Being People of Truth

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[0:00] I wonder if you've heard the joke about two men who one day found themselves walking through a graveyard.! And the first man away in the distance spots a gravestone, and it's got some engraving on it.

And he turns to his friend and he says, what does it say? So the second man runs all the way to the gravestone and slowly begins to shout it back to his friend.
Here's what it says. Here lies a politician and an honest man. The first man hears him, smirks to himself, laughs and replies, strange that, isn't it?
Why on earth would they bury two people there? Clearly a good enough joke that I feel I need to explain it. It's a joke about how you can't be a politician and an honest person.
But the thing is, if you search online, you will find those kind of jokes for, what did I write down? Lawyers. I'm happy to take that. He's an ex-lawyer.
[1:03] Car mechanics, social media influencers, estate agents, journals, and on and on it goes. There are people in life who we find difficult to take them at their word and find difficult to trust their word.

And I just want to add on the fact that for many of us that will be really painful. It's not a kind of joke that. It will be really, really painful. And hang on in there for the good news of this passage that Jesus is going to give us.
But we find it in life difficult to trust some people and take them at their words. A couple examples of that this week in the news, if you've followed it. It is like a political drama that you see on Netflix playing out down in Westminster right now, isn't it?
I have lost count of who's in, who's out, who's standing for running against Keir Starmer, who's kind of supporting him. Kind of lost track of the whole thing. It's interesting, isn't it? People in circles saying things.
People distrusting, trusting people's words. Playing out down south, isn't it, at the minute. It's also playing out if you're into football. I know it's a raw day to mention football. But the Premier League playoffs, if you've noticed it down south, they're heading towards their final.
[2:19] The semi-finals clouded in controversy. To get to the final, they call it the £100 million game to get promotion to the Premier League. Again, there was massive controversy this week because Southampton were accused of spying on their opponent, Middlesbrough.

A total breach of the fair play rules that they signed up to at the beginning of the season. And I loved it. And a bit of football banter, the Middlesbrough fans all turned up at the game with binoculars. It was quite funny. But we live in a world, don't we, where we used to talk about my word is my bond.
We used to talk about gentlemen's agreements. But nowadays, no one really talks like that. But friends in the U.S., the phrase that they always use is, now we live in a lawyer-up culture.
But that's the world out there. But this passage today is going to ask us to take a much closer look at home. And ask us whether people today would describe us as people of our word.
Are we trustworthy? It's been well documented, hasn't it, that people today, what do they value? They value keeping their options open until the last minute in case a better offer presents itself.
[3:31] Can I give you a little example of this? I was reading the latest book from Ramesh Ranganathan, you know, the Radio 2 DJ. He's one of my favorite comedians. And I've always kind of tracked his career because we're kind of, he's a few years older than me, but we're at the kind of same stage of life.

And I was reading over the Easter holidays his newest and very relatably funny book, which is all about his midlife crisis. And about how he's noticed these growing behavioral patterns in his life that

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he now perceives.
And here's what he wrote about plans. And I know the font is small, but I thought I'd give you the whole quote because I thought it was really funny. See if his honest humor, call it like it is, connects with you. He says this, I became convinced for a while that I had a condition that has been dubbed cancellation ecstasy.
I love cancelling. It's glorious. You've arranged to go out for dinner or a night at the pub. And as the time approaches, you start to dread getting ready and leaving the house. You start thinking it feels more hassle than it's worth.
And then you start to resent the fact that you're having to go out at all. A few hours before the event, you convince yourself that the right thing to do for your mental health is to not go out at all. And you cancel.
[4:40] Actually feeling noble because you are taking steps to protect yourself. Now, how relatable is that? I love what he called that particular chapter, just really simply flake.

But see, when you bring all that together, we are living what I read somebody described recently in the aftermath of the elections last week.
We are living today in a low trust culture. And so Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples about the shape of life in the kingdom of God, who he's calling us to be as his saved people, saved by grace.
These are so timely. And they will make them, if we take them to heart, they will make us so distinct. Really simply because he's encouraging his people to be people of their word.
And it comes in the context of Jesus' teaching about oaths. It's not language that we use much these days, but hopefully you can kind of connect with that word. And a bit like last week, before we read it together, here's the question.
[5:51] Why does Jesus care so much? So let's read it together while we, the words will go on the screen, but you follow along in your own Bible if you can.

This is Matthew 5, 33 to 37. We'll pick it up at verse 33. Jesus speaking to the crowd, to his disciples. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago.
Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. Verse 34. But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all.
Either by heaven, for it's God's throne. Or by the earth, for it is his footstool. Or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not swear by your heads, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.
All you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. And God will bless the reading of his word to us this morning.
[6:55] So we pick up at verse 33. Do you see it? You have heard it said. Now that's a phrase that Jesus has been using throughout this sermon. And it's indicating to us once again that he's challenging the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

Now what were they teaching? We'll see it there at verse 33. Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.
Now, strictly speaking, that is not a precise quotation of any one particular law of Moses. So you won't find that exact phrase in the Old Testament.
But what it is, is an accurate summary of several Old Testament commands. Ones where God's people were encouraged to make promises to God and follow through on and fulfill those promises. Really simply make a promise to God and keep it. Simple as that. Give me a couple examples on the screen. Here's one from Numbers 30. When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word, but must do everything he said.
[8:09] Do you see it? Or here's another one. You can scribble these down if you want. Deuteronomy 23. 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 concept at verse 33, their quotation, is certainly an accurate one.
But the Pharisees and teachers of the law, as they teach the people, and remember in their day, their role, they're doing more than teaching the people. They're also called to set the pace when it comes to holiness, godliness.
Just like they've done with divorce. Remember this last week. They're doing the same here. They're demonstrating the fact that they're sticklers for the letter of the law, but totally missing the heart of

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the law.
Now we thought last week, if you get back into what's going on in this sermon, remember we've thought about this every single week. The mistake is to think that this is a moral lecture from Jesus. It's not that at all.
[9:15] It is about what life inside his kingdom looks like. And we thought last week that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, if you remember this, they're presenting to the people a botched version of the original.

And Jesus has come to restore it to its beauty and its original intention and to display that to his disciples, not just in his teaching, but in his life.
And somebody insightfully asked our growth group this week, as we consider that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Somebody asked, why are they getting it so wrong?
That's a good question, isn't it? Why are they getting it so wrong? And I think the answer, if you remember back to the first week, first couple of weeks we spent in the sermon on the night, the answer is that they are trying to make it easier to obey.
They are trying to drop the bar so low that anybody can feel like they've got over it. Because who doesn't want to feel like we're all in God's good books? So when it comes to righteousness, what they're trying to do is achieve it on the cheap.
[10:25] When it comes to righteousness, they're trying to achieve it on the cheap. And so when it comes to oaths, in an attempt to make it easier to obey, got to notice what's going on here, what they're doing.

They are just shifting the emphasis. Hold with me, track with me. Take that phrase, fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. Now the emphasis is mine just for the purposes of this.
Take that phrase, fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. Now it doesn't require too much thinking to realize that the emphasis in that sentence, where is the really important thing? It's on the Lord, isn't it?
It's on the Lord. This is about who the Lord is. This is about who he is. This is about what he has done. This is about what he has said. And it's in light of his character that we'll come back to in about 10 minutes time.
It's in light of his character that we want to obey. So the stress is on the Lord. However, in their day, what they've done is they've just switched the emphasis.
[11:30] They've shifted the emphasis to the vow. And they've come up with this elaborate scale by which people can assess the seriousness of the vow that they have made.

And maybe to get your head around what I'm talking about, this is a bit like, if you remember back to the playground at school. Do you remember this? Unless your friend would promise to do something and you would take them at their word.
Or maybe you were that person, I don't know. Friend would promise something, you would take them at their word. You would act on what they said. You would come back to them and say, why didn't you do what you said?
And they would say, oh, sorry, I made that promise all the time having my fingers behind my back. So technically, it doesn't count. And that's kind of what they're doing when it comes to the vows that they are making.
And see, later on in Matthew's gospel, you kind of get a worked example of this. This is chapter 23. Jesus speaking. I'll go on the screen. He says, woe to you blind guides.
[12:35] And that's strong language, isn't it? You say, if anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, it's bound by the oath. You blind fools.

Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, if anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing. But anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.
You blind men. Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So can I give you the Shanks-inspired paraphrase of what's going on here, right?
They've created this bizarre distinction where somebody makes a promise saying, I swear by the temple, right? I swear by the temple. And when they don't follow through on that, they would say, ah, well, technically, technically, I only swore by the altar.
And so it doesn't count. And so they've developed this whole system whereby your promises only count if you make them in a certain way and you make them according to a certain formula.

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[13:42] And the three examples, I think, in the text, I think that's what Jesus is saying to them. Do you see them there? Heaven, earth, and Jerusalem. You can imagine that. I swear by heaven. I swear by earth.

I call upon Jerusalem as my witness. You kind of get that, right? And Jesus comes along and looks at this whole charade and says, what utter nonsense. And two reasons it's nonsense.
The first one is implied in the text. And it's what the very existence of the oath tells you. Now, last week, if you remember last week, if you were here, we thought about the fact that the certificate of divorce with that, Jesus was implying that it only exists because of the hardness of your heart.
This week, Jesus, I think, is implying with the oath. Do you know what? It only exists in the first place because of your untruthfulness.
I mean, if you're having to convince someone to trust you by appealing to an oath, essentially saying to them, I really, really, really, really mean it this time, then that doesn't reflect well on your character, does it?
[14:54] You're having to convince somebody, beg somebody to trust you. I mean, what kind of person has to twist someone's arm to get them to trust them? Answer, an untrustworthy one. So it's implied in the text.

Why do oaths exist in the first place? Think about it. But I think the second reason is, again, implied in the text. And it's this. Because commentators generally agree with this, that what had happened here is that they had developed this system, that if you use the Lord's name, then your vow is really serious.
But if you didn't use the Lord's name, it's not as serious. And Jesus is saying, do you see the futility of thinking that you can somehow keep God out of this by not using his name?
Do you see how that is utterly absurd? This is how I've been thinking about it this week. It's a bit like that constant theme in Lord of the Rings when Frodo, any time he puts on the ring, the all-seeing eye of Sauron kind of sees him and looks at him, and all of a sudden he's got him.
And if he takes off the ring, he's invisible again. It's that kind of thing that they're trying to do with the vows. We mention the Lord's name, all of a sudden he sees. But see, if we don't mention the Lord's name, he doesn't see.
[16:15] That's the mindset. Thinking if we just keep him out of it, if we just keep him out of it and try and get around the back door with our oaths, then we're doing okay.

Because we still kept our oath, because technically we swore over something else. So technically we're okay. Do you remember we said this last week, they are looking for loopholes? And just as an aside, that was the precise logic of the famous atheist philosopher A.C. Grayling.
He talked about how society's reliance on thousands of CCTV cameras in public places was proof of the fact that people today don't believe that a divine being is watching them.
So I've always found it interesting why he thought that that proved the unreliability of God. When I think actually all it does is just show the unreliability of the human heart.
But you can make your minds up on that one if you want. But Jesus is reminding his disciples here really simply that God sees it all. And it's a great time to remind ourselves, every time we come up against this stuff, remind ourselves who the Lord is.
[17:31] I'll give you two words. The Lord is the omnipresent one. So that word omni just means all present everywhere. He is the all everywhere one.

And he is the omniscient one, right? Omni, again, all science, knowledge. That's where we get science from if you're into that.
Omni, he is the all-knowing one. So he's the all-seeing one. He is the all-knowing one. He is the holy one. He is the one who's so far above the things of this earth. And they have reduced him to, he only sees when we kind of bring him into the equation.
And Jesus says, how wrong, how twisted. How twisted. How foolish. And I think what Jesus is getting at here is what the Puritans used to talk about using that Latin phrase, coram deo, meaning always in the presence of God.
Always in the presence of God. All of life, always in the presence of God. And that's what Jesus is encouraging in his disciples, I think here.
[18:42] Now, remember that shift in emphasis? The Pharisees seeking to make it easier to obey, dropping the bar. They're seeking to put the emphasis not on the Lord. They're seeking to place it on the vow.

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I think really simply, if you want to understand this, Jesus here is just seeking to shift the emphasis back. And so here's his simple conclusion and plea to his disciples, verse 37.
All you need to say, remember, in light of everything he's just said, in light of who the Lord is, all you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.
Now, what is he seeking to create in the hearts of his people? I take it really simply, truthful speech. People whose words can be trusted.
Now, listen, you might hear that and think to yourself, well, listen, I never come out with lines like, I swear on my auntie's dog's grave, right? Or as God is my witness.
[19:47] I never come out with lines like this in my life. But Jesus won't let us off the hook so easily. He loves us too much for that. Because so often we do this in subtle ways.

Can I ask you four questions that as this passage has had me in a headlock this week and wrestled with me, that I've freshly realized that I am so guilty of and sometimes I don't even notice it?
And try these on for signs and they all begin with over. See if they connect. Friends, are you guilty, first of all, of maybe over-promising? Right?
Saying that you'll make sure that something definitely happens and then being casual on making good on those words. Some of my biggest regrets in life and some of my biggest pains I've received in life are all to do with that.
Hurt people by the things that I promised would happen and never happened. Or was led up the garden path to think that something was going to happen and it never happened. Really hurtful. But Jesus is saying, are you prone to over-promising?
[20:54] Secondly, are you prone to over-committing? Saying you'll take something on, saying that you'll be at something and then realizing that you've written a check that you can't cash?

Just, oof, find this really hard. Third, these are really quick. Are you prone to over-egging? Exaggerating stories for effect?
Using superlatives? Replaying conversations in your mind where you're always the one who comes off 100% in the right? Maybe fourth, are you prone to over-speaking?
Pretending you have answers when really you have no answers? You know, our phones, I think this happens all the time in my life. My phone tricks me into thinking that I'm the one who's omniscient. All-knowing. So all I need to do is just go on Google and I can find out answers to things. And all of a sudden, I can be an expert in any kind of things. Horticulture, politics, anything. I can be an expert and give me five minutes and I can rustle up a conversation.
[21:58] That combined with social media and feeling the pressure to be an expert in everything, to give your hot take, to give your opinion and the speed of the news that comes at us these days in our 24-7 news channels that says you need to be informed on everything.

You know, friends, can I tell you the lecturers at uni that made the biggest impact on me were the ones who I could tell were the cleverest people in the room. I mean, their knowledge.
I cannot begin to even fathom the things that they know, right? But here's the thing. When they were quizzed on something, when we used to have a Q&A at the end of class, it's 10 minutes Q&A, anyone got any questions?
And they got asked a question that they didn't know. So instead of waffling an answer, they would just humbly say, do you know what? I don't know, but great question.
I want to find out. I think we feel the pressure, don't we, sometimes, of having to know everything. But friends, see when you bring those four things together, over-promising, over-committing, over-egging, over-speaking, I think here's what we need to see.
[23:15] Is that a great question to be asking with these four things? And there's lots more we could have said, right? But a great question to be asking is always, why do I do it? Why do I do it?

Whoa, whoa, whoa. What is the heart motivation in these things? Have you ever thought last week about so often the devil tempts us to think that red flags are actually bunting?
And friends, can I suggest that these things might just be warning lights that are going on in our hearts? Can I give you my honest answer why I so often do it? I so often do it because I think I want people to think better of me than I actually am.
And our words really are windows into our hearts. A great question to ask yourself with these things is what's going on in my heart.
Again, as my American friends used to say, you've got to learn in life to pop the hood. What's going on in the heart? And so why are we to be truthful people, right?

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[24:19] How are we going to change? Because I take it none of us are sitting here thinking, do you know what? I love lying. But it comes so naturally to us. I think this is why Jesus is speaking into this area. It's like we're born with the seeds of deceptiveness in our hearts, isn't it?

It's what happens in Genesis 3. And Jesus has come to woo us back to life in the light. How are we going to change? Well, I take it it's a bit like what environmentalists will tell you about water pollution.
It is in a way pretty futile to spend your time cleaning up the actual river. In actual fact, what you need to do is go way back to the source.
And I'm convinced this is what Jesus is doing in this sermon. We often get focused on the river. But he's saying he wants, if we're going to change and he longs to change us, he will take us right back to the source.
What's the problem with murder? It's the evil thoughts, angry thoughts in your heart. What's the problem with adultery? It's the lust that exists in your heart. So don't, this is bad, but this isn't where the problem is.
[25:28] The problem is here. And sometimes we need to go way further upstream. And I think this is what Jesus is doing here.

And here's somebody who puts it way better than I will. This is a man called David Gibson up in Aberdeen in his book called Radically Whole. And can I just recommend that you get it? It's on the book of James, but it is so applicable here.
Try this quote on for size. Never try to fix your words by mending your mouth. Instead, the heart needs to change. Since the tongue is the hinge on which the door of the heart turns, we need to open our hearts to God, first of all.
And then, when we open our mouths, things will be different. And the answer, I think here, that Jesus is wooing us towards is knowing who the Lord is.
That's what's upstream. Not our words, not our truthfulness. We don't start there. We start by getting back and knowing the Lord who loves us and has saved us.
[26:41] Remembering his character. Remembering the Lord, the one who is faithful. Remembering that the Lord is one who never changes his mind.

There is no shadow due to change with him. Remembering that the Lord is the one who always delivers on his words. He is the one who speaks truth.
He is the one who is outside of time. And on and on and on we could go. It's by remembering who the Lord is. Friends, when I use my words to improve what others think of me, it shows that I've forgotten that the most important and defining thing about me is what God says is true of me in the gospel.
When I live for the praise of others instead of his praise, that's exactly what it shows me in you. And remembering the Lord, remembering what is true of us of the gospel.
What is true? And so often what this gathering is, we gather every week as one body is all about remembering what the Lord has said is true.
[27:56] What is true of us in Christ, of our, and you might be here feeling like it is a mustard seed faith I have in Christ. Seems to me that the tenderest words of Jesus for people are those in the gospels for whom that is true.

If I can just touch the hem of his garment. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. It is those people. But what is true of us that God declares over us in Christ because of our faith in him?
The Christ who went to the cross, the Christ who came and lived, the Christ who is risen, and as we sang at the start, who has our names graven in his hand. What is true of us? We are a new creation.
The old is gone, the new has come. We are forgiven, we are chosen, we are loved, we are adopted, we are sealed with his spirit, and we have a glorious future ahead.
That's what's true of us, and the call here is to take that truth about who the Lord is and have that impact and change our words. And we're going to think more about this next week.
[29:05] that the Lord is transforming his people into those who increasingly reflect something of his character to the watching world.

And in this case, what is that truth? It is his truthfulness and faithfulness. Do you see how that changes any little lies, little exaggerations we are tempted to tell, ways that we're tempted to promise things, and all these things, we can glorify God in those smallest of moments.

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The call here is to make your words matter. And we can build our lives there on who the Lord is. You know, just as we close, I've got my grand's funeral on Wednesday next week.
You can pray for us with that funeral. She was 95 when she died. Suffered from vascular dementia the last season of her life. got a funeral Wednesday.
And my dad this week, or the tail end of last week, was cleaning out her flat, thinking what on earth are we going to do for the funeral? And as it turns out, a lot of people like her in that generation, she'd written the funeral plan before she died, but she didn't just write it a week or even a month before she died.
[30:25] She wrote this thing 12 years before she died. And she was still fit as a fiddle. And he sent us a screenshot of it, and she's written this, she was like, I would love to use this funeral director.

The funeral director is not going anymore, right? I would love to use this minister, my minister. I had to drag the guy who retired late 80s to come and do the funeral. It's fine, so we're having a joke about the things in this that have totally changed.
But then we start reading, I want these readings, things, and I want these hymns, and these to be themes that come out of my funeral, and all of a sudden you're laughing at the things that change, but the whole thing is built upon the things that don't change.
The whole thing, our whole life is built on the fact that the Lord is truthful, he's faithful, and we can stake everything. It doesn't matter how long in advance you want to plan the end, the Lord is saying the end is written, it's done, it's sealed, and you can live your life backwards.
So it doesn't matter how much of a running you have to the end, how many days, hours, weeks, months we have left on this planet, by God's grace, you can stake it all in the fact that I am truthful and not going to change.
[31:48] So do you see how that, knowing that, knowing who the Lord is, it impacts friends. Our words. It impacts our words. Here's the words of Isaac Watts, and I love this quote, and we'll end with this.

I believe the promises of God enough to venture an eternity on them. Let me pray. And so Father, we pray today for just a greater view of you.
thank you that you have not left yourself without witness. Thank you that we can look around, we can see, and we'll think a bit more about this next week, we can see your goodness in creation, we can see your power in creation, we can turn, though, to the pages of the Bible, we can see your plan, your purposes, your track record, and we can look at Christ and see perfectly who you are.
Father, thank you that you have not left yourself without witness. And we pray, Lord, that we would leave here today having increased in our knowledge of who you are, and may you in turn, continually, day by day, moment by moment, and word by word, turn us into a people who increasingly display your truthfulness to a watching world.
Father, we thank you for your love for us this morning, and I pray, Lord, for all of us, wherever this has landed, that they would be both conviction, and comfort. Lord, we leave here with an increased desire to live for you, and we pray all of these things in Christ's precious name.
[33:27] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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