

The King's Speech: Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes'

Matthew 5:33-37

February 23, 2014

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[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5. Today we are continuing our series through The King's Speech – Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' sermon starts with the Beatitudes where He paints this three-part picture of what it means to be His follower: being salt and light in a world like ours means we continually find ourselves on our knees in need of grace, and then turning the grace we receive outward and often suffering for what we believe.

And then Jesus jumps into part one of His sermon – what it means for His followers to live under a fulfilled Law. Here Jesus gives us the good news that He has come to fulfill the Law not abolish it – and this is good news! This means two things: first, He obeyed the Law perfectly for us, doing everything it required in a way that we never could. So He earned the righteousness that He gives to those who follow Him – we stand before God faultless because Jesus clothes us with His righteousness. That's the first way Jesus fulfilled the Law.

But second, Jesus also fulfilled the Law by filling it up to what God originally intended – that means He showed us how God wants His people to live. Many people today, like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, think we are alright because we do good things and avoid sins like murder and adultery. But in the King's Speech Jesus tells us that God's heart behind those rules, even in Old Testament times, did not stop with simple rule observance, but with a heart full of worship and love. So Jesus reminded people that at the heart of the Law has always been the command to:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Luke 10:27)

Now up to this point Jesus hadn't brought anything new to the table. He had just done what the Law commanded and taught us what the Law required. And this is where we stopped last week, but it isn't the full picture because Jesus does add some new vocabulary to God's Law that brings out God's heart in a way that had never been seen before. And we get this in John 13 where Jesus says:

A new command I give you: Love one another. (Nothing new about that, but here it is) As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. (John 13:34-35)

With these words Jesus takes the "golden rule" to heights it had never even aspired to because Jesus loves us infinitely more than we love ourselves. He loved us so much that He gave up His divine rights and stooped from Heaven to

take on the very nature of a servant even dying a brutal death to set us free. And He did this while we were still sinners in rebellion against Him.¹

And Jesus says now this is the way My followers live. They have the same attitude that I have, and they prove they love God by loving their neighbours the way I love them.

And then Jesus gives us five examples of what this looks like.

First He says “yes murder is sin, but if you are going to love people like I love you that means even holding anger in your heart might as well be murder.” And “yes adultery is sin, but to love people like I love you means that even lusting after a person in your mind or getting wrapped up in divorce makes you guilty of adultery.”

And today Jesus says “Yes swearing oaths falsely is sin, but really any dishonesty within you is from the evil one, and makes you a liar.

So let’s unpack the text now starting in Matthew chapter 5 verse 33

[Read Matthew 5:33]

Each of Jesus’ five examples start with these same words “you have heard that it was said.”² And in each of these examples Jesus starts with something everyone would agree with.

Now I’m not sure about you, but at this point I can see everyone on the Mountain wanting to nod in agreement but feeling a little reservation after what Jesus has just said about murder and adultery. While Jesus started in a position of agreement in both those cases, by the end He had proved everyone was guilty.

And that is again what we are going to see here – to love our neighbours like Jesus loves us is something none of us do completely. We all fall short of the glory of God.

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Now before we get into this too deeply I have to tell you that Jesus’ words here in verses 33 to 37 have been the subject of much debate. And a lot of the debate has been aimed at explaining away what Jesus clearly says in order to make exceptions.

So let’s look at what Jesus says in verse 34 and following, and then I’ll unpack a bit of the controversy.

[Read Matthew 5:34-36]

¹ Paraphrased from Philippians 2:6-8 and Romans 5:8

² See Matt 5:21; 27; 33; 38; 43 (I believe 31 is a subsection of verse 27’s adultery theme)

What Jesus clearly says here is that people who follow Him are to *never* swear oaths.

We get similar words from Jesus' brother James. He writes:

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. (James 5:12)

So Jesus says “do not swear an oath at all” and James says “Above all... do not swear”. And there is really no other way to read this than exactly like it sounds, but in spite of the clarity this teaching has not been embraced with much excitement – here is why:

Swearing oaths has been a common practice for thousands of years. Long before Jesus came on the scene people would affirm their truthfulness by swearing that they would do or not do a particular action in the name of their god.

If you ever watch any TV shows depicting ancient cultures you will probably hear them saying things like, “By Oden” or “By Zeus”. And what this meant was that if they broke their word they were inviting their god to strike them dead.

And this was common practice in Jewish culture as well. In Deuteronomy Moses tells the people:

Fear the LORD your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you. (Deuteronomy 6:13-14)

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Now we don't swear all that often today, but if you can remember back to elementary school you may recall that depending on how truthful you wanted to appear you could say certain things... I remember playing around with sayings like “cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” And come to think of it I almost never said this unless I was lying. But that was part of the game right?

You see the whole problem with swearing is that it implies dishonesty at its core. There is no reason to swear if you always tell the truth.

Later in Matthew Jesus calls the Pharisees out for their hypocrisy in this matter saying:

“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? (Matthew 23:16-18)

The Pharisees were playing the game and they had found a “loop-hole” in the tradition of swearing oaths which allowed them to continue in their dishonesty while still maintaining that they were righteous.

Now elementary school was a long time ago for most of us but interestingly our legal system still naively follows this tradition in hopes of getting truthful testimony out of people today. But oath or not, the evidence is in that someone who is already guilty likely won't have any problem lying under oath.

Some of you remember the tobacco industry lawsuits that occurred in the 80's when dozens of tobacco CEO's and lawyers swore in court things like: “There is no evidence indicating that there is anything in tobacco or tobacco smoke to which individuals become addicted.”³

The world of course watched as it was proved that the industry had known about the addictive qualities of nicotine since the 50's, and this resulted in billions of dollars of lawsuits over the last thirty years.

So the idea that you could make someone tell the truth by having them make a particular sign and say some specific words is really naïve and actually finds its roots in pagan, religious superstitions. So why do we still do this?

Actually in the first 400 years after Jesus Christians chose to die rather than swear any oath at all. But then when the emperor Constantine rose to power, and Christianity became the state religion, thoughts changed on this topic as Christians began to enter prominent places in the political world.

You see swearing oaths and being sworn into positions of power had been part of the political world for centuries before Christ – it was part of the tradition. And as with all tradition people love to keep them the same. And so Constantine implanted the idea that swearing oaths was now ok for Christians because they were swearing truthfully to a Christian authority. And, with a few exceptions, this has been the practice for the last 1600 years.

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Now let me stop here for a second. At this point most of us should be sleeping because very little of this applies to us. Very few of us spend much time in court or have run for political office. And so very few of us have sworn a serious oath.

But, as we saw with murder and adultery, Jesus' words, which at first we could all agree with because they were directed at someone else, turned out to shine light on wickedness that dwells within our own hearts.

³ Evolution of the Tobacco Industry Positions on Addiction to Nicotine (pg 6) (http://www.who.int/tobacco/publications/evolution_tob_ind_pos_add_nicotine/en/) accessed Feb 20th, 2014.

And Jesus isn't speaking irrelevantly here either. He is speaking to us. And so if we get hung up on the language of swearing oaths which doesn't apply to us we will completely miss the point of what Jesus is saying, and that is that a Christian must not swear at all because they are to be completely honest never needing to back their words up. Jesus calls for His followers to be women and men of complete integrity, before God and before each other.

Look at verse 37

[Read Matthew 5:37]

If you say you are going to do something, then do it. If you say you aren't going to do something then don't do it. Be completely honest in your speech or show yourself a child of the devil. This is serious, but that's the easy part – now here's where this strikes homes: honesty goes well beyond speech to who we are when no one is looking.

...

Church is a funny place. The reality is the church is like an AA meeting where everyone who comes is an alcoholic, it's a hospital for sin-sick sinners who keep needing forgiveness till the day we die, but we act like it is a monastery for saints.

We gather together for worship or fellowship and we ask each other "How are you doing; how's the family; how was your week; how are things at work." And the response is "I'm fine, work is fine, the family's fine. Everything's fine."

When it comes to us everything is always just fine, right up until the day the divorce papers are filed. Everything's fine, even though your job has you so stressed out that you're about to lose it emotionally. Everything's fine, even though you worry your teenage son may be getting into drugs. Everything's fine, even though you're struggling with feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem.

And then we come to our prayer time and we pray for things God cares about. Uncle Fred is sick and my friend down the street lost her job. These are important things and we should pray about them, but we neglect to pray for the most important things, the things God cares most about – we are standing before the God of the universe and the reality is we know our own hearts are often far from Him. We are struggling with anger, we are struggling with lust, we are struggling with back biting words – we are sinners.

On top of this most of our city is going to hell and we don't know how to reach them, in fact we feel apathetic to reach them or perhaps afraid to reach them. Though the Spirit of the Living God lives within us we are timid. These are the things God cares most about. He sees right inside each of us and He cares where your soul is at today.

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The reason we put this show on for each other and talk this way and pray this way is that we fear that if we show people in church that we are broken sinners then we will be judged and rejected by everyone else who obviously has their lives together. And so we never risk bringing our sin into the open and as a result we never deal with it.

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So the question I want to turn our attention to for the rest of our time here this morning is “what is it that I am lying about?” “What is it that I’m lying about?” This is the dishonesty that is at the core of what Jesus is talking about here.

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Last week we looked a little bit at the story of King David who saw Bathsheba bathing and, instead of turning away in respect he lusted after her, and then used his power to sleep with her and then to cover this up her had her husband murdered in battle so that he could “lawfully” take her as his wife.

But the worst thing about this story was that King David, who was not only the political ruler but really he was the spiritual leader as well, carried on with his duties as though nothing had happened. He lived a lie.

He knew he was a sinner, but David never repented or confessed that he had done anything wrong. He kept going to the temple, he kept being involved with the sacrifices and he kept leading his country, all under the pretext that he was right with God.

And many of us are in the same place as well. There is sin in our lives that we know is there, but we haven’t repented of it and turned away from it and instead we just carry on as though we were right with God.

Imagine this was your living room. And in the center of your living room there was a large pile of horse manure. But instead of dealing with it you clean around it. You take care of some of the peripheral side issues but you never deal with the main thing.

And this is what Christians often do. We come to church every week, we sing some songs, listen to a sermon and put some money in the plate – we clean around the edges but at the centre of many of our lives is a big pile of fertilizer. We live a lie.⁴

And the worst part is that in doing this we find ourselves lying to the God who created us and can see right through us. Fortunately God still loves us and doesn’t want to leave us here.

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In Psalm 51 we get the words David wrote after Nathan the prophet came to him.

⁴ Illustration adapted from Francis Chan “Getting real: What’s in your closet?” (as seen on Youtube)

And you can turn to Psalm 51 if you have your Bibles.

You see while David was a huge sinner the thing that made him a man after God's own heart was that after he sinned, and sometimes it took him actually being caught, David would humble himself and repent. And that's what we see in Psalm 51.

And when David repents we see him do three things. First he professes his guilt, then he asks for forgiveness and then he leaves rejoicing with the weight of his sin lifted off of his shoulders. And the weight lifts because David is no longer living a lie.

So look with me at verses 1 through 4:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

David doesn't say my sin was someone else's problem. Bathsheba shouldn't have been bathing naked on her roof in the first place. Or at least she should have put up a curtain. No he says "blot out my transgressions, wash away my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.

And David prays this way because he knows he is guilty. His sin is always before him. Even when he was pretending everything was alright he knew he was a sinner. And he knows that ultimately all his sin is against God.

David bears God's name, he was the king God had appointed, and so to live as a sinner meant living in opposition to what God had called him to. And if you are a Christian you too bear God's name, He has written it on your heart, and so any sin you commit is primarily against Him. And that is why forgiveness must primarily be sought from God and that is where David goes.

Now notice that David doesn't pray forgive me because I've been good now for two weeks. Don't we often do this? We sin and then we feel too guilty even to pray and ask for forgiveness so we start doing good things for a few days until

we start to feel like God might have forgotten how bad we actually were. And then we come and repent.

I was a terrible older brother growing up and I often lied to get my younger sister in trouble, and my parents believed me. And that bothered me so years after I had left home I went and confessed to them that this is what I had done. And what do you think they did? Nothing. There was nothing they could do now. And besides I'm a pastor so everything worked out right?

But that kind of reasoning doesn't work with God because He's outside of time. He only forgets when He forgives. So David doesn't ask for forgiveness on the basis that his life is now good. Look at verse one. He says "Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love. Forgive me God, not because I am good, but because you are good.

...

David goes directly to God and admits his guilt. And then he asks forgiveness.

In verse 7 David prays:

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

wash me, and I will be whiter than snow....

Hide your face from my sins

and blot out all my iniquity.

Create in me a pure heart, O God,

and renew a steadfast spirit within me....

Restore to me the joy of your salvation

And grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Friends, do you long for that this morning? Do you feel the weight of living a double life; on one hand appearing like you have everything together to your family, to your friends to your brothers and sisters here, while on the other hand you know that your heart is far from God and the only answer is to be forgiven?

Do you long to let go of the lie you have been living and have God cleanse you with hyssop and wash you whiter than snow? Do you long for a pure heart and to have the joy of your salvation restored? Do you long to have your rebellious spirit traded for a willing one?

Do you long to be a person who says "yes, I follow Christ" and "no, I do not live controlled by the world" and stands true to this word by the strength of the blood of Jesus?

If yes then I urge you to follow David's steps to the foot of the cross because there is freedom in repentance. Psalm 51 ends with David praying in joy and confidence:

Open my lips, Lord,
 and my mouth will declare your praise.
 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
 you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
 a broken and contrite heart
 you, God, will not despise.

...

We are going to conclude our service a little differently today. Instead of singing another song and having a benediction I am going to play a song by video. And after the song plays the service will be over and you will be free to leave. If you are in a spot today where you aren't living a lie then I would encourage you to clear out and enjoy the afternoon. But after the video plays Alice is going to play a couple more songs.

And as these songs play I am going to stand just off the stage over there. And if you have been living a lie, if you have looked holy on the outside but your sin is ever before you and you know God knows where your heart is. If there is poop in your life that you have been cleaning around but today you want to take a shovel and clean house for real, then I invite you to come forward.

It will be scary to do because by coming forward you will be saying to everyone, I might look holy, but really I'm a sinner. But don't worry too much about what other people think because more importantly you will be saying this to God.

And David says "a broken and contrite heart you, God will not despise." And Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."⁵

The irony is that it isn't those who look like they have their lives together who get the kingdom; It's those who recognize they don't and who come before the cross with open hands to receive the grace Jesus has to offer.

The Apostle James also tells us "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."⁶

If you want to confess your sins you are welcome to do that to me and I would be happy to pray for you. Or you can just come to the front and stand or kneel before the cross. But whatever you do don't leave here living a lie. If you are going to follow Jesus let your "yes" be "yes."

⁵ Matthew 5:3

⁶ James 5:16