

True Faithfulness

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- [0 : 0 0] is from Matthew chapter 5 and at verse 27. Matthew's Gospel chapter 5 and at verse 27. It's page 969 in the Church Bible. Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount. You've heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.
- And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It's better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.
- It's been said anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery.
- [1 : 2 8] And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you've heard that it was said to the people long ago, don't break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the oath that you've made.
- But I tell you, don't swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it's God's throne, or by the earth, for it's his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it's the city of the great king.
- And don't swear by your head, for you can't 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. Thanks be to God. Well, good morning.
- My name is Simon. I'm the trainee minister here. As James has helpfully teed up for us already, today's passage is in the Sermon on the Mount, and it's one of us that many may find quite hard to hear.
- [2 : 4 3] The passage will, however, be a challenge to all of our hearts. So in light of that, let's ask for the Lord's help as we dive in. Heavenly Father, thank you that you are always at work through your word.
- Lord Jesus, help us to hear you as disciples in need of the grace that you have bought for us. Holy Spirit, open our hearts to your word, and change us through what we hear to be more like the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray.
- Amen. Well, this morning we are continuing our series in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has been teaching the disciples what kingdom life will look like.
- He's taught them that though they are poor in spirit, thirsting for righteousness, they are also blessed and will inherit his kingdom with him. To be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus, will mean being distinct, being a light to the world, and displaying the glory of God to people who don't yet know him.
- As disciples, they were called to a righteousness that surpassed that of the religious leaders of Israel and the teachers of the law. And to show them how to live that way, Jesus has begun to correct the misunderstandings of the law being taught in his day.

[4 : 02] Jesus shows the disciples that following laws of our changing hearts simply doesn't work. And last time we looked at this Sermon on the Mount, we found Jesus saying that merely following the command not to murder by not committing the act never addresses the contempt and anger in our hearts from which it comes.

So to be a disciple means a radical heart change, and ultimately a righteousness that only Jesus himself will provide. So today as we look at this passage, we need to keep that in mind.

Jesus is dealing with three more instances of teaching on the law in his day and correcting them. Teaching on adultery, divorce, and oath-making. So as we dig into this, we will then find ourselves looking at what it means to be a disciple in the areas of purity, faithfulness, and integrity, and how we are called to live radically different to the culture around us in those areas.

So first then, radical purity. In my preparation for this sermon, I've been reading through a commentary written by the late John Stott, who was a wonderful theologian and preacher of a few generations ago.

And I think one quote from his book that I found really helpful as we dig into this point is this. John Stott said, Now the reason that I found that quote striking, that he was so sharp on sexual culture, was that that was written in 1978.

[5 : 45] And just think, in John Stott's day, he said that things were already bad, and think how much worse then, in our generation, the culture has become. I think that quote would have stayed true in every generation.

Our society becoming more and more sexualized over time, pornography more and more accessible. And we know that because it's the culture that surrounds us. It presses in on us from every side.

Sex is everywhere. It's used to advertise products. It's the subject of so much of the music that's on the radio. It's all over social media, and utterly pervasive to almost everything in 21st century life in the West.

We desperately need Jesus to teach us how to live well in a culture that's so saturated with and confused about sex.

So let's look at what Jesus has to say here. Look down to verses 27 to 30, where Jesus calls his disciples to radical purity, to honor God with their sexual desires.

[6 : 46] You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Like Jesus' previous statement on murder, it seems that Israel's religious teachers have minimized the law around sexual activity, just to the act of adultery itself.

It's become a kind of license for self-righteousness. If you haven't committed adultery, well then, good for you. Look how holy and good you are. But Jesus says that actually what's going on in the heart is no better.

Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Did we hear that correctly as we read it?

Has already committed adultery? Brothers and sisters, let me say, that immediately declares every one of us sitting here an adulterer. Is there any one of us that can claim that we have never looked at another person with lust in our minds?

[7 : 54] Now in our previous sermon on the passage before, Andy described anger and contempt as murder in a can. An action that might not be happening, but were to open that can up, that's exactly what would happen.

Similarly, I want to say that lust is adultery in a can. It's alarming, isn't it? This simply isn't how we think of ourselves. But Jesus tells us outright that is the state of our hearts.

So what are we to do with that? If you're feeling a bit raw from that assessment of your heart, then it's time to just go to the further sting of verses 29 and 30.

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Now Jesus is using the strongest possible terms, isn't he? This is how we must react to this, really, is just strongly. Jesus is using the language of a maimed body, and it's kind of harrowing.

[9 : 08] But on another level, it's very simple, isn't it? Better a costly cutting off now than eternal punishment. Notably, were you to read the rest of Matthew's gospel, all of the disciples make it to the end of the gospel with all of their limbs and facial features intact.

So clearly this isn't meant literally, but it certainly was meant seriously. Better to suffer cutting something off at great cost and with great pain than to face the eternal punishment of hell.

So how are we to follow this as disciples of Jesus? Well, I want us to take this challenge in one general and one specific way in which this applies.

So first, a general way for absolutely all of us sitting here. Are we taking radical action to put sin, and specifically here, sexual sin, to death? To honor sex as the good gift that God has made means keeping it exclusively and only within the bounds of marriage.

Anything else that might pull us away from that in any direction must be cut off. No matter what our relationship status, married or single, we're all called to radical purity.

[10 : 24] So what do you need to cut off for the sake of holiness? Let me say, pornography is so obviously wrong. The objectification of people and the cheapening of sex is devastating.

That must be cut off. But it's not the only thing that could cause a person issues, is it? If you sit here going, well, I don't watch porn, so I must be fine.

Well, time to think about where your heart's actually at. What causes you to stumble sexually? Some of the things that you could watch on TV or Netflix or YouTube aren't pornographic, but they certainly do cause your heart to lust.

If that's the case, cut them off. Stop watching. Better to be a person who just hasn't seen the latest TV show and to be out of step with your peers and to kind of get the kind of mild abuse for having not seen the TV show than to be a person who's repeatedly falling into sexual sin because of it.

There are so many versions of this. What we watch, what we look at with our eyes, where we go with our feet, what we do with our hands, so many versions of things that might cause us problems.

[11 : 37] It's going to vary person to person, obviously, but I think we need to think about our thought process. If we're honest with ourselves, has our thought process become, can I get away with this?

Rather than, does this fit with the radical purity I'm called to as a disciple? They're very different places to come from, aren't they? I can't stand here and lay down hard and fast rules for how we interact with our culture, but it is wise to say in our age, probably we're more likely to be unhelpfully permissive than unhelpfully careful.

The culture is a good thing. We must interact with it. That's great, but we must hold ourselves as well to a high account. Every individual's conscience must make decisions for them on this.

And given what Jesus is teaching here, if we don't, the consequences are dire. So what lengths are you going to, to kill the sin in your life, to radically uproot whatever is leading you into temptation?

If that's the general thing for all of us, let me give a more specific application directly then. Just look down at verse 28 again. Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

[13 : 01] Now while this passage does obviously address all of us in our sexual desire, it is addressed specifically to men. At a preaching meeting this week, we were discussing this passage, and some of the women on the staff team really helped us to understand this together.

Whilst this passage does speak to all of us, it has always been the case in all of history that lust, and in the next passage, divorce, will always disproportionately impact women more than men.

This is something that we know fine well from recent news, that women are vulnerable. So let me address specifically the men in the room, if you're sitting here. How you look at a woman absolutely matters.

It's not something you can be even a little bit lax about. Jesus is calling you to take serious responsibility, because in this fallen world, women are vulnerable and need to be protected from the sexual sin of men.

The predatory looks of men cause real harm and real fear, so be very careful with how you use your eyes. Be very careful with your actions, and be absolutely ready to cut off what is unhelpful and what causes harm.

[14 : 20] Now, it's said with real seriousness, but we say that with real love for the Lord who calls us to it, and that with real love for one another. The people in Jesus' kingdom are called to be radically different to the culture around us.

But the church must be a place that is safe, where sex is honored as a good gift, and that is ordinary. To be an ordinary Christian means to take sex seriously, and honor it as the good gift that it's given to be.

It means that St. Silas has to be different to the Glasgow Uni Bar and the clubs in town. This can't be a place of sexual confusion. In a culture so saturated by sex, well, that's going to be hard work.

This brings every single one of us to repentance, but thankfully, this is being spoken to disciples, to people already welcomed in the kingdom, which is a place of redemption for sexual sinners and adulterers.

And we can absolutely trust that in pursuit of that righteousness, Jesus will change our hearts. Now, if you're here and you're new, you might not know that over the last four to six months, we've had almost a dozen engagements in the church.

[15 : 39] The marriages are just kind of flooding in, since Silas, at the moment. So it's a wonderful time of celebration. If you've recently gotten engaged, congratulations again. It's been a joy to celebrate that with you.

I have the privilege of going to quite a lot of weddings, and it's something that I really enjoy. And this summer, I had the privilege of conducting a wedding for the first time ever. And when I was doing the preparation for conducting that wedding, it really struck me how wonderful the marriage service is and how beautiful the vows are that we actually say in that liturgy that we use.

So let me just quote this so we can remind ourselves what happens. The groom says to the bride, I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy law, in the presence of God, I make this vow.

Aren't those beautiful words? Significant lifetime promises of faithfulness in every situation that life could throw at you. They treat marriage as a gift from God that it's been made to be.

And it sets up a theme that runs through the whole Bible of faithfulness. Faithfulness to the idea of marriage and faithfulness within marriage and faithfulness to one another. So as disciples of Jesus' kingdom then, Jesus calls us to show radical faithfulness and to hold the gift of marriage carefully.

[17:07] That's our second point. Radical faithfulness. So verses 31 and 32, Jesus teaches on divorce. Now it's been clear in his teaching on adultery, and as an extension of that, making vows is going to be kind of the next bit we come to.

So somewhere in between teaching on adultery and teaching on making vows is this bit in the middle, teaching on divorce, something that is a kind of step between the two, an important issue, somewhere between our attitude towards sex and our attitude towards faithfulness and truth.

So let's have a look back down at verses 31 and 32. It has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery.

And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Now, we simply don't have time to go back to the roots of the Old Testament divorce laws and kind of pick those apart.

Let me say, if you're a reference taker and want this for your notes, what Jesus says there is based on Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 to 5. And if you were to go back and look that up, those were laws that were meant to stop women being treated as property, just being passed around from man to man.

[18:27] The law in Deuteronomy says that women must be honored, loved, and the marriages must be cared for. But the religious teachers in Jesus' day have taken one line from that entire law and basically said, as long as you write her a certificate, that'll do.

And the question of divorce was a hot topic in Jesus' day. Some rabbis had banned divorce outright in their synagogues, and some rabbis had said that you could divorce a woman for almost any circumstances.

I looked into this a little bit. Rabbi Hillel, who would have been around at that time, said that divorce was permissible if the wife burned the food or lost her good looks or someone more attractive came along.

It's not good, is it? It's hardly honoring marriage in any way. Again, the law has been minimized to something much smaller than it was meant to be, and in the process, women are being victimized.

Jesus' correction says that divorce is only for cases of sexual immorality, i.e. the physical act of adultery, because otherwise, the man makes the woman an adulterer by default and becomes an adulterer himself.

[19:39] Jesus is clear. Marriages cannot be ended on the mere whim of a man. Jesus calls his disciples to be people who honor the gift of marriage by showing radical faithfulness.

And we must understand this is not a mandate for divorce. Jesus doesn't say the second this happens, just divorce. This is permission. Jesus isn't commanding divorce in every single occasion of adultery, but permitting that.

If marriage is a valuable gift, to treat it right means to stay faithful even when that is immensely costly. Now, this isn't the Bible's only teaching on divorce, and there are situations where separation for a time or permanently is right.

But valuing marriage and faithfulness is how kingdom people are called to live. Now, I know there will be some people here for whom this feels very sharp, maybe children of divorced parents, parents of divorced children, or those who've been through divorce themselves.

And to you, I want to say, none of those situations have been without pain, I'm sure. But we know that Jesus takes that pain seriously because he is teaching people to value marriage and stay faithful within it.

[20 : 54] Another comfort is to know that we know a God who knows the pain of a marital struggle. Were you to go back to the prophet Hosea, you would find a whole book where God addresses his people as an adulterous wife who've wandered away from him again and again and again.

They're a divorce-worthy wife, Israel. And yet, the book of Hosea is a wonderful story about how God brings his people back to him, how he cleans Israel up and stays faithful to her forever.

So we know a God who understands real marital struggle and the pain of faithfulness. And so with that in our mind, we can hardly imagine that Jesus is encouraging divorce here.

But he is making the law clear. God made and loves marriage. He is a lover who calls us to love like him. Even as he shows love for his adulterous bride, he remains faithful forever.

So that call to faithfulness is then both faithfulness to the gift of marriage itself, to honor marriage for what it is, and also faithfulness to our marriages in the church and faithfulness to one another.

[22 : 11] That is to radically mark Jesus' followers. So this church, again, must be a place that is different to culture on this, where we honor and protect and sustain marriages, something that requires the effort of all of us, not just the married couples.

If you are single here, don't think you can switch off at this. It is your responsibility to help those who are married and help them sustain their marriages. To care for one another side by side and not to give up when marriage is hard requires the effort of a whole church family.

So just like the last section, we will find ourselves seriously in need of grace and repentance in meeting that challenge. But I want to just say more about that at the end. So let's move on.

Now, about one month ago, the 14th of September, there was a press release from CNBC News in America. And the press release said that the cryptocurrency producer Litecoin would be able to be used as payment in Walmart supermarkets online.

Sounds pretty mundane, doesn't it? The interesting thing about that, it would be the first cryptocurrency ever to be used at a supermarket online. The problem with that is that it simply wasn't true.

[23 : 24] The press release was found to have been faked. Neither Litecoin nor Walmart had ever made that partnership, and yet they'd both been quoted in this press release. Unsurprisingly, it was found to be fake news, and even less surprisingly, the price of Litecoin went significantly up, and someone made a lot of money.

Now, we live in an age of fake news where you go online and think, can I even trust the thing that I'm reading? Words have become cheap. Since the invention of the telegraph, words can be communicated almost instantly.

And since the invention of the internet, just about anything can be broadcast to the whole world in moments, without filter. In an era of fake news and corruption, integrity almost seems like an outdated idea.

And in our final section, Jesus addresses that exact idea, the idea of integrity and truth in our words. Jesus calls his disciples to be people of radical integrity, known for their truthfulness.

So that's our final point, radical integrity. If you look back down at verse 33, Jesus condenses multiple statements from the Old Testament law about making oaths or vows, which is not something the Lord directly condemned.

[24 : 44] In the teaching of the Pharisees, however, the reason for making that oath or vow is no longer being assessed. Merely, they were just saying, if you make a vow, you must keep it. But to make sense of those verses from verse 34 to 36, it's helpful to know that a Jewish tradition said that you could never swear by the name of God.

That is too holy, you can't even say his name. So swear by something near to him. Maybe swear by heaven or maybe in a lower sense earth or a lower sense Jerusalem or even a lower sense on your own head.

And this kind of system had arrived that bigger and smaller oaths and promises for the point that you were trying to make. The problem is, every single one of those has ended up devaluing truth.

When Jesus assesses this, if you look down at verse 36, 37, sorry, all you need to say is a simple yes or no.

Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Chillingly, anything beyond simple integrity and speech, says Jesus, are the words of the devil himself.

[25 : 57] The direct danger of the whole oath-making culture is that it devalued truth and in doing so was no representation of the God who made truth himself.

It took me a while to kind of get my head around this when I was putting the sermon together because we just don't have a culture of oath-making, do we? But one of the commentators, Helmut Thielica, said this, which I found really helpful.

He said, whenever I utter the formula, I swear by God, what I'm really saying is now I'm going to mark off an area of absolute truth and put walls around it to cut it off from the muddy floods of untruthfulness and irresponsibility that ordinarily overruns my speech.

In fact, I'm saying even more than this. I'm saying that people are expecting me to lie from the start and just because they are counting on my lying, I have to bring out the big guns of oaths and words of honor.

It's interesting, isn't it? I hadn't thought of it that way. If you're trying to prove that your words are true by declaring them, by swearing on something, you're basically saying the rest of the time you shouldn't trust me. So we may not have a culture of oath-making, but the question I want to ask is, do we have a culture of truth-telling as a church?

[27 : 16] When was the last time you said yes to something but in your mind really meant yes, unless I get a better offer, or yes, unless it ends up costing me something, then probably not?

When was the last time you signed up for a rota at work or at church and dropped out last minute because it was just inconvenient? When was the last time you exaggerated a story to make yourself look better or to be the hero?

When was the last time you said, I'll pray for you because it seemed like the right thing to say but you never really had any intention of following through? When was the last time you sent a text message, a Snapchat, or an email thinking, well, it doesn't really matter what I say?

Like the comment on adultery in verse 28, verse 37 applies to every one of us. Can any one of us say that we've lived with absolute integrity to our words and never lied?

Scarily, that means every single one of us has taken part in the devil's work of spreading lies everywhere. Isn't that painful? Every one of us has participated in this and Jesus is telling the disciples that is absolutely out of bounds for people who are meant to be marked by truth with absolute integrity.

[28 : 38] But then, think about it, what else could be required of people who say that they worship a God of absolute truth? I think one of the most serious implications of how we think about truth and integrity is that if we don't live with integrity to our words, why should anyone listen to what we say about Jesus?

To be people not marked by truth would make us incapable of representing Jesus out to the world. So everything from elaborate oath-making right through to a lack of integrity does the same thing.

It devalues truth and devalues integrity and makes us indistinguishable from the culture around us. So this church then, the place where kingdom people meet together must be a place where truth is spoken with love and integrity all the time.

A place where we mean the words that we say and treat them as valuable and respect the words that others say assuming that they are said with integrity. And wouldn't it be wonderful if this was a place where we all trusted each other when we speak?

When we never thought that someone was going to lie to us or abuse us with our words? How counter-cultural would it be to be a place where that was the case? And that is exactly what Jesus intends his kingdom to be.

[29 : 58] Let me say to all of these things, what is radical against our culture must be ordinary for the church. You're not called to be something here that is radical within the church.

This is ordinary Christianity. But against a culture that is so lost it looks so radical. And in that there is a real challenge. Can we be ordinary Christians who shine with the glory of the Lord because we are people marked by real purity, real faithfulness and real integrity?

But I imagine some of us come to the end of this passage just feeling a bit raw. Those words cut deep and show us our sexual sin, our lack of faithfulness, our lying words.

We're far from the people that we ought to be. We find ourselves hugely in need of repentance, desperate for mercy and grace. But if you find yourself being that person who is poor in spirit, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, mourning your own sinfulness, well then you're in the absolutely right place of Jesus.

These passages just push us back to how Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount. The poor, mourning, hungering for righteousness people are those who will be comforted, will be filled with righteousness and will inherit the kingdom.

[31 : 19] If you find yourself a failure by Jesus' standards here, then come to him for mercy and grace. The gospel is wonderful news for sinners.

It's great news for disciples, great news for this church and great news for this world. It's the gospel of a God who is always pure, always faithful and always true.

One with whom we are safe and one who is worthy of all of our worship. With that in our minds, let's take a moment maybe to bring our thoughts before the Lord, thinking about how we need to repent and say sorry to him and hold on to the wonderful truth that Jesus has died for this and we can find grace and mercy in him.

Let's pray. Gracious, loving, pure, faithful, true and holy God, we pray to you as people in need of your mercy and your grace.

We so often fall short of your command and fail to live lives worthy of you. We pray that you would forgive us our sins, our manners of the mercy and grace that we have received in Christ.

[32 : 42] By your spirit, remake us into people of purity, faithfulness, and truth who shine as a light for this world that all may come and hear your word and know your name.

Amen. Amen.