

Breaking Promises

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[0 : 00] Psalmist wrote, create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. It's a kind of sad habit of mine that I quite like watching stuff on Netflix and Amazon Prime and get involved with these long things that have various seasons.

And one of the ones that attracted my attention, partly because it had Hugh Laurie in it, who I think is one of our best British actors. It's called House. And it's the story of this brilliant diagnostic doctor, brilliant at diagnostic medicine.

He can find out what's wrong with people. Speaking personally, that's what I want from a doctor. You know, I don't want to make it up. He's excellent. But, unfortunately, he is addicted to prescription painkillers.

He is a very cantankerous human being, very difficult, very difficult to get on with, can't maintain a team, can't do any of that stuff. And one of his strap lines is, he repeats it all the time, he teaches it to all his, I don't know what they call him in America, but what we would call registrars.

He says this, remember, everyone lies. Everyone lies. And before you dismiss that as kind of the addicted comments of a somewhat cynical doctor, let's just think about that for a moment.

[1 : 41] In psychology today, I read that champion liars, that's a research category apparently, champion liars tell about seven lies per day.

That is one every, well, kind of three hours, I guess, of waking. No, it's more than that, isn't it? I need to read maths today. We read that most people in marriages tell lies to each other. We might judge them as harmless lies, like, you know, my wife says to me, are you listening to me?

Yes. Or somebody might say, does my bum look big in this? And well, betide the person who says, yes, it does. The weight of psychological evidence tells us something really scary.

And that is, people who lie in small things tend to tell lies in big things as well. We also know that extroverts incline to lie more, and people who are obsessed with what psychologists call personality management tell lies simply to bolster their image.

[3 : 04] I was in somebody's home the other day, and they were talking about their little girl. I don't know where the mother comes from, but she's, you know, sounds very Thames Valley.

And she said that her daughter had gone to school and told the teachers that her mother was Brazilian. It's kind of completely random lie. She never been to Brazil.

She's not Brazilian. It just kind of, you know, provokes and says, oh, your mom's from Brazil. Well, she's not. By the way of introduction, I also want to remind you that quite a lot of the way that our society works is built on trust.

Go and see your doctor. You have to trust what the doctor says to you. You step on an airplane. You hope that the guy who's going to fly you to wherever you're going, you're hoping it's not his first day at work.

Or as Brexit reminds us, if we can't trust our politicians, then we end up divided and mistrusting. Or, of course, closer to home.

[4 : 09] Relationships rely on trust. Business relationships rely on trust. And what I want to say to you about promises is that one thing all promises have in common is that they rely on a level of trust and they rely on a level of commitment.

The heart of our society, which hopefully is broadly civilized, is a government. They pass regulation and laws and society works where that bond of trust between government and people is that the people seek to commit to keep the law.

At least that's the idea. Mostly, even though we try and keep the law, we probably would admit at points we're not too good at it.

30 mile an hour limits. Somewhat challenging for many of us. 20 mile an hour limits. Impossible. Modern cars aren't geared to drive at that speed.

Psalms 51 introduces to a psalm written by King David. A man greatly revered in Jewish history. [5 : 29] But to understand this psalm, you have to look back in the Bible as to why David was going through such a terrible time at this moment in his life.

And if you turn to 2 Samuel, you don't have to do that, but you have to trust me for a moment to tell you what it's about. And I'm going to paraphrase this story, A, to make it shorter, and B, to get to the point.

David, one night, is having a quiet evening and he steps out on the roof of his condominium. And he looks across the street.

And across the street, there is an open window and the lights on. I don't think they did curtains in those days. And he sees this beautiful woman, whose name is Bathsheba, step into the light, remove her clothes, and start to wash.

And unlike the man of Christ's church, Clevedon, who would look away immediately, he stared.

[6 : 41] And lust was kindled in his heart. And he wanted that woman with a driving passion that meant that he became out of control. And so he committed adultery with her.

She was married to a man called Uriah. And then, even worse, David arranged that Uriah would be taken to the front of the battlefield and isolated so that he would inevitably be killed.

And he was killed. And I don't know how David dealt with his conscience. I don't know how you deal with your conscience. But David seemed to be doing okay until, unfortunately, God sent this man called Nathan, who was a prophet.

And Nathan got a really smart tactic here. He starts to tell this story. He says there was a wealthy man, had a load of sheep and camels and very wealthy.

And then there was this poor man who had a little lamb. And he said the poor man had brought this lamb up as if it were his own daughter. He'd hand-fed it, hand-raared it and everything.

[7 : 55] Came to a feast day. And the rich man, instead of taking one of his own sheep, one of his many sheep, took the lamb off the poor man and killed it.

And he and his friends ate it. And David's pumped up with indignation. He's like, I could get my hands on that guy. And Nathan says, you were the man.

And part of what I am to David, after that shocking revelation, is that he wrote Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. David was told by God in 2 Samuel that there would be consequences as a result of his behavior.

One of the lessons we learn from Psalm 51 is this. That privilege brings responsibility. Indeed, it's pretty easy to argue from Scripture that one of the central messages of the Old Testament prophets was that privilege implies responsibility.

[9 : 18] In old covenant terms, it would go like this. You are one of God's chosen people.

Therefore, you have to keep the law. That was the kind of theological slash psychological contract that God had with his people.

The one thing that is certain in that contract is God is faithful. That's been the thread that has run through this whole teaching series. We might be a bit iffy, but God is faithful.

Even David, in the depths of his guilt, seems to say it still hold on to that. Lord, have mercy on me, according to your unfailing love. This is not a fair-weather friend called God.

This is a God who loves us because essentially God is love. He can't not love you. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, we read Paul writing this.

He says to the Christians that, this is how we instructed you to live in order to please God. In New Testament terms, the way that psychological, theological contract works is that in return for being the adopted children of God, God places on us a responsibility to live in a different way.

[10 : 46] A way that will bring us the blessing that God wants for us. But the problem is, we let God down.

As Dr. House would say, everybody lies. You know that thing in the Bible, I think it's one of the most punishing little phrases in the Bible.

It's just before Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. You remember this lawyer comes to Jesus and says to him, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus quotes to him the Shema. You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And the lawyer, it says, and these are the words, right?

I want you to hear these words and ask yourself this question, how much do these words fit you? It said the lawyer, it said, he wishing to justify himself.

[11 : 50] Let me ask you a question. When you do, don't shout out the answer. When you do something wrong, is your first response to want to justify what you've done?

I have heard people defend preposterous things. I've talked to murderers in prison who justify what they did to their wives or to some innocent guy in the street.

He was looking at me funny, so I killed him. Some would say that's a little touchy. But bring it closer to home.

You're having words with the person you claim to love the most. And you say something you should never have said. What's your first response? I'm going to justify myself here.

I'm going to justify myself. What 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 teaches us is, firstly, if we're going to live in order to please God, then we need to be instructed in that.

[12 : 57] It doesn't come naturally to us. The life that God wants you to have is so difficult for us because he asks you to live in a way that's not necessarily natural to you.

That's why the whole discipleship thing is such a struggle. Our commitment, our promise, is to live as he would have us live.

It asks things of us that would not fit in with the way we naturally behave. In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, I mean, this is really close to home, forgive me, but it says, do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God.

You are not your own. You were bought at a price. What we read about in our newspapers every day is that we're not that good at temple maintenance. Many of us don't exercise.

Many of us eat too much. Many of us abuse alcohol. Many of us, the list goes on. We forget, do we not, that we were bought at a price.

[14 : 20] And that price is the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. You sit light to the psychological promise you made if you're a follower of Christ to live as He wants you to live.

You sacrifice two things. One blessing. And two, you sacrifice your own well-being because you start to feel guilty.

How many of us how many of us when we're in the kind of temptation zone think to ourselves, you know what, I need to be careful here because I've been bought at a price.

We're more likely to say to someone, wow, you know what, nobody will find out. It doesn't matter.

And she does. Second thing we learn from Psalm 51 is that all of us are temptable.

That part of our human nature is frail. I don't need to lecture you about that. I've got a classroom full of experts. Whatever the temptation might be, be it pornography, alcohol, food, jealousy, chocolate, whatever, there is always something that catches us out.

[15 : 50] And the devil knows exactly where your weak spot is. weakness. And he will maneuver any which way he can to exploit that weakness. And the worst thing that you can do is to start to think that when it comes to temptation, you are somehow bulletproof.

The way of Christian discipleship is littered with the corpses of men and women. Men and women who thought they could handle it.

And I remember once a man came to me when I was a vicar and he said to me, fairly young Christian, he said, I need to talk to you, Mike.

I said, okay. He said, I'm a commuter, I go train on the work every day. I sit next to the same woman every day. He said, most unusually for commuters, we kind of got talking a little bit and we've had a couple of lunches together.

And I'm starting to feel some unworthy feelings about her. What would your advice be? My advice was simple. Change trains.

[17 : 13] See, you need to know what your vulnerable area is when it comes to temptation and you need to keep away from it. David had certainly discovered that one of his weaknesses, actually I think generally you would say of David, he had relationship issues.

But one of his issues was sexual lust that could be kindled in his heart. And a lot of men are like that. We need to be aware of our weak area.

You know, if you've been struggling with alcohol, probably better stay away from off licenses and pubs, right? If your weakness is you could easily fall in love with another man or another woman, don't put yourself in that situation.

Immediately withdraw. The third thing we learned from this story is that many of us fail. I read in a book once that 85% of New Year's resolutions have gone by the board by the middle of February. 85%. I read that a third of the people, which was 4.2 million people this year, who decided they would go for dry January, a third of them gave up before the end of January.

[18 : 42] We fail. I go, come clean about this. You know, I have a streak in my nature, which is a bit, you know, I have to resist it.

You know, it says, do not step on the grass, right? There's a bit of me that has to step on the grass, right? When I was at university, it said, you know, the lawns are for the use of the dons altogether. I used to go on the, you know, people come to me and say, you were done. I didn't say yes. I think we're all a bit like that. You know, we're not all of us, but many of us kind of, you know, have this little bit of the devil in us or something that just can't resist.

But here's the thing about those things we get wrong. We break a promise. We seek God's forgiveness. And how many of us are like this, right? you have done something wrong that you've been doing wrong for quite a long time.

So you think, you know what, I'm going to sort this out now. So you go and you get on your knees or whatever you do and you say you're really sorry to God and you're like, wow, dealt with.

[20 : 06] And you do it again and you do it again and you get into this repeat cycle of breaking a promise, asking God's forgiveness, breaking a promise and asking God's forgiveness.

And you say, oh, that's great. You know, grace will cover the base. In a way you're right, but in a way you're wrong. Because if you keep behaving like this, it will poison your soul. You know, Paul had to deal with a situation in Rome where the Christian church there clearly got the word about grace, God's love shown to us even though we don't merit that love.

They got that message, so they're thinking, we can do what we like now. But Paul had to say to them, you know, shall we sin the more that grace may abound?

Romans chapter 6 in verse 1. He said, no, that's not the way it works. I mean, we can trust grace, but we can't keep behaving badly, going back to going, it will hurt your soul, believe me.

We learn also that God is a faithful God. The whole assumption of this psalm in David's mind is that though he has been unbelievably unfaithful in his shenanigans with Bathsheba, is that God is faithful.

[21 : 29] Indeed, the whole of the Bible reinforces this idea. And this, you know, I want to speak to one or two of you here today in particular.

And that's those of you who've been brought up to believe that God is faithful, but actually something's gone wrong in your life and you feel that God has badly let you down.

You know, I don't know if this is you, but again, all the research I've read about people in the twilight years of their life, people like me, is that many of them get to old age with a deep and uneradicable sense of guilt, sense of regret.

And if you're that person, you can stop being that person today, because God is faithful. But many of us know that in our heads, but then there's something called my life, my dead husband, my child, my hopeless marriage, my secret addiction.

The list goes on, and I'm actually left wondering whether God is trustable, because something's gone wrong. Well, you know this, you know, it's an easy thing to trot out, it's not what happens, but it's how you deal with it in life.

[23 : 04] God asks us to trust even though we don't feel like it. And also, scripture tells us that what we can't understand now, there will one day be a day when we can understand it.

But the deal breaker is we need to trust, even when there seems to be no good reason for trusting. In a way, that's what faith is.

God is indeed faithful. Life's adversity and our suffering can either make us stronger or make us bitter. And when you give most people that choice, they don't want to live a life of unrelenting bitterness.

Let's come again to the God who is faithful. Asking God's forgiveness is important for two reasons. I've heard people say this to me, if God knows everything, why do I have to confess my sin to him?

There's a kind of logic about that, isn't there? Here's the thing, there are two reasons why you need to confess your sin. One, it signals to God that you're serious about your wrongdoing and two, it opens the door for you to seek his help in overcoming the wrongdoing.

[24 : 24] If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

you hear the significance of that. God doesn't want to just forgive you, he wants to cleanse you of the temptation that's tripping you up.

And my final point is this, help is available. And it's called the Holy Spirit. John says when he comes he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

It says the Holy Spirit will convict us. But it says that the Holy Spirit will give us the inner strength to deal with temptation when it comes our way.

I prayed at the beginning of this message that God would send down his fire. And you need to know that when it comes to breaking promises, you're probably guilty.

[25 : 31] And the bottom line is you can seek God's forgiveness, but don't just seek his forgiveness. Seek his cleansing.

Is there anybody in the house who would love to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit? Would love to push to one side a habit that's been tripping them up for a very long time?

Is there anybody in the house who needs to know maybe for the first time in their heart, they get it in their head, but in their heart, that the spilled blood of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary will cover everything you have ever done.

And you can access God's forgiveness. See, if the answer to those questions is no, then your life will be robbed of hope and robbed of confidence.

You know, the Bible makes the assumption that, you know, the word we translate into priest in English is a word that really means elder.

[26 : 54] And one of the assumptions of the New Testament was, the people who lead the church will be older because they have wisdom. That's why when Paul wrote to Timothy, Timothy was clearly an exception because he was a young church leader.

Let me tell you this. Some of the most childish people I know are elderly. some of the most bitter people I know are elderly.

And friends, you know, I'm not going to say you're in the waiting room for heaven, but I am going to say you need to start to deal with this stuff now. I used to feel when I was in church ministry that the elderly people got a bit ignored only because they were faithful in their attendance, they were there every week.

So most clergy made the assumption they're all right. They're really not. Like the rest of us, they need heart help.

They need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit as we all do. That we may know the forgiveness of God in our hearts. Broken promises will become less and less a part of our lives.

[28 : 17] And we shall have sweet fellowship with God in the light. And that will have consequences in our lives that are positive.

Just as breaking promises has consequences in our life. Because it will hurt your soul. And I have to tell you that because your soul matters to me.

God's love and I want you to feel the freedom of the grace and the forgiveness and the power of God in your life.