

Sermon on the Mount - Integrity

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- [0 : 0 0] As I said tonight, we are going to return to our study on the Sermon on the Mount. And as we've been saying, this study is entitled, Disciples Trained by King Jesus.
- And the reason we called it that is because, first of all, that is what the Sermon on the Mount is. It is training for the disciples of Jesus Christ, for those who are in the Kingdom of God.
- But it is also, secondly, what we want to be. It's our goal as we study the Sermon on the Mount. We want to be disciples who are well trained, who are well equipped and who live as a King wants us to live.
- Our diagram highlights the key areas that are touched on in the Sermon on the Mount, or certainly many of the key areas. It's not exhaustive, but it highlights some of the key things that Jesus is highlighting.
- Tonight we are coming to the fifth one of these boxes. We are going to look at integrity. The section of the Sermon on the Mount that we read is teaching all about the place of the law in the lives of disciples.
- [1 : 1 2] Jesus has said that he has not come to abolish the law, but he's come to fulfil it. When we studied that before the summer, we said that that basically means that Jesus is bringing the law of God to a new level.
- He's not abolishing it, he's fulfilling it, and if anything he is, bringing it to a new level. As disciples we do not abandon God's law, we strive to obey it.
- The law is not the means of salvation, but it is a real life as disciples. In the New Covenant Era, one of the key biblical emphases is that God's law is not simply an external activity.
- It is written on our hearts and God wants inward and outward obedience affecting the whole of our lives.
- Jesus talks about the law here. We looked at it under obedience. He then gives a series of examples as to what he means. These show how God's law is to be applied in the lives of disciples.
- [2 : 1 9] These four blocks that we have here are all dealing with these examples that Jesus touches on. They are all in reference to the place of God's law in our lives.
- Jesus introduces all these examples in the same way he says, you have heard it, was said, but I say to you. In doing so, it is important to remember, we said this last time, Jesus is not drawing a contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- He is not saying the Old Testament is to be ignored, and now I am saying this. He is instead drawing a contrast between his teaching and what the Jewish leaders have been saying.
- He is not tackling the Old Testament itself, he is tackling what the Jewish leaders have been saying about the Old Testament. Because of course they have taken the Old Testament, they had added to it, and in many ways they had lost sight of what was being taught.

In other words, Jesus basically says the Pharisees and the leaders say this, but I say unto you.

- [3 : 26] The first three examples affect the realm of relationships. We looked at that and we saw how Jesus warrants against inappropriate anger and he warrants against inappropriate attraction.

He teaches us that we have to be mindful of both the causes and the consequences of sin. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. He is highlighting the ruthlessness that we should have in regard to sin.

That was what we looked at last time. Verses 34 to 37 bring us to the next key emphasis, where Jesus is teaching about integrity.

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, but 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 simply be yes or no, anything more than this comes from evil. Now, that's a very interesting passage and when you read that, a question arises in your mind.

- [4 : 41] What's wrong with oaths? Because in many ways you think for sure that oath is a good thing, and we tend to associate oaths with sincerity, with honesty.

And so it would seem at first sight strange as to why Jesus is saying, do not take an oath at all. Well, there's two important points to note, and the first one is kind of a general point.

If you think about it, why is it that people use oaths? Well, the answer is because all too often people lie. All too often people are dishonest.

And an oath is an attempt to say, what I'm about to say is not part of normal conversation, it's not necessarily the way I normally speak, here I swear I am being truthful. And so you are elevating your statement into a category which is set apart as truthful and reliable.

And so in a sense, when somebody begins a sentence by saying, I swear this is the truth, it's almost implying that at other times we're untruthful.

- [5 : 58] And it's only if we say, I swear, then you can rely on what we're saying. I read an interesting quote by somebody called AM Hunter, I have to confess I don't know who that is, but he says, oaths are necessary because men are so often liars.

That's a really interesting point. And so the key point is that although oaths may seem like a good thing, they actually arise from a problem in society. They arise from the fact that dishonesty is prevalent in the human race and in conduct. So that's a general point.

Secondly, and more specifically to the New Testament context, oaths were a big part of life at this time. And it appears to be the case that the Pharisees had developed quite an intricate system of oaths, which depending on what word he was used, were either binding or not.

And we can see evidence of this in Matthew 23. Here Jesus addresses the Pharisees and he says, Woe this ye blind guide who say, if anyone swears by the temple it's nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple he is bound by his oaths.

You blind fools for which is greater the gold of the temple, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred. And he say, if you have anyone that swears by the also then it's nothing, but if someone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he's bound by his oaths, you blind men, for which is more just a gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred.

- [7 : 30] So, we ever swear by the altar, swear by it and by everything on it. Do you ever swear by the temple, swear by it and by him who dwells in it? And do you ever swear by heaven, swear by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it?

Now, the basic point that's been emphasised here is the fact that it seems to be the case that according to the Pharisees, depending on what wording you used, determined whether or not you were bound by your oath or not.

So, basically, I could say, I swear by the temple that I'm going to give you 100 pounds. And then when the time comes to hand over 100 pounds, I'll say, ah, wait, wait, wait, wait.

I only swear by the temple. I'm not bound by what I say. And it seems to be the case that many Jews would have the view that unless the name of God was mentioned, or unless something specific according to their system, like the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, unless these things were mentioned, you were not bound.

But like, now, when you were children, people would make a promise and they would have their fingers crossed behind their backs. It seems so daft. But back then, that's how people used to be. Ah, my fingers were crossed. It didn't mean it.

[8 : 39] And this is, I think, falling into the same category. And in all of this, it's clear that the Pharisees were being horribly dishonest.

Because if you think about it, they were using an oath to give an impression of sincerity. And yet all the time, they're using these subtle distinctions to hide the fact that they didn't really mean a word of what they were saying.

So Jesus is tackling really quite a deceitful issue that seems to be prominent in society. And so it's against this background, against the fact that oaths arise from the frequency of their dishonesty, and from the fact that the Pharisees of Jesus' day were using an intricate and really quite frankly delious approach to oath taking.

It's against that background that Jesus very clearly says, do not take an oath at all.

Now at this point, a question arises. Does this make it wrong for a Christian to speak under oath? So for example, if you were called to be a witness at a court case and you were placed under oath, is it wrong for you to speak under oath?

[10 : 04] Well, some people do think that that's the case, but I don't think that that's the point that Jesus is making. I don't think that's the emphasis of the passage here, but it's also backed up by the fact that in Jesus' own trial, he remains silent to the questions that he was given.

But then the high priest says to him, I adieu you. And that word basically means I put you under oath.

So the high priest placed Jesus under oath. I put you under oath by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. And then Jesus spoke.

Jesus responded to what he says. You have said so. And so Jesus' own example, I think, would show that if we are in a situation where we have to speak at a court case under oath, that would not be inappropriate. So what is Jesus saying? What point is he making?

Well, the point that Jesus is making is that as disciples, we must be men and women of absolute integrity.

[11 : 22] In other words, what we must say should always, always be utterly trustworthy. As disciples of Jesus Christ, if we say something, then we are always to be truthful and honest. If we promise anything, then we are to be true to our word.

And if we speak, we should always ensure that we mean what we say. Our inward heart, our outward speech should always match up.

And the key point that Jesus is making is that for the Christian, an oath should never be necessary. In other words, we should never have to tie and convince people that we are being truthful.

We should simply be always truthful so that nobody will ever doubt the reliability of what we're saying. It should always be the case that our simple speech, our yes and our no, is absolutely trustworthy.

And it's an important New Testament theme. James emphasises the same thing. Above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

[12 : 41] That's basically what integrity means. When you say yes, you mean yes. When you say no, you mean no. And we avoid ever going down the road of saying one thing and meaning another.

As disciples, we have to be men and women of integrity. And that's immensely important. And it's important for three reasons, and I want to just look at them together briefly for the rest of the time.

Why is it important to have integrity well for these three reasons? First of all, integrity recognises the reality of who God is.

Jesus highlights this in Matthew 5. He says, don't 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.

Do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. It appears to be the case that the Pharisees were saying that if they swore, say by heaven, or if they swore by Jerusalem, as long as they didn't mention God's name, they weren't bound by their oath.

[14 : 01] But Jesus is pointing out the foolishness of what they're saying, because heaven, earth, Jerusalem, they are all part of God's creation, and they are all under God's authority.

And Jesus is showing the people that it is absolutely impossible to escape God's jurisdiction. Therefore, whether we tell a little fib, or whether we make an oath by heaven or by earth, God knows what we've said, and he knows if we are being honest or not.

And Jesus is highlighting an important theological point. He's highlighting the fact that our understanding of the nature of God should always have a practical effect in our lives, because our theology tells us that God is omniscient, that he knows everything.

We believe that about God, this knowledge has no limits. Our theology tells us that God is omnipresent, that he's omnipresent.

To guide the morning wings and dwell in the first parts of the sea, even there, Lord, You are with me. We know that these are two, none of us would deny these things, but these theological truths should always have a very real practical effect on our lives.

[15 : 32] Because the practical implication of these two theological truths for our speech is the fact that our words are always spoken in the hearing of God.

It's interesting, in the Great Commission, Jesus says, I am with you always. And we primarily tend to take that as a word of comfort and encouragement, which it is the greatest comfort we could ever know.

But it is also a solemn reminder that every day we speak and act under the listening ear and under the watching eye of our King.

And if we think like the Pharisees, that we could have kind of double standards, if we could have dishonesty and almost take God by a behavior, then we are really blind to the implications of some of the most basic truths of who God is.

And it's reminding us that our theology should drive us to the utmost integrity. We believe that God is omniscient, we believe that God is omnipresent, and therefore our great desire should be that He would never, ever find the sort of deceitfulness and dishonesty that Jesus is addressing here.

[16 : 53] And by showing integrity, we are showing and acknowledging the fact that Jesus is Lord of every part of our lives, and we are pleasing God.

And of course, we are simply mirroring the character of God Himself, because God's yes is always yes, and God's no is always no.

So, so often, we worry about what people think, we worry about what people say, and I'm guilty of that myself, and we are all guilty of that.

But Jesus is reminding us here that people are not the ones who really matter. He says a person can't even make their hair white or black, people are small. As disciples, our primary concern is what God sees and what God thinks.

And God is looking for integrity from His disciples. That applies whether you're speaking to a top politician or whether you're speaking to a drunk on the street. In terms of our speech, we always wanted to be the case that if we say yes, we mean yes.

[18 : 04] If we say no, we mean no. And God Himself is our witness. He's our constant witness.

So, integrity is a practical outworking of the nature of God. Secondly, integrity is vital for the health of God's church.

Remember the sermon, the amount of speaking about how Jesus wants us to live as disciples. This is how God's people, the new Israel, the Church of Christ, this is how we are to conduct ourselves. And quite simply, and I'm sure you know it already, but Jesus is highlighting the fact that as disciples, we should never be dishonest with each other.

We should never speak behind each other's backs. We should never speak in a way behind each other's backs that we wouldn't want to speak in front of their face.

We should never use our silence as a tool for dishonesty. Sometimes I'm guilty of this myself. Sometimes you go to a meeting and things don't go the way you wanted to go. And you just keep quiet and then you go out in your mode. I do that.

[19 : 20] That's not showing integrity. And we are being reminded that in every part of our dealings with one another as Christians, we should do so with integrity.

We are to be united in all that we do, as Paul emphasises in Ephesians, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

That was really what the Pharisees had with their oaths, a crafty deceitful scheme. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ.

So integrity is vital in the life of the church. And it's particularly important when things go wrong, or when things don't go as we would have hoped.

Now, in the Christian church, there are often challenges, there's often disappointments, there's often frustrations. And when things go wrong, or when something difficult happens, it is so easy to think the worst of people.

[20 : 34] Somebody does something or fails to do something and you can instantly think that their motivations are bad. And you can instantly hold against them the fact that this has happened.

It's really, really easy to think the worst of people. And that's the characteristic of the world and it keeps into the church. And interestingly, it appears to have often happened to Paul.

Paul was often criticised, often questioned and often viewed with suspicion by the churches that he had planted and that he was ministering to. And for this reason, you can see evidence in his letters that things have gone wrong and clearly he has been viewed with suspicion and he goes to great lengths to highlight the fact that his intentions were always honest and genuine.

I've got three examples here which are really interesting. First of all, Romans 1, he says, I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but I've thus far been prevented in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the gentes.

Policy, and the reason I haven't come is because I haven't been able to. It's not that I don't want to, but I haven't been able to. We see the same thing in 2 Corinthians which I think is even more specific.

[21 : 55] He says, I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. He obviously intended to do that but never did and they were clearly criticising him for it.

He says, was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make plans according to the flesh, ready to say yes, yes and no, no at the same time? He highlights the fact that he wasn't lying to them when he said he was going to come and the fact that he didn't come was because of other circumstances that had arisen.

Same thing is emphasising Galatians. He talks about his conversion. He says, after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him 15 days, but I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother in what I'm writing to you before God.

I do not lie. Paul has highlighted the fact that even though things haven't worked out, he was never dishonest in his intentions. He explains why his circumstances did not work out because he's a man of integrity.

And this is when our own integrity is vital for dealing with difficult situations in the life of the church. For example, if someone makes a mistake, which we all do and I do, then a genuine apology can bring healing and deal with the situation.

[23 : 18] If plans and intentions don't work out, then an honest explanation can take away the disappointment. Why is this not happening? Why is that not happening? An explanation can make all the difference.

And as disciples, if problems arise, then rather than kind of thinking the worst of one another, we should lovingly, gently, honestly talk things through.

And that applies even when we disagree on issues because in the life of the church, the whole Church of Christ, people will disagree. Sometimes people will say yes, sometimes people will say no.

And in that situation, honesty, openness, integrity can keep us united even though we don't think the same way. So integrity is vital to the church. That's why Jesus highlights it in the Sermon on the Mount.

So integrity is essential to the practical application of the nature of God. A vehicle for the healthy life of God's church. And thirdly, integrity is an incredibly powerful witness.

[24 : 24] Jesus spoke these words to a society where integrity was lacking. Oaths were being used to deceive people and instead of guaranteeing honesty, they were utterly unreliable.

So there was a severe lack of integrity at this time. And of course we live in a world that is exactly the same. Of course oaths aren't so much of part of our culture nowadays, probably certainly not to the same extent.

But we still live in a world that is saturated by the same sort of dishonesty. Two examples. One is exaggeration. How many times do we hear people exaggerate?

Maybe people exaggerate their own achievements, maybe people exaggerate their own hardships, maybe people exaggerate details of events. Sometimes we can hear the same story being told three or four times and each time it gets bigger and more expensive and more dramatic or whatever.

We live in a world that is full of exaggeration and I'm sure you can all think of examples of that. Some maybe trivial, some much more serious. So we live in a world of exaggeration.

[25 : 40] We also live in a world full of spin. If something happens, if something is said, if a decision is made, then all too often there is an attempt to put spin on it to make it look better.

And I don't need to convince you of that, we see it everywhere. Both these things reflect a lack of integrity, an acute lack of integrity in the world.

For example, would you say, you think of the most influential people in our society, either in media, business and politics, would you say that the majority of them are people of absolute integrity?

Donnie's laughter answers the question. A cute lack of integrity. And we're so used to it, we almost become numb to it, but Jesus is tackling it head on.

And the great message of the sermon on the Mount is that as disciples, we are to be different. We are to be different to the world.

[26 : 55] So in a world that exaggerates, in a world that spins, in a world that makes oaths that they have no intention of keeping, we are to be men and women of integrity.

What we say we are, we really are. What we say we will do, we will really do. People should be able to look at us all and say, there's a man or there's a woman of absolute integrity.

It's a key characteristic of a disciple and something that applies every day. Here's that interesting question, I'm very nearly finished.

What's the opposite of integrity? Yes, that is true, but another word.

What would you say? Another word I'm looking for. What is it? H.

[28 : 03] Would you agree opposite of integrity? No, not true. Don't even try it. Hypocrisy.

That's why Jesus uses the term hypocrite. Exactly, exactly. Well, if you think about it, a hypocrite, it comes from the word, the Greek word for an actor. And in those days, actors put on a mask.

And so basically what you saw was not what the person was. The person was pretending to be something else. And there are few things that are more off-putting to people in terms of gospel witness than when they see hypocrisy in the Christian church.

But if they see integrity, integrity in your work, integrity in your home, integrity in what you do in this community, integrity in your habits, integrity in your speech, then they will see that you are following a master who is worth listening to and worth following.

Sometimes witnessing can seem so, so hard, but your and my daily integrity is a constant testimony to the fact that Jesus has changed us and brought something amazing into our lives.

[29 : 31] So as disciples, let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. May God grant that everyone would know us as people of integrity.

Amen. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. And in many ways it challenges us because we know that we fail.

And we have to be honest and say that there are so many times where we've not had the integrity that we should have. We pray that you would write your word in our hearts and influence and shape the way we go through our lives.

So that we would follow the example of Jesus is perfect integrity, that we too Lord would be faithful in following you and living for you.

Help us not to give in to the temptation to conform to the world's ways. Help us to be different. Help us to be your disciple.

[30 : 47] And that will be affecting every single part of our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.