one who swears to his own hurt and does not change; integrity sometimes costs us to keep our word.

Aim for one concrete act of follow-through or honest repair. Either fulfill the promise, or, where that is no longer possible, honestly acknowledge it and make it right. The goal is to stop letting unkept commitments pile up unaddressed, and to become, again, a person whose promises mean something.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithfulness in promises, not just honesty in words
- Unkept commitments to family, church, and God as a quiet erosion of integrity
- Keeping our word even when it costs us (Psalm 15:4)
- Fulfilling or honestly repairing broken promises

Discussion Prompts

- What promises have you made and not kept?
- What would it look like to fulfill or honestly make right one of them this week?
- Why is keeping our word, even when it hurts, a mark of integrity?

Question 7

Student Question:

The integrity Jesus describes is not just about avoiding outright lies but about being a wholly truthful person, the same on the inside as on the outside (v. 37). How does true integrity go beyond technically accurate words to a deep wholeness of character, and where does that wholeness come from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Develop the deeper meaning of integrity, which shares a root with words like integer and integrated, meaning whole, undivided, all of one piece. The integrity Jesus calls for is not merely the avoidance of false statements but a wholeness of character in which the inner person and the outer person match. The truthful person is not playing a part; they simply are what they appear to be.

Contrast this with the divided life, where the public self and the private self diverge, where the words say one thing and the heart holds another. A person can technically avoid lying while living a fundamentally false life, projecting an image that does not match reality. Jesus calls for the opposite: a life with nothing to hide because there is no gap between the seeming and the being.

Teach where this wholeness comes from, because it cannot be manufactured by effort alone. It grows as a person is increasingly conformed to Christ, as the heart is made new and the loves reordered, so that truthfulness flows from a transformed nature rather than being painted on. We put away falsehood because we have put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness (Ephesians 4:24–25).

Help students see that this wholeness brings rest. The divided life is exhausting, requiring constant management of the gap between image and reality, the maintenance of stories, the fear of being found out. The whole life is at peace, because there is nothing to hide and no fictions to sustain. Integrity is not only right; it is restful.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integrity as wholeness and undividedness, not merely avoiding false statements
- The divided life where the public and private selves diverge
- Truthfulness flowing from a transformed nature (Ephesians 4:24–25)

- Wholeness as the fruit of being conformed to Christ
- The restfulness of a life with nothing to hide

Discussion Prompts

- How is integrity more than technically accurate words?
- Where does the wholeness of true integrity come from?
- Why is a whole, integrated life more restful than a divided one?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think about the gap, if there is one, between the person others believe you to be and the person you actually are. Where is God inviting you to close that gap and become more whole, more integrated, more honest all the way through?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to examine the gap, if any, between the person others believe them to be and the person they actually are. Almost everyone manages some version of this gap, presenting a self that is a bit better, more put-together, more faithful than the reality. The question invites honest awareness of it.

Help students see that the goal is not to broadcast every flaw but to close the gap by becoming, in truth, more like the person they present, and by dropping the pretenses that cannot be sustained. Integrity is not achieved by lowering our public self to match a poor private self, but by letting Christ make the private self whole.

Move toward one specific area of integration. Where is there a gap between image and reality that God is inviting them to close, perhaps through honest confession, through real change, or through simply dropping a pretense? The aim is a life that is increasingly all of one piece before God and others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest awareness of the gap between image and reality
- Closing the gap by becoming whole, not by broadcasting every flaw
- Letting Christ make the private self whole
- One specific area of integration to pursue

Discussion Prompts

- Where is there a gap between who others think you are and who you actually are?
- How might God be inviting you to close that gap?
- What pretense could you simply drop this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

God is described throughout Scripture as a God who cannot lie, whose word is utterly trustworthy, and who keeps every promise he makes. How does our calling to honest, reliable speech flow from the very character of God, and how does the gospel both expose our dishonesty and make us into truthful people who reflect our truthful God? Connect this to who God is and what he has done.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, and it grounds the whole call to honesty in the character of God and the work of the gospel. Begin with God himself. Scripture presents a God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2), in whom there is no falsehood at all, whose word is truth (John 17:17), and who keeps every promise across every generation. Truthfulness is not an arbitrary rule God imposes; it flows from who he is. When we are called to honest speech, we are being called to reflect the very nature of our God.

Show that humanity's fall into dishonesty is, by contrast, the mark of God's enemy. Jesus says the devil is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44), and that the first temptation came wrapped in a lie about God. Every deception, every shaded truth, every broken promise aligns us, in that moment, with the liar rather than with the God of truth. This is why Jesus can say that the manipulative oath system comes from evil.

Now bring the gospel to bear, for it both exposes and heals our dishonesty. The gospel exposes us, because the light of Christ reveals how deeply falsehood runs in us, the self-justifying spin, the image management, the comfortable half-truths we had stopped noticing. We cannot become truthful until we admit how untruthful we are. The first step toward integrity is the honesty to confess our dishonesty.

Then the gospel heals us, because in Christ God makes liars into truth-tellers. We have put off the old self and put on the new, created in the likeness of God, and so we put away falsehood and speak truth (Ephesians 4:22–25; Colossians 3:9–10). This is not self-improvement but transformation, the steady work of God conforming us to the image of his truthful Son. The Spirit who is called the Spirit of truth (John 16:13) produces in us the integrity God requires.

Bring it home with hope. Above all, the gospel is itself the great instance of God keeping his word. Every promise he made, from Eden onward, found its yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). The God who kept his costliest promise to us, sending his Son to die for sinners, is the God now making us into people who keep our word. We become truthful not by gritting our teeth but by living in communion with the faithful God, who is remaking us into his own truthful likeness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as the God of truth who cannot lie and keeps every promise (Titus 1:2; John 17:17)
- Dishonesty as alignment with the father of lies (John 8:44)
- The gospel exposing how deeply falsehood runs in us
- The gospel transforming liars into truth-tellers (Ephesians 4:22–25; Colossians 3:9–10)
- The cross as God keeping his costliest promise, the ground of our truthfulness (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Discussion Prompts

- How does our call to honesty flow from the very character of God?
- Why does the gospel have to expose our dishonesty before it can heal it?
- How does the God who kept his promise to us make us into people who keep our word?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has called you to be a person of simple, complete integrity in a world of spin and half-truths. Where is he putting his finger on your speech and your reliability, and what is one specific way you will pursue greater honesty this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to name where Jesus is putting his finger on their speech and reliability, and one specific way they will pursue greater honesty this week. After a lesson that has ranged across exaggeration, broken promises, image management, and the divided life, this question grounds it in a single concrete response.

Help students choose specifically. For one it will be a habit of exaggeration; for another, an unkept promise to fulfill; for another, a gap between image and reality to close; for another, a relationship where credibility needs rebuilding. The aim is one nameable step, not a vague resolve to be more honest in general.

Close on the gospel and the character of God. They pursue integrity not to earn God's approval but as people being remade into the likeness of their truthful God. Send them home aware that the call is high, the God of truth is faithful, and the Spirit of truth is at work in them to make their simple yes mean yes and their simple no mean no.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the specific point of conviction about speech and reliability
- One nameable step toward honesty rather than a vague resolve
- Pursuing integrity as those being remade, not to earn approval
- Trusting the Spirit of truth at work in us

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus putting his finger on your speech or your reliability?
- What one specific step toward honesty will you take this week?
- How does trusting the God of truth change the way you pursue integrity?