

# Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

## Integrity \* Matthew 5:33-37

Before we get to the message this morning I have two important announcements. First, if you were not here last Sunday I want to encourage you to either watch the message online or grab a CD from Harmony Central after the service. This was an important message where we shared a vision for the future of Harmony, and we really want everyone to have this information and understand where the Lord is leading us in the days ahead. By the way, let's take a moment to review the vision statement. What kind of church are we? *We are a worshipping community on mission.* We are a group of disciples who are striving to worship Christ in all of life, live in community together and live on mission to make more disciples.

Second, we want to remind you that next Sunday Don Helton will be here to candidate for the position of Pastor of Discipleship & Theology. Don will be preaching and we will hold a Q & A time with him in the Youth Room immediately following the service. I'd also like to refer you to the insert in the handout, which provides a job description as well as some biographical information on Don and his family.

Ok, today we return to our study in the gospel of Matthew, and specifically to the Sermon on the Mount. So, if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Matthew 5. And while you turn there let me share something that happened in the church office this week. On Thursday afternoon, Jaime Monroe, one of our wonderful assistants, gave me a book that records some of the history of Harmony Bible Church. Now, last week I said that Harmony has been in existence for approximately 60 years. However, the roots of the church actually go back to the 1850's. Somehow we still have documents from those days, and in perusing them Jaime found something interesting from 1880. We've got a picture up here that is probably nearly indiscernible, but here is what it says. The date was February 1<sup>st</sup>. Sunday school opened at 10:00. Weather cool and pleasant. The attendance was small, a total of 24. That's about the size of the Carr and Situmeang families put together. It also says the offering was a whopping 27 cents. But I found what they were

studying to be most significant. It was Matthew 5:1-16. And the title of the message was "True Disciples." So you may remember last week I said our vision wasn't really anything new. Well now we have proof that this is the case. The purpose of this church has been to make disciples for over 130 years...and with the Lord's help it will continue to be our purpose as we grow and reach people here in SE Iowa and around the world for many years to come.

So, let's get to our message for today. And because it has been a few weeks since the last time we were in Matthew, let's take a moment to review what the Sermon on the Mount is all about.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is giving His disciples a portrait of discipleship. He is explaining to them what it means to follow Him. At the end of Matthew 4, Jesus has approached Peter, Andrew, James and John and said, "Follow me." And shortly after they respond yes, Jesus takes them to a nearby mountain to give them instructions on what following Him would include.

And I think it will be especially helpful to review the passage we studied the last time we were in Matthew, verses 17-20. Take a look at it with me:

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Let me remind you of two important things from these verses. One, Jesus is saying that He didn't come to get rid of the Old Testament but rather to complete it. This is important to understand because in verses 21-48 it's

going to appear that He is trying to get rid of it. But Jesus didn't come to abolish but rather fulfill the Old Testament because ultimately it is all about Him. Hopefully we will see how this is the case in the days ahead.

The second thing we need to remember about these verses is that discipleship is ultimately about the heart, which is the primary theme of the Sermon on the Mount. Yes, there are things that a disciple does and does not do. Yes, there are commands that Jesus wants us to follow. Yes, there are things that He wants us to avoid. But discipleship goes much deeper than our speech and our actions. True discipleship goes all the way to the heart. And we are going to see this again in our passage today.

Now, this naturally leads into the next part of the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in verses 21-48. This portion of the sermon is known as the antithesis section, because six times in these verses Jesus introduces a new topic with some form of the statement, *"You have heard that it was said to those of old. But I say to you..."*

We see a form of this statement in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43, and with it Jesus introduces His teaching on six different topics – anger, lust, divorce, integrity, retaliation, and loving your enemies. In the weeks ahead we are going to take an in depth look at all of these issues, but for schedules sake we are going to cover them out of order and begin today with verses 33-37. So, let's fast-forward a few verses and read this section together. Jesus says:

*"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, 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."*

Now, I recognize that at first this passage may seem somewhat innocuous. And to be honest, historically it has not been given as much weight as the

other five. However, I think we are going to find it to be one of those “this is where the rubber meets the road” kinds of passages. That’s because Jesus is addressing integrity. In these verses Jesus is continuing His teaching on what it means to follow Him, and is telling us that integrity is a hallmark of a disciple. He wants us to understand that a disciple lives a life of truthfulness. When a disciple says he will be somewhere, he shows up. When a disciple says he will do something, he does it. When a disciple speaks, he speaks the truth. When a disciple says something, he means it. Every single word. To be a disciple means to be a person of integrity.

Now, one of the reasons this issue is so pertinent is that we all face challenges in the area of integrity. We are all tempted to tell a little white lie every once in a while. We are all tempted to shade the truth a little bit now and then. We all struggle with keeping our word regarding the commitments we make. We all regularly face the pressure to fudge just a little bit here or there. Many of us are even struggling with integrity on that tax return we will file tomorrow.

And of course we face the added pressure of living in a culture where compromising one’s integrity has become acceptable and in many instances even expected. Today it is widely believed if you want to get ahead in life, particularly in school, politics, or business, you have to be willing to bend the rules a little. Perhaps the clearest example of this is found in the world of sports, where pretty much any form of cheating is acceptable as long as you don’t get caught.

And here is the biggest problem for us in the church. Dishonesty, in a variety of forms, has become what we might call an acceptable sin. Yes, we believe it is something we should try to avoid, but in many cases we consider it the cost of living in the world today. Yes, we know it is wrong, but it’s really not that big of a deal. You see, we have somehow come to the place where we think it’s ok to tell a little white lie, or to not be completely truthful with someone, or to fail to do something we have said we would do. And let me tell you, in my experience this is rampant in the church. However, in this passage, Jesus is very clear that untruthfulness in any form

has absolutely no place in the life of a believer. In fact, the main point of the passage is summarized in verse 37. Look at it with me:

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

And to make sure you understand this is not the only time Scripture addresses this issue, note that the Apostle James repeats this point almost verbatim:

*But 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. (James 5:12, ESV)*

So, let me be clear about this from the get go. In this passage, Jesus is saying that disciples are people who are completely trustworthy. They are people of unquestioned integrity.

Now, much like today, integrity was also an issue in the first century. In Jesus' day, the people had taken a simple command about keeping their word and made it extremely complex, and in doing so had strayed far from the purpose for which the command was originally given.

Essentially what Jesus is addressing in verse 33-36 is the misunderstanding, misuse, and misapplication of an Old Testament directive about keeping oaths. In verse 33 He indirectly quotes a command that is given in a number of Old Testament passages which essentially says, "don't break the vows you have made before the Lord."

Now, the emphasis on this command was two fold. One, oaths were only to be made in very serious circumstances and two, whenever an oath was made it was to be kept, regardless of who or what it was sworn by.

However, by Jesus' day, the people had corrupted both of these emphases. First, they had gotten to the point where they would make oaths about

almost anything. They would very readily say, "I swear to God," or "I swear to heaven," or "I swear on my head." Virtually any oath, used for any kind of purpose was acceptable. They had even developed an incredibly intricate system regarding how binding an oath actually was. Naturally, this led to all kinds of frivolous oath making, much like the filing of lawsuits in our day. Today people file lawsuits about everything and anything. And the same had become true in the first century with oaths. The result was that random and disingenuous vows became so commonplace they were not taken seriously and actually became a mark of deceit rather than integrity.<sup>1</sup>

Second, it had become acceptable to break a vow as long as you didn't swear to the Lord. In other words, they had taken the emphasis in this command to be to whom or what you swore by, rather than on the fact that you had given your word. That is why Jesus mentions heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the Temple, and the head because people had come to believe that if you swore by one of these things it was much less binding than if you swore to God. John MacArthur explains it this way:

*People would swear by heaven, by the earth, by the Temple, by the hairs of their heads, and by any other thing they thought would impress those they wanted to take advantage of. That kind of routine oath-making was usually lie-making; and it was considered by those who practiced it to be perfectly acceptable as long as it was not in the name of the Lord.<sup>2</sup>*

So, the result was God's standard of integrity being lowered to give the people wiggle room to be dishonest. They had taken a command that was given to enhance integrity and abused it in order to lie. And as much as frivolous lawsuits are used today for personal gain, so were oaths 2,000 years ago.

However, Jesus makes it clear with His antithesis that one, an oath is a very serious matter, and two, it doesn't matter how an oath is made, because

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, John (2001). Pg. 323. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 323.

everything a man swears by is related to God in some way. Heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the Temple and even the hairs of the head are all under God's ownership. If you swear by anything you are ultimately swearing by God, because He is the one who is ultimately in control. In fact, this is the problem with oaths in the first place. When we make an oath we are in danger of putting ourselves in the place of God. Therefore, oath making should be undertaken only in serious situations and when made they should always be honored.

Now, at this point you may be thinking, ok, this is good and all, but you know what, I really don't take too many oaths these days, so I don't think this really applies to me. But if you are thinking that, I hate to tell you, you are wrong. That's because what Jesus is really after here is a truthful heart. The point really isn't about making or not making oaths, but about His followers being people of integrity. And I'd like to take some time in the rest of this message to talk about why this is so important. So, let me give you four reasons that integrity is a big deal.

## **Four Reasons Integrity is a Big Deal**

### **1. God is a God of Truth**

The first reason is that God is a God of truth. Note what Hebrews 6 tells us:

*So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:17-18, ESV)*

Do you catch what verse 18 says? It's impossible for God to lie. That's because truthfulness is one of His primary characteristics. And since disciples were created and redeemed to be like Him, they strive to be people of complete truthfulness as well.

And by the way, not only is God truthful, but He is also the truth.

In John 14:6 Jesus tells His disciples:

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

Do you know what this means? It means that when we live with integrity, even in seemingly insignificant things, we are pointing towards the ultimate truth, Jesus Christ. And of course the opposite is also true. When we compromise our integrity, even in small ways, we are pointing away from Him, which makes integrity an absolutely huge deal.

## **2. Falsehood comes from the devil.**

The second reason integrity is a big deal is falsehood comes from the devil. Take a look back at verse 37 for a moment.

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

The word evil here can also be translated "evil one". Jesus is saying that everything false in our world originates with the devil himself. This is because the devil is the father of lies. Jesus says this in John 8:

*[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44, ESV)*

And so being a person of integrity comes down to whom we are going to follow. When we tell the truth we are following Jesus, and when we lie, even in small ways, we are following the devil.

Let me press this just a little bit. If you are a child of God, you have to remember that this wasn't always the case. There was a time when you

were a child of the devil. At that time being a liar was just part of who you were. That is the reason lying is so prevalent in our world today. There are still a lot of devil's children out there. However, if you are a believer, you are not one of them. God sent His Son to die so you could be rescued from Satan and adopted into God's family. You are now His son or daughter. And the result is you are no longer a liar but rather a person who lives with integrity.

Take your Bibles and turn with me for a moment to Ephesians 4, where Paul makes this point crystal clear. This is a little longer passage of Scripture, but I think it is well worth the read. Pick up with me in verse 17:

*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!- assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. (Ephesians 4:17-25, ESV)*

You see the result of being a child of God is that you are a new person, created to be like God. And one of the primary traits of this new self is truthfulness. Disciples are people of integrity because they have been created like the One who is the truth. Now, this naturally leads to the third reason integrity is such a big deal.

### **3. Our integrity (or lack thereof) reveals the condition of our heart.**

Our integrity, or lack thereof, reveals the condition of our heart. Once again, this is the primary thing Jesus is trying to get across in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in this antithesis section. He is trying to make it clear, over and over again, that discipleship is not simply about following the letter of the law but the spirit as well. Notice what Jesus says about this matter just four chapters later in Matthew 12:

*“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:33-37, ESV)*

Now, once again, our words don't save us. This isn't about being truthful enough to get to heaven. Rather, it's about what verse 34 says. *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* What we say reflects what is actually going on in our hearts. Our words and actions give evidence as to whether or not we have been justified, i.e., made right with God.

Let me give you an example that is very real to the Carr family right now. We knew before we adopted her that our new daughter Zoe has a very serious heart condition. One of the symptoms we noticed right away was her very blue lips, fingers, and toes. Now, if you didn't know she had a heart condition, you might think upon first seeing her that her extremities are the problem. But we knew that this wasn't the real issue. And that was confirmed a couple of weeks ago when they put a little balloon in her heart to open up the pulmonary artery, and wa-lah, almost immediately her lips, fingers, and toes turned pink, just like they are supposed to be. You see the problem isn't with Zoe's outside it is with her inside. And the same is true for us. If we have a problem with integrity we might think it is just

something we need to touch up on the outside. We might think it is something we simply need to work on a little bit. But the truth of the matter is that a lack of integrity is a matter of the heart, and it requires very serious surgery if it is going to be corrected.

Let me speak directly for a moment to those of you who really struggle with integrity. Now, the fact of the matter is that this is an issue for all of us. But at this point I am speaking directly to those who are enslaved to falsehood. To those of you who just can't seem to stop lying. If this is you, the root of your problem is very likely that you don't know Jesus Christ. You probably have a heart problem. You see, when we truly come to know Jesus and follow Him as our Lord and Savior, we start to become like Him, which includes having the ability to put off falsehood and speak the truth. And so if telling the truth is difficult for you, you don't need to try harder, but rather you need to repent of your sin and trust Jesus to give you a new heart and grant you the power to live a life of truthfulness.

Let me share one more relevant passage on this point. I just love this verse, 1 John 5:20:

*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

You see, until you know the one who is the truth, you can't live a life of truth. But once you do know the truth, you will seek to live the truth in every way.

#### **4. Integrity greatly impacts our ability to be salt and light to a lost and dying world.**

The fourth and final reason integrity is such a big deal is that it greatly impacts our ability to be salt and light to a lost and dying world. Listen carefully on this point because it is going to be an important underlying principle in the weeks ahead. Every one of the antithesis statements Jesus

makes has to be read in light of what He says in verses 13-16. Take a look at them with me:

*"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

I have to tell you that the more and more I prayed and worked on this sermon, the more convinced I became of the incredible significance integrity has on our ability to be salt and light in our community. The truth of the matter is that people of integrity are hard to find. Unfortunately, this is often the case even inside the church. And I truly believe this is one of the primary reasons our witness is so ineffective. If people can't trust that we are people of our word, how will they ever believe what we have to say about Jesus? Think about it this way: if we don't live a life of truth, are people ever going to believe us when we say Jesus is the truth?

And I want to encourage you that this means living a life of truth not only in the big things, but also in the little things. It means having integrity in things that don't really seem to matter. It means having integrity even when it hurts.

A great example of this is Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Britain and one of the most influential figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You probably heard that she passed away this past Monday at the age of 87. There are many notable things from her days of leadership in the British government, but one that stands out to me was her response to the great opposition she received over her economic policies. In a speech to her political party in October of 1980, she famously stated, "This lady's not for turning." This philosophy would serve her well for a time, but eventually it would cost her deeply. And while you may or may not agree with her

politics, you cannot help but admire her for the integrity she showed to what she believed. And brothers and sisters, we need more women and men who are not for turning today. We need women and men whose 'Yes' means 'Yes' and 'No' means 'No'. We need men and women who believe what they say, and say what they believe. We need men and women who show through what they say and what they do that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through Him. We need women and men who are not for turning.

## **Conclusion**

Now, I want to conclude this message with an encouraging word regarding the integrity of God. To help with this, I'd like to take you back to the passage we looked at in Hebrews 6. Here it is again:

*So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:17-18, ESV)*

Do you realize what this means? It means that all of God's promises can be completely trusted. It means we don't have to worry that God is going to do what He has said He will do. It means because God has promised to work all things for our good, we can know for sure that the difficulties we are facing right now are going to all work out in the end. It means because God has promised to meet our needs, we don't have to worry about anything. And ultimately it means that when we die, we are going to live with Him for all eternity, because He has promised that this will be the case.

Now listen, I know this is hard to believe in a world where no one is completely truthful. We all have been let down at one time or another by pretty much everyone we know. Even the most trustworthy people disappoint us from time to time. But the same cannot be said of God. He cannot lie, which means He will always do what He has said he will do. The

author of Hebrews goes on to tell us in verse 19 that this trustworthiness serves as an anchor for our soul.

*We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*

You see, through all the storms and challenges of life, we have an anchor we can hold onto. An anchor that is immovable. An anchor that will carry us through until every last storm has passed. And that anchor is the unchangeable integrity of God. May we hold onto this anchor and seek to imitate it in the days ahead.

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