

Simply Tell The Truth

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[0 : 00] Amen. So some of us will be aware that we are in the build-up to festival season, music-wise.! So let me begin with a music image. I imagine if you're not that much into music, you know what! happens when someone plays unplugged. A band or a singer has an unplugged set. What you get is the song stripped back without all the extras. So there's no effects, there's no solos, maybe there's no big choir, it's stripped back to the heart of the song. And there's something really powerful in that.

Well, Jesus, as He continues to preach this famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, in effect says to you and I today, tell the truth unplugged. Don't add extras. We don't need to add oaths, often false oaths. We don't need to dress up the truth, and we should not shade the truth. What we have from Jesus are really simple but challenging words, and I hope that we'll all see that in different ways we stand in need of Jesus' truth. Think about our own words. You and I know that our words matter, and they matter to the people around us. If we have words that are truthful, then that links with being trustworthy. We don't want to be the boy who cried woo. And we admire those people who are known for telling the truth, where their word is their bond. The kind of person we meet from Psalm 15, someone who speaks truth from the heart, someone who doesn't slander others, someone who keeps their word even when it hurts. So the teaching of Jesus matters for our own words, but I think we recognize too it matters for our world. There are lots of people commenting and writing about the fact that we are experiencing truth decay. So at the same time as we've never had more access to information, the question of what is truth and where is it to be found becomes harder and harder to answer. It's increasingly recognized that we don't have anymore a shared concept of truth that's rooted in something that is objective and agreed upon. Rather, we have the idea, well, this is my truth, you tell me yours. Truth is often manipulated to suit personal agenda.

And what we're seeing as a society is that loss of truth has led to a loss of trust in authority and institutions. And also we're losing a sense of community. If we're not able to discuss constructively, because there's no shared idea of truth, then we really struggle to build community. So Jesus' words on truth really matter for the world in which we live. But they also matter if we're Christians for our witness. Remember earlier, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount talked about being the salt of the earth and the city on the hill to be the light of the world. You know, you and I, while we can't change government, we can't change how big business or social media operates, we can commit ourselves personally to pursue truth and integrity, to be people who are known for truth telling, to build trust in our words in such a way that we might shine a spotlight on the greatest truth of all.

[3 : 53] God in Jesus has come to save us and to bring us into his kingdom. So I think this is a really important message, a really simple message. We can summarize it in one sentence. Here it is. Followers of Jesus speak the truth simply and sincerely to demonstrate love for God and love for our neighbor. So we'll see that as we go. The first principle I think that Jesus identifies for us is this, speak the truth knowing that your Father sees you. So again, as Jesus teaches here, he very much has in view the Pharisees, the other religious teachers, and how they treat oaths and what their attitude to the truth actually is. To help us to see this, we need to understand oaths in the Old Testament and to understand that an oath was never commanded by God. It wasn't seen as necessary, but it was permitted.

People were permitted to make oaths as an expression of their love for God, of their loyalty to the Lord as God. So a few texts to show us, Numbers 30 verse 2, when a man makes a vow or an oath to the Lord, he must not break his word, but must do everything he said. Deuteronomy 6, we heard it, Fear the Lord your God, serve him only, and take your oaths in his name. And then later on in

Deuteronomy, If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. So the teaching of the Old Testament, that oath was an act of worship. It was about our heart and our life showing commitment to God, expressed in the form of an oath, with the obligation therefore to obey. So here's what we need to understand. We need to understand what have the Pharisees done with that concept. And what they've done, and we saw this last week, is they've figured out, here's another escape tunnel I can dig. This time, here's a way to escape from my oath. And so they were acting and teaching that my oath, my word, is only binding if I specifically reference the Lord God. So what they've done is they've got these series of get-out clauses.

Look at verse 34. It's clear that they've been swearing by heaven, or they've been swearing by the earth, or they've been swearing by the city of Jerusalem. They've even been swearing by their head.

And the point is, well if I just do that, then I don't really need to keep that promise. I'm not disobeying God if I fail to keep my word. It would work like this. If I was to say to you, I swear on my head, ma'am, I will give you 20 pounds next week. If you came to me next week and said, where's my 20 pound? I'd say, oh sorry, I didn't swear in God's name. I only swore on my head, therefore I'm not obligated to give you the money. It's a basic dishonesty in the form of an oath.

And Jesus challenges that basic dishonesty by reminding them, reminding us, that everything belongs to God. So look at verse 34. Don't swear by heaven, because what's heaven? It's God's throne.

[7 : 36] Don't swear by the earth. Recognize the earth is God's footstool. Jerusalem, that's God's city. Our head, well that belongs to God also. And that was designed by Jesus to remind us that our Father is present. He is a witness to all our words and promises, whether we use His name or not.

And that should shape our words. And especially as we remember that every word matters to God. Our God speaks truth and only truth. Our God is truth. Truth is sacred to God. And as image-baders, we are called likewise to love, to value, and to protect truth.

And so Jesus says, do not swear an oath at all. Now here He's not referring to the law courts or promises that we make at a wedding ceremony. He's thinking about that idea in our regular discourse, where we resort to adding words that actually reveal a basic dishonesty in our speaking. I guess we maybe grew up with expressions like, cross my heart and hope to die. You know, I swear on my mother's grave. What are we doing there? We're adding intensity in our words to gain trust. But that reflects the fact that maybe we have a dishonesty problem. And it's really interesting as well to think about how this kind of crops up in our everyday conversation. Phrases that we use, either speaking or in response, like, honestly? Or we want someone to believe us and we say, you know, there's not a word of a lie. We say, oh, you wouldn't believe it. Really? Seriously? Seriously? Did we notice? Maybe not all of us have that same conversation tick, but a lot of us probably do. And it reminds us, I think, as people, we have a complicated relationship with truth.

[9 : 57] We really want people to believe our words, but often we struggle to be trustworthy. What is it that makes us tell a lie? What is it that makes us shade the truth? What is it that leads us to make bold claims that we can't back up? All of us are different. And I think it's really important for all of us to know our own heart, to recognize where we are tempted to lie or to shade the truth.

And maybe for you, like for me, I think, that we want to protect our reputation. I don't want my failure to be seen, so I will try and hide the truth as much as possible.

Maybe it's we want to avoid taking responsibility. We don't like the consequences that might come. We don't want to be found out, so therefore we will not tell the truth.

Maybe it's because of insecurity that we shade the truth in such a way that it puts ourselves in the best light possible and puts other people in the worst light. Maybe it's because of fear.

If I tell someone the truth, if I tell someone the truth about myself, will this person show me grace or not? Is this going to mean the end of a relationship? Am I going to be exposed or rejected?

[11 : 29] There's lots of causes in our heart that can make us struggle with the truth. But Jesus says, speak the truth. Remember, your father sees you. And notice how he finishes in verse 37. All you need to say is simply yes and no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. When we lie, when we hold on to the truth lightly, when we only talk a good game but we've got no intention of following through, Jesus reminds us we're speaking the devil's native language. Who is the devil? He's the father of lies. He's the great deceiver. And at the same time, we stop speaking God's language, the language of truth. I read an article from a diplomat this week, which I found really

interesting.

Eric called Gabriel Ashinafi. Listen to him. After he talked about this sort of the decay of truth, he said this, when truth is subjective, society loses its ability to engage in constructive conversation. Citizens retreat into their own version of reality where they are unable to find common ground with others. Having truth matters and speaking the truth matters for community and for society. And Jesus' teaching reminds us that every promise that you and I give, every word that you and I speak, we do before our Father in heaven. And as much as we might struggle with the fear of others, will I lose reputation? Will I experience consequence? Again, we're invited to live with the fear of the Lord.

In that sense that we are conscious of His presence, of that desire we have above everything to love Him and to obey Him, and to bring that right down to the nitty-gritty of our words and our truth. So, that's the first principle that Jesus invites us to consider, speak the truth because our Father sees us. The second principle that we see here is, speak the truth and keep it simple and sincere. [13:49] I think Jesus puts His finger on a temptation that maybe we also experience. That temptation to pile up words upon words to make them sound more believable. Or perhaps we want to disguise the truth under this great cascade of words that pours from us. There are some places where we recognize that as people we have a great ability to sidestep or to disguise the truth. I think we can see it in the movement of our politicians.

Because they are experts, aren't they? You watch any interview with a politician, they're experts at sidestepping the question at hand. Even if, you know, even if the interview is saying, listen, I just need a simple yes or no answer. They can find a way with a whole barrage of words to get around giving a simple direct answer.

Sadly, that's not just restricted to politicians. In fact, it's probably something that we all learn as children. If we don't even need to be taught it, learning it maybe makes it sound like it's not something that we just have instinctively. You ask a child, did you draw on that wall?

No. While the crayon drops to the floor behind them. Did you hit your brother? That's a fairly simple yes or no. But he stole my toy. But he started it. Did you clean your room? You'll get an answer, but there's always essential follow-ups.

Not just, did you hide it under the bed, stuff it in the bottom of the cupboard. But we understand that from childhood, we struggle with simple, sincere truth. It's a habit that we find really hard to develop out of.

[15:57] And so Jesus takes us back to first words. All you need to say is simply yes or no.

If we care about truth, Jesus is saying, we need to learn to cut out the extras. We need to keep it simple. We need to practice truth unplugged.

Even as much as that may be uncomfortable for us. He gives us these basic rules for our words and for our intentions. Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. Say what you mean. Mean what you say. It's not complicated, but it's really challenging, isn't it? Here is Jesus. His kingdom is built on grace and truth. And he says to us, now that you've discovered God's grace and you've been brought in, I want you to live practicing truth.

And as we keep the truth simple and sincere, that yes or no, it shows that we value truth. We want to protect the truth. And it shows that we want to honor God our Father. We want to keep His command, do not lie. We don't want to see how close we can get to that. We want to see how much we can walk in integrity and in truthfulness. God speaks truth. He is our Father. We want to wear His family likeness.

[17:29] But as we have this commitment to simple, sincere truth, it also shows we honor other people. We want to be reliable. We want to have integrity. We want to be simple and sincere and transparent in our dealings. So again, it sounds simple. It's not complicated. There's nothing complicated here.

But I think the working out of it is really challenging. Because there are those situations where we want others to think well of us. And so we are tempted to tell the little white lie. It's no big deal. Perhaps we think nobody will ever find out.

I like what C.S. Lewis said. He said, a little lie is like a little pregnancy. It doesn't take long before everyone knows. And so we should practice integrity. But it's hard. There are times where we don't want to face an uncomfortable truth. And we know that telling our truth will land us into difficulty. So we might be deliberately vague. We might paint a picture where we're seen to be the hero rather

than guilty of wrongdoing. It is hard to be honest when we fear damage to our relationship. And so we are tempted to think, well, it's maybe better to cover up rather than risk a negative reaction. When Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no be no, he knows that as people we are prone to exaggeration. And so Jesus wants his followers simply to cut it out. To speak the truth simply and sincerely. And when we do, it's one way for us to show our love for God. And Jesus was asked, what's the greatest commandment? He went to Deuteronomy 6? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. God is the one true and living God. He speaks grace and truth. He is unique. He has created us. He has saved us in Jesus. He deserves our worship and our obedience, including our truth telling. Jesus said to his disciples really clearly, if you love me, you will obey my commands.

Those commands include, do not lie, but do tell the truth. And when we break that love command, it opens the door for breaking every other command. But if we want to keep the command to love God, that will influence our attitude towards truth. As we look to factor God into every area of our life, as we want to practice the fear of the Lord, as we want to show that he is Lord of all of our life, then that's going to have an influence on the words that we speak.

It's an invitation to us to let the word of the gospel shape our words, to recognize that we are loved, we are accepted, we are called into his kingdom, that that would influence how we speak, that we would show love for God. But also, as we commit to speaking the truth simply and sincerely, it shows a love for other people. Remember when Jesus is asked what the two great commandments, the first one, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, the other, love your neighbor as yourself. Do we recognize what a gift it is to one another, to the people in our lives, to our community, if we are committed to telling the truth?

[21 : 27] What a wonderful group of people to discover. Here is a group of people whose word is reliable.

When they say they will do something, they do it. Here's a group of people who speak with clarity and transparency so that we know where we stand with them. That's something really refreshing in a world full of half-truths where it's hard to figure out where is the truth to be found. We have the truth in God's word, and that shapes our attitude to truth-telling, and that is effective in building real community. The life of truth-telling that Jesus calls us to is such a gift to the people around us, to our friends, to our family, to our colleagues. It is a really great way to love our neighbor.

We don't want to be lied to. We don't want to have to figure out if a person's word is reliable or not. Therefore, we want to be honest with others and be really transparent.

So perhaps one of the responses that we have to the words of Jesus is that we would start this new week committing to speak the truth. Think about where you're going to find yourself this week, the people that you're going to mix with, and determine even when it's costly you're going to speak the truth. Start at home, your family with the people that you live with. Think about the place where you work or your school. Think about what's going to happen when you go to a community group, when the guys gather here on a Friday to share a meal.

As we commit to truth, we're committing to building trust together, and we're committing to bless others. One last principle to consider. Speak the truth and let Jesus help you. Because it's challenging to pursue honesty and truthfulness. So when we struggle with truth-telling, when we're tempted to shade the truth, when our fear and insecurity would lead us to speak with forked tongues, where do we find help? Where do we find the power to change and to grow?

[23 : 59] Well, Jesus invites us to look to Him, who is Jesus. Jesus is truly God. He is the one who said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the one who invites us to come to Him. He says, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. We're invited to come to Jesus and to recognize here is the truly righteous man of Psalm 15. Remember that description of the righteous person?

Here is the one who speaks with integrity. All his words and his ways are righteousness. And then there's that wonderful promise that this righteous man keeps his oath, keeps his promise, even when it hurts. Now think about that in relation to the mission of Jesus. Jesus is committed to God's mission of salvation. Jesus is committed to establishing a new covenant between God and His people. And for Him to keep that promise, it hurts. It involves betrayal and rejection and suffering and ultimately dying on the cross in the place of sinners like us. Taking the penalty for our lies, for our shade in the truth, for our breaking our promises in the truth. And for our sake of salvation, we're not going to be able to keep God's promise.

We're not going to be able to keep God's promise of salvation to us. That through Jesus' broken body, through His shed blood, there is forgiveness. There is restored life with God. There's the truth that sets us free.

And the truth of the gospel continues to set us free to pursue truth in our own lives. When I live knowing and living out the truth that in Jesus, I have God's approval, I have His love, then I'm going to find that there is freedom to be honest with my words, to be honest about my weakness, to be honest about our sin.

God knows the truth about me, and still He loves me, and He approves of me, and He accepts me. That truth frees us up to live out truth. When we believe and live knowing that Jesus paid for all my sins, all those little white lies that I justify, all those big lies that I am so ashamed of, He has paid the price in full. There is no condemnation. When He is my King of grace and truth, and He rules in my heart, what do we have? We have freedom from guilt.

[27 : 13] We have a new motivation and a new power to choose His way, the way of truth and love. When we hear the true words of the gospel spoken to us, I love you. I will never let you go. I will send my Spirit to be with you, and He will help you.

I will take you home to be with me. As we hear the gospel, as our words are shaped by the gospel word, we have that new power and that new desire to love and speak the truth.

So, for us to speak the truth simply and sincerely, knowing the Father sees us, to speak the truth unplugged, we need to come to Jesus. We need to hear the truth of His love.

And from that position, we go with Jesus to speak the truth to one another. Let's pray together.

Amen.