

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 7: Integrity and Honest Speech -- Matthew 5:33-37

Think about how much of life runs on trust. You hand your keys to a mechanic, trusting he will fix what he says he will fix. You sign a contract, trusting the words mean what they say. You believe your friend when she says she will be there. When that trust holds, life works. When it breaks, everything grows heavy and suspicious. We were made for a world where words can be relied upon, and we feel the ache when we land in a world where they cannot.

In Jesus' day, people had developed an elaborate system for getting around that very trust. They made oaths, but they had learned to grade them. An oath sworn by the temple did not count, the rabbis said, but an oath sworn by the gold of the temple did. Swearing by heaven was one thing, swearing by God's name another. It was a sophisticated game of spiritual fine print, a way to sound binding while leaving yourself an escape hatch. The whole system existed so that people could appear truthful while reserving the right to deceive.

Jesus sweeps it all away. "Do not take an oath at all," he says, and then he dismantles the whole apparatus of graded oaths, because heaven is God's throne, earth is his footstool, and even the hairs of your head are beyond your control. Then he lands on the principle underneath it all: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." The point is breathtaking in its simplicity. A follower of Jesus should be so reliably truthful that no oath is ever needed. Your bare word should be as good as a contract sworn in blood.

This cuts close to home, because we live in an age of spin, exaggeration, and carefully managed half-truths. We pad our resumes, shade our stories, tell people what they want to hear, and make promises we have no intention of keeping. Jesus calls his people to be different, to be men and women whose simple yes means yes and whose simple no means no. Before you read another line, ask yourself the uncomfortable question: if people could see behind all your words, would they find a person of complete integrity, or someone who has learned, like the people on that hillside, to sound honest while keeping an escape hatch open?

Group Discussion: Jesus dismantles a whole system of graded oaths designed to let people sound truthful while reserving the right to deceive, and calls his followers to a simple, reliable honesty. Why are human beings so creative at finding ways to appear truthful without actually being truthful, and what would it look like for a community to be marked by people whose word can simply be trusted?

Personal Reflection: Examine your own speech honestly. Where do you tend to shade the truth, exaggerate, tell people what they want to hear, or make promises you do not keep, and what might that reveal about what you are afraid of or trying to protect?

Read Matthew 5:33-37

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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.
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: James 5:12, the echo of Jesus' teaching that your yes be yes and your no be no; Ephesians 4:25, putting away falsehood and speaking truth with our neighbor; Colossians 3:9–10, not lying because we have put on the new self; Psalm 15:1–4, the one who may dwell with God swears to his own hurt and does not change; Proverbs 12:22, lying lips an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully his delight.