

# TRUTH TELLERS

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:33–37  
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Paul Taylor  
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*Matthew 5:33–37*

A few weeks ago, my children came home from the PBC High School group and they wanted to watch *The Princess Bride* because a movie clip was shown that night. After re-watching this incredibly classic movie, I noticed a scene that made me think of what we're talking about this morning.

I've fallen out of the habit of showing movie clips in my sermons, so this seemed like a good time to bring it back. In this scene, Inigo Montoya, the expert swordsman Spaniard, has been left behind to battle with the man in black.

The man in black has every reason to distrust the Spaniard waiting to kill him. He can't possibly believe what the Spaniard says is true. But then the Spaniard swears an oath. That oath, taken on the soul of his late father, convinces the man in black that his words are true.

How do you know when someone is telling the truth? What convinces you that someone is telling you the truth?

What about when someone lies to you. How does that feel? Sometimes people go to great lengths to convince you they are telling the truth, and it still ends up being a lie. What does that do to your relationship?

Words are incredibly powerful. God spoke the earth into creation, and he used words to call Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. When he sent Jesus to the earth, John describes Jesus as the Word of God. Our ability to speak reflects our creation in the image of God. Our speech has power. We can do incredible things with the power of our voices. You're sitting here right now, listening to me say a lot of words.

Words are powerful, which is what makes a lie so destructive.

We're in the middle of a sermon series on some of the most famous words that Jesus ever spoke: the Sermon on the Mount. We've called the series "Blessed Are" because Jesus is giving us a window into how to live a good life,

or how to be blessed. He's helping us to see how we can live as part of his kingdom in the heavens even while we remain on earth.

In our passage this morning, he addresses the power of words. Many people use words to speak falsely, but Jesus tells us that if you are living in the kingdom of heaven, you don't do that. He describes kingdom-dwellers as truth tellers.

We are studying the fourth in a series of six sections where Jesus takes one of the Old Testament laws and reframes it for his listeners. In each case, he starts with the surface of the law and then he takes it deeper. Ultimately, his goal is to get at our hearts.

We've seen Jesus address anger, lust, and divorce. Now he tackles the telling of truth.

This morning we'll see him give one of the simplest suggestions we could imagine. It's the easiest possible way to live our lives. But something about it is incredibly difficult.

Jesus starts by addressing a practice that was common in the first century. Then he moves on to tell his listeners what not to do. We'll consider our own lives and think about the various ways we obscure the truth. Finally, he gives them this incredibly simple instruction. We'll conclude by thinking about how that applies to our lives. We'll find out how much we personally have to gain by becoming truth tellers.

## The power of a vow

Jesus begins as he does in all six of these sections by quoting a known law. This one isn't one of the Ten Commandments. It's more of a combination of several laws from the Jewish Scriptures.

**Matthew 5:33:**

**"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.'"**

Jesus refers back to this law about keeping your oaths when you swear upon something. People knew that when they swore on something, that meant they had to do it. You may think that this doesn't have a lot to do with our world today. We don't talk about oaths a lot. But think about what's going on.

We could go back to Inigo Montoya, the Spaniard. Twice he tried to convince the man in black that he wouldn't kill him until he reached the top of the cliff. The man in black didn't believe him until Montoya swore on the soul of his father. Now he was believable.

This kind of practice was pervasive in the first century. People would make oaths for all sorts of reason, from commerce to personal relationships to political allegiances. The Old Testament was clear that you couldn't make an oath by the name of God. So people would swear on all sorts of things to make their claims believable.

We do the same kind of thing. People say, "I swear to God." Or "I promise." Or "I'm not going to lie to you." In more formal settings, we ask people to vow that they are "telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

So why do we do this? Why did Inigo swearing on the soul of his father make him believable? Why does saying "I swear to God" or "I promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth" change anything?

First, it seems we assume that most of the time, people aren't telling the truth. Think about that. We just believe that people are walking around all the time lying to us. So we have to say "I swear" or "I'm not going to lie to you" to get people to believe us. No one trusts anyone else.

But even deeper than that is the motivation in our hearts. We say these words to control other people. We're talking to someone else, and we want to control them with our words. So we dress up the words, and we make our words bigger and more powerful so that we can control the people around us.

Right after Jesus was arrested, Peter was left wandering around Jerusalem. Peter was clearly from the boondocks of Galilee, so several people assumed that he had been with Jesus, the Galilean.

The first time we are told in Matthew 26:70 that he denied it. The second time he was asked that question,

verse 72 says "again he denied it with an oath." The final time someone said that he knew Jesus, verse 73 says, "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'"

Does that sound familiar? Have you seen that kind of a progression? There's what we say. Then we get more adamant about it. It's not working - people don't believe us, so we get insistent and start swearing that we are telling the truth.

And maybe we are telling the truth. But that's not the point. The point is what's happening in our hearts. We're feeling out of control, so we're desperately trying to use our words to get back in control. That's what happened to Peter.

I know that feeling. There are times when I want other people to act a certain way, and I try everything in my power to get them to do that. Sometimes I use words to try and control them.

The old law said that when you dress up your words by taking an oath, you had better be telling the truth. But as always, Jesus wants to go deeper.

## Getting to the heart

In the first century, people knew they couldn't swear by God's name, so they found ways to get around it. They would swear by heaven or earth or the temple or dozens of other ways. That way, they could technically be following the rules, but still manage to dress up their words. This behavior challenges Jesus.

### Matthew 5:34-36:

**"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."**

Jesus takes the old command to make sure you keep your oaths and brings it deeper by telling people not to make oaths at all. He uses logic to point out that even though they thought that swearing by heaven or earth was okay, it amounted to the same thing as swearing by God.

He tackles the little tricks that people use to technically obey the rules, while they can keep doing the

things that they really want to do. Which, in this case, is to try and control other people using oaths to make themselves sound believable.

The other day I was studying in a coffee shop, and I saw two children, probably 5-7-years-old, come in with their mom and dad. They walked to a table for four people which was two smaller tables pushed together.

The first child sat down and slapped his hands on the table saying, "This is my table!" His sibling saw this and slapped his hands on the other table with the same claim, "This is my table!" The mother shows up and tries to figure out a solution. She suggests they move outside to a different table. The children both exclaim, "We're sitting here. I hate outside!"

Finally, the dad comes by unaware of all the previous drama and says, "Why are we sitting inside? Let's go sit outside." The mother looks exasperated, and the children respond, "we're sitting here." The father looks confused for a moment. Then he and his wife get up and announce, "Well, okay, but we'll be outside." One second later, the children look at each other and walk outside to join their parents.

It struck me how much human nature I had just witnessed. These children were using words to stake their claims on their tables. Their exaggerated insistence, "I hate outside," because they wanted to retain dominion over their inside location. The parents simple and authoritative move to go outside. And the children following. Everyone's trying to control the situation. Everyone's trying to make things turn out the way they want them to go.

I realized how similar I am. I don't think I've ever sworn an oath by Jerusalem. But I used words to get my way. Sometimes I exaggerate. Sometimes I overstate things to make my point. Sometimes I ask questions in a patronizing way. When people ask a question, sometimes I answer even though I don't really know what I'm talking about.

All of this reveals a problem within our hearts. Sometimes things don't go our way. We wish it were different. There are times when we desperately feel out of control. Sometimes we want to force things to turn out according to our designs. So we use words to manipulate. We bend the truth even if only slightly. This is what we do. We bend the truth to control our world.

But this does not happen without consequences. Speech is a relational thing. You normally don't talk to

yourself. You talk to someone else. So when we use our words to control, we hurt other people. We convince of something other than what's real for a variety of reasons. Maybe we're afraid of the truth. Maybe we're obsessed with a certain outcome. Maybe we're ashamed or too proud or protecting someone else or trying to cover an earlier lie.

When we use our words to bend the truth, people get hurt, relationships fracture, and trust disintegrates.

My family has become a fan of the Netflix show *Stranger Things*. One of the dominant themes of the third season is a simple phrase, "Friends don't lie." But as you watch the show, you see friends doing just that—lying to each other. You see the consequences and you want to scream, "Tell the truth. That would fix everything."

Now imagine you are God. You're sitting up there in the kingdom of the heavens. And you're watching all the ways that we interact with each other. You see us exaggerating and overstating and making oaths and covering up and omitting the hard parts. You know the truth. You know everything. But you have to watch the all-out war that we seem to have with the truth. And you have to witness all the destruction it causes in our lives and in the world.

This is what Jesus addresses. He says that when you are living in the kingdom of heaven, your life looks different. So once again, he gives us an incredibly simple instruction to follow. And once again, this behavior starts on the outside, but it has a way of working into the deeper places of our hearts.

## Be truth tellers

Jesus' instruction is no surprise. Once we've come face to face with our tendency to bend the truth in an effort to control our world, the cure is simple.

**Matthew 5:37:**

**"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."**

If you say yes, then let it mean yes. If you say no, then let it mean no. When you speak, just say things that are true. Jesus' suggestion is simple but radical and world changing. Just be honest all the time. Say what's true. Don't dress it up. Don't add weight to it. Just speak the truth.

Can you imagine living like this? Actually, it's the easiest way to live. When you are a truth teller, there's nothing to remember. When you are a truth teller, there's nothing to hide. When you are a truth teller, there's nothing to manipulate or control or twist or spin. You just speak truth. It's so simple.

That's why Jesus says that anything more is from evil. Other translations render that the evil one because the language seems to be referring to one who is evil. John says this about the evil one in his Gospel in John 8:44, "He is a liar and the father of lies."

So if telling the truth is so simple, why don't we do it? Why are we so tempted toward all of this?

I think it's because there are things that are true that I don't want to be true. There are things about me that I wish weren't true. I wish I were kinder than I am. I wish I were less materialistic. I wish I had more capacity to love and didn't get hurt so easily. I don't want it to be true that I tend to blame others for my problems. I don't want it to be true that I have limitations and can't manage all the things I want to be able to do.

There are parts of me that hate the truth. Parts of me that want to overcommit, exaggerate, diminish, hide, and embellish.

But Jesus invites me to face the truth. He asks me to come and follow him and lay down my old self and live in the light. He's describing people who speak the truth. But you can only speak the truth if you live in the truth. He wants to see our hearts transformed so that we can accept the truth. He wants to transform us so that we can embrace the truth.

The incredible thing about embracing the truth is that it is nowhere near as scary as I fear. All those things that I want to hide, all those areas of my life which I'd like to change, all the ways I think I need to control so that I'm okay—they melt away when I embrace the truth.

The greatest truth of all is that God loves me. I am accepted by my heavenly Father. I am okay and I am included. That is the truth which forms the foundation of everything else in my life.

I may be this way or that way, but God loves me. I may not be all that I wish I were, but God loves me. I may be broken and confused and bored and doubting, but God loves me.

In 1 John 3:1, the author exclaims, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

No matter what else is true, God is willing to take you into his family. He is not ashamed of you. If you believe in Jesus, he has called you a child of God. That's the kind of love the Father has for you.

This is the message of the Gospel. This is the message of the kingdom of the heavens. You are invited. You are included. You are forgiven. You are embraced by God.

And when we live with that kind of truth at our core—when we allow that truth to work its way into our hearts—then we become people who live by the truth and people who speak the truth.

This is why Jesus says this in John 8:31-32, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

When the truth has set us free, why would we want to say anything other than the truth? Why would we need to swear by anyone's name that we're telling the truth? Why would we need to control anyone else with slight variations on the truth?

When we embrace the truth, the truth sets us free. We don't have to fear the truth anymore, so we allow truth to flow out from us and shame falls away. We become children of God. We are freed by the truth. That's what it looks like to be a kingdom-dweller. That's why kingdom-dwellers are naturally truth tellers.

## Conclusion

Let's think back to our friend, Inigo Montoya, waiting on the cliffs to kill the man in black. Inigo could learn a lot from the Sermon on the Mount. He could start with "do not murder." Assuming he gets past that, think of how things in his life would be transformed if he became a truth teller.

I suspect that some of you today are hiding something significant. You're afraid of the truth because you don't know what would happen if the truth came out. I know it feels scary, but let me invite you to speak the truth. Share it with a friend or one of the pastors or someone you trust. I promise you that Jesus knows what he was talking about when he said that the truth can set you free.

To live in the truth is such a simple thing. Most of us learned to tell the truth when we were barely able to speak. But truth tellers are rare—rare, but powerful. The simple act of telling the truth can transform a situation; confession; vulnerability; proclamation; keeping our promises; transparency; honesty in business dealings.

This can only happen when you're living in the kingdom of the heavens. Jesus is the truth, so when he is on the throne, truth reigns in our lives. Stop controlling the world around you with lies and embrace the truth. Embrace the world-shattering truth that God loves you. Let the truth of God transform you so that your heart is changed and you live in the freedom of being a truth teller.

## Endnotes

- 1 Madeleine Carlisle, "Recently Released Video Shows Football Coach Wrestling Gun Away From Student, Then Hugging Him," Time, October 20, 2019, video, 0:38, <https://time.com/5705756/video-coach-shooter-hug-portland/>, accessed 10/30/19.
- 2 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York, NY:HarperOne, 2009), Kindle Edition, 201.