

“Honesty & The Good Life” Matthew 5:33-37 Shane Hatfield 5/15/22

Open your Bibles up to Matthew 5. We’re going to continue our study of the good life according to Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. This morning’s study is called ‘Honesty and the Good Life.’ There should be an outline in your handout as well as a contact sheet. If you want more information, you can fill that out and drop that in the baskets at the back or the front. There’s also a QR code you can scan and contact us if you want more information. If for some reason you contact us through that and we don’t contact you back, keep emailing us! Last week somebody told me that they had tried to email us and it hadn’t gotten through, so sorry if that’s been you. In your handout there are also other emails, my personal email is in there as well as Steve’s. So, if you want to get a hold of us that might be a better way to do it if for some reason we’re not getting those other emails. We do want to be a church that has a good, loving community. That’s why we have all those events we’re having, that’s why we have small groups and Bible studies and all these fun things. We want you to be a part of our community.

One of the main parts of our community is studying God’s word, so we’ve been studying the Sermon on the Mount all semester and as we have seen, Jesus is clarifying misinterpretations or misunderstandings about God’s teaching. We’ve been going through a section called the antithesis. So far, we’ve looked at three different areas that he’s clarified. We’ve looked at anger, lust, and divorce, those are three tough topics, and I thought, ‘Whew! I’ll be glad to get through those, we’ll get a break,’ and I got to the topic this week and it’s on oaths and vows and promising and I started drilling down, and it’s about truth and honesty and I was like, ‘Alright, so we’re in for another tough one here.’ But the reason why Jesus is going right to the heart is not because He’s bad, but because He’s so good and He knows we’ve got to get down to the truth of the matter if we really want to experience the good life with God that He wants for us.

So, this morning we’re going to look at honesty and the good life. It is essential to having a good relationship with God, and a good relationship with each other. So, let’s read Matthew 5:33-37. Hear the word of the Lord:

“³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

David tells us in Psalm 119 that the word of God is sweeter than the honey on a honeycomb. Let’s taste and see that the Lord is good.

This week I went to a retreat at Shangri La in Grove, Oklahoma. We’re a part of the presbyterian church and the presbyterian church is divided into regional churches called presbyteries and this weekend we had a presbytery meeting and along with that we had a retreat. As part of the retreat, we played golf at Shangri La because it has a wonderful, beautiful golf course, and we had a competition. We had what we call a scramble. We had ten pastors, and we were divided into teams of five. Everybody tees off, they all hit their shots, then you pick the best of those shots and you all hit from that spot. You hit again and you take the best shot and you hit from that spot and you keep repeating that until you get into the hole. So, we had a great competition. We were going into the last two holes and our team was leading by two strokes,

okay? So, we come to 17 and we all hit our drives in the fairway. We go down and we pick the best one of those drives, and so we're sitting in the middle of the fairway and we're about 215 yards from our shot to the green. But between us and the green, there's a low area with lots of flooding, and it was totally covered in water, so you had to fly the water to get it up on the green. So, you had to hit a really good shot. So, our first guy comes up and he hits one and he hits it into the trees by the green. So, it's dry but it's still not very good. The next four of us proceed to walk up there and hit our shots all in the water. So, we've got one shot in the trees by the green. Meanwhile, the other team is up on the green watching us hit, because they want to see what happens to us. So, they see that we're all in the water, but we've got one shot in the trees, and they're thinking, okay, they're going to bogey this. So, they leave! Thankfully, we have these things called mulligans, it's an extra shot. One of our buddies steps up there and he hits another shot. He hits it into the trees again! We've got one mulligan left. And in a total, if you've seen the movie 'Ten Cup,' in a total 'Ten Cup' moment, I look at my friend Jonathan and I say, 'Give me a ball.' He gives me the ball, I put it down, 'Whack!' I smoke it 215 yards into the center of the green. Everybody cheers, we all celebrate! It's like, 'Yes! Yes! We did it!' We get up there, we two putt, we make par, we go to the last hole. They've birdied the last hole. We par the last hole, so we win by one stroke. We get to the last hole after we par it, and they're like, 'Hey, how did you guys par 17? We saw you hit it into the water and the trees!' And I said, 'Well, after you guys left, we used our mulligans and I dropped another ball and hit it onto the green.' 'No, you didn't! You're lying!' 'Yeah, yeah, no I did. I actually hit the ball.' 'Oh, that's really convenient, you did that after we left, huh?' I'm like, 'Yeah! You left. If you had stayed you would have seen me drop the ball and hit the ball onto the green! I'm not lying!' They said, 'Oh okay, let me guess, this is what you did: the whole time you guys were hitting extra shots and if they were good you were calling it a mulligan and if they weren't good you weren't taking it.' We were like, 'No! We weren't cheating! We were playing straight up the entire time!' They just couldn't believe that I had actually hit that shot and we had actually won straight up.

Why do I tell you that? Because what they were questioning in that moment was our integrity, or our honesty. Integrity is the quality of being honest. It's the quality of living an undivided life, right? Someone who lacks integrity is someone who is dishonest or they're duplicitous. They act one way in one situation, and they act another way in another situation. Well, what we're going to see this morning is that Jesus teaches His disciples that the good life is a life of honesty and integrity. It's a life of living consistently in all situations, living the same way, living for truth. What I want you to see this morning is that through the gospel we can become people who love the truth and live for the truth. The good life is found in loving the truth and living for the truth, but that only comes through the gospel. We're going to look at three things this morning: the challenge of honesty, the importance of honesty, and the source of honesty. Kids, you can listen for another golf story later. Somehow this turned out to be the golf sermon, I don't know why. Maybe it's because the PGA is here next week and I'm thinking about golf.

Point number one, the challenge of honesty. In verse 33, Jesus addresses a popular teaching on honesty and integrity and oaths in His day. He says, "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'" Now, this is not a direct teaching from the Old Testament, but it's a summary that the Jews had developed on the Old Testament teaching on oaths and vows. We don't use oaths and vows anymore these days, we talk about promises and contracts and maybe even occasionally a covenant or something like that. Those would be the modern-day equivalents of

oaths and vows. But what the Old Testament emphasized was the importance of living honestly, speaking truthfully, and keeping your promises.

What the Pharisees did is they built an elaborate system of laws that made it easier to externally keep the laws about oaths and vows, but they missed the heart. For example, they said if you swore by Jerusalem then you didn't have to keep your promise. But if you swore toward Jerusalem, then you had to keep it. As if that made a difference. Another one of their laws was that if you swore in the name of the Lord then you had to keep your promise because you couldn't take the Lord's name in vain. But if you swore a promise but didn't use the name of the Lord, then you didn't have to keep it. So, what they were doing was that they were making a distinction between profaning the name of the Lord and misusing the name of the Lord. They were trying to say, well, it's a sin to profane the name of the Lord, but it's not a sin to misuse the name of the Lord. What are they doing? They are creating a system that encourages dishonesty and lacks integrity, while at the same time pretending to be religious, pretending to be holy, and pretending to love God and love His word.

So, what Jesus does is He challenges them to speak honestly. In verses 34-36 He says, "But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black." What is Jesus saying? Jesus is saying there is nothing you can swear by that God does not own. God owns the heavens. God owns earth. God owns every hair on your head. There is nothing you can swear by that He does not possess. Therefore, there is nothing you can swear by, by which you are not bound to keep it. Not only that, but all of these things sort of, what they were trying to do was they were trying to hide from God's presence. They were trying to say there was a way by which they could swear that God doesn't see their lies, and their dishonesty. But we know that God can see everything, everywhere. We know that God is omnipresent and that there's nowhere we can hide from the gaze of God. What Jesus is saying is you need to live at all times and in all ways as if God is with you and God is watching you. He tells them, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." He's challenging them to speak and act with such integrity that they don't need to swear by anything else, because people know that when they say, 'Yes,' it means yes! And when they say, 'No,' it means no! He's challenging them to love the truth and live for the truth.

Now, like the scribes and the Pharisees, we struggle with honesty and integrity. We struggle to keep our promises. We struggle to tell the truth. We struggle to speak without pretense, without exaggeration or hyperbole. We struggle not to shade the truth. But now, it's hard for us to admit that because we're good, red-blooded, honest Americans! We live in the Bible belt! Most of us are religious, so we don't come right out and lie, right? When we tell our spouse that we're going to be home at six o'clock, we mean we want to be home at six o'clock, but if we stay later, we'll make a little bit more money, and if we make a little bit more money, then our spouse is going to be happier and your boss is going to be happier. So, it's okay if I don't make it home until six thirty or seven! It's not a lie! We tell our parents, 'Yeah, we're going to go to so and so's house, and this is what we're going to do.' And you know, that's what we planned on doing but plans changed, and all my friends wanted to go do something else, and yeah, it's probably not the safest and best thing for me to do, but mom and dad will understand, right? They want me to have these friends! We tell our bosses that we're going to do a specific job, a specific task, when that day comes around, you know, my friends are going to the lake, it's going to be really fun and I don't really feel like doing that project, so I'll just call in sick.

Government officials have every intention of trying to pass laws that please their voters, but then when it comes down to pleasing their voters or pleasing their principles or whatever it is, maybe they just decide to vote for whatever is going to get them reelected instead of acting based on principle, or their promises. Journalists write half-truths for clicks. Social media influencers promote anything for money. In our own social media accounts, we don't exactly lie but we make our lives look a little bit better than what it actually is, maybe, just maybe. Jesus is challenging us on all of these areas and all these different ways, not to shade the truth, not to protect our approval or to control our lives, but to love the truth and to love honesty and to speak with integrity and to live with integrity. But that's challenging, isn't it?

Why is it challenging to live with integrity? It's challenging because honesty costs us something. Honesty is always going to cost you something. For you to come home on time to your spouse, it's going to cost you more money, and it might cost you your boss's approval. For you to uphold that promise you made to your boss, it might cost you time with your friends. It might cost you a fun time. For you to be honest on social media about what your life is really like, it might cost you clicks, it might cost you followers. For you to be honest with your parents and actually do what they ask you to do, it might cost you friends. It might cost you approval. For you to be honest about who you are, it might cost you glory. The truth is always going to cost you something.

I have two different friends who when they were in college, they told people that they were on their respective college golf teams, they weren't scholarship players they were walk-ons, but they were on the team. It was only years later that they both admitted that they were never on the team. They never played college golf. They were good high school golfers, but they never played college golf and lied to all their college friends. Now why would they do that? They wanted approval. They wanted glory. They wanted the fame that came with being a college athlete.

Let me ask you this, where are you tempted to lie or shade the truth or break your promise? More than likely, it's going to be an area where you either A give up approval or B give up control. At our core, true honesty is going to cost us either approval or control. So, Jesus challenges us to be honest, and He challenges us because it's important. Honesty really is important. There are several ways that it's important, and we have them listed up here, I'm going to go through these quickly. Without honesty, we lose our sense of identity. We don't know who we are! In a book called, "The Power of Promising," by Lewis Smedes wrote, "Some people ask who they are and expect their feelings to tell them, but feelings are flickering flames that fade after every fitful stimulus. Some people ask who they are, and they expect their achievements to tell them, but the things we accomplish always leave our core character unrevealed. Some people ask who they are and expect visions of their ideal self to tell them, but our visions can only tell us what we want to be, not who we are." Who are we? Smedes concludes that we are largely who we are by making and keeping wise promises. Making wise promises and keeping those promises is essential to having a stable identity as a person.

One of the challenging parts about being a pastor, it's a privilege, but it's also a challenge, is you get to walk with people when they've totally destroyed their lives, when they've made disastrous decision after disastrous decision after disastrous decision. One of the things they repeatedly say is, "I don't know who I am. How did I get here?" What's happened is they've lost their sense of identity. Without honesty, we lose our sense of identity, and without honesty, we can't develop community. Trust is the foundation of every relationship, and honesty leads to trust, and trust leads to relationships, and relationships lead to community!

You've got to think about trust how you think about money, about currency. When you say you're going to do something for someone, and you do it, you're developing trust. You're taking a coin and you're putting it in their trust account. When you speak truthful words to someone, you're taking a coin and you're putting it in the trust account that they have for you. You're making deposits. But when you lie, what do you do? You take a withdrawal. When you break a promise, what do you do? You take a withdrawal. If you lie enough, and you break your promises enough, and you take enough withdrawals, guess what? You go bankrupt. There's nothing left in the account. If you don't have trust, you don't have a relationship. Without honesty, we can't have relationships and we can't have community.

Without honesty, we don't have dignity. Honesty destroys dignity. I'm reading the Proverbs this month, it's fascinating. Throughout the Proverbs there are warnings about unjust scales, moving land markers, and lying lips. In modern day, we see that a lot, but unjust scales, moving land markers, what are the Proverbs teaching us? They're teaching us to deal honestly in our work, to work with honesty, to treat others with honesty and dignity, why? Because others are made in the image of God and when we cheat them in our work, we're robbing from them. We're stealing life from them. We're taking dignity from them. But not only are we doing that, we're losing our own dignity. Because we're made in the image of God and God is truthful and God is honest. So, as we lie and steal from others, we're actually losing our dignity! So, without honesty, we destroy dignity, identity, and community, but lastly, we lose reality.

People who habitually lie become lost in a world of their own making. Their reality becomes an alternative reality. What the Scriptures tell us is that someday we're going to come face to face with reality. In Matthew 12 Jesus says that someday everyone will give an account for every careless word that they have uttered. I can tell you as a pastor that is the most absolutely frightening verse I've ever read in my life! It's right up there with 'those who teach will be judged more strictly.' It's like oh I talk all the time, I teach all the time, and I'm going to be judged more strictly. And Jesus says I'm going to have to give an account for every word! What's going to happen when we come before the Lord is, we're going to come face to face with reality. Whether we have lived in reality now, or we live in reality later, eventually it's going to hit us right in the face. So, what Jesus calls us to do is He calls us to love the truth and live for the truth now because it's important for our identity, for our community, for our dignity, and for our view of reality. When we take that in, all of a sudden, we begin to feel the weight of the law that the Pharisees felt. If you have this law without the gospel, it will crush you and it will feel like you're going to die.

This week I wasn't feeling well, I was a little sick, and so, I had to stay home on Wednesday, and I did what everybody does when they stay home from work sick. I was actually sick though. My kids can attest to it because I was vomiting which I never do, I've only done that a few times in my entire marriage. But anyways, I digress, that's not the point. The point is I watched the documentary "Free Solo" which I told you about a few months ago, but I had never watched it, so I thought, 'I should watch this.' So, I sat down, and I watched it. It's about a rock climber named Alex Honnold who climbs El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. It's a 3,000-foot sheer rock face. He does it without a rope. He climbs 3,000 feet without a rope. Just let that sink in. And most of that, he's just climbing up a crack in the side of a mountain, okay? As you watch the documentary, they're trying to describe just how impossible this task is, and Alex says that literally every handhold, every foothold has got to be exactly perfect, and his friend says, 'Imagine that you are trying to give an Olympic level perfect performance, and if you fail, you

will die.' That's what he did. 3,000 feet of perfect handholds, perfect footholds, almost four hours of rock climbing, or death.

If you think about this commandment alone without the gospel, that's what it's going to feel like. Every wrong word, every half-truth, every broken promise, and you're going to fall to your death. What you're going to do if that's your view of this law, is you're going to do what the Pharisees did. You're going to go into one ditch and you're going to say, 'Well, Jesus doesn't mean this, He doesn't really mean that, and we're going to kind of hedge our bets here and lower the law and make it to where we can keep it because we don't want to die!' Or you're just going to go into the other ditch and you're just going to throw the whole thing out! 'Well, you know, that was just during Jesus' day and this is really just a law that we don't have to keep anymore and...' You're going to go into one of these two ditches: into legalism, or antinomianism. Because you know that you can't keep this. We all have this little Pharisee in our heart that says, 'You can't keep the law!' And the reality is that we can't, right?

So, the only way to become people of honesty and integrity that Jesus is talking about here is through the gospel. Yes, there are different degrees of honesty and integrity in life but the only way that we can have the kind of honesty and integrity that Jesus is talking about here that leads to life and community and dignity and reality, is through the gospel, and that's the last thing that I want you to see, the source of integrity.

Jesus hints at it here in verse 37, He says, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." So, if dishonesty comes from evil, then what does honesty come from? It comes from good. Jesus said, 'Nobody is good but God alone,' and God is love. And if God is loving, then He can't tell a lie. He's got to be truthful, right? Because relationships are built on love and truth. So, truth and honesty come from love. They come from God. When we see Jesus come, who was God in the flesh, we see Him live a life full of honesty and integrity, not from fear or anxiety of death, but from faith and love in His heavenly Father. We see Him speak the truth in love to Pharisees.

In John 3 He talks to Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Him in the night, which is Biblical language for the fact that he is hiding. He wants to wax theology with Jesus. 'You're a rabbi that has come from God, we can plainly see that.' And Jesus just totally calls him out with the truth, He says, 'You can't enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again.' See, He knew that the honest question of Nicodemus' heart was, 'How can I be in your kingdom? How can I experience the good life?' Nicodemus knew the way of the law. He knew that he couldn't keep it! Jesus says, 'The only way to the good life of the kingdom is to believe in me. To believe in me means to walk into the light, to be honest, to do what is true.' And as you come into the light in honesty and integrity and in truth, believing and trusting in Jesus, then you experience the good life of the kingdom, then you are born again. He offers that to the Pharisee.

Then I love in John 4, Jesus' truth is attractive to an outsider. I think we talked about her last week maybe, but Jesus talks to the woman at the well and He's talking to her about water, and He's talking to her about her relationships, and about the gospel, and He offers her the living water of the gospel, but she has to be honest about her sexual immorality. Then, what does she say after she has this interaction with Jesus, and she goes to tell all her friends about this rabbi? She says, 'Come meet a man who told me everything I did.' You see, Jesus saw the truth about her, and she knew it, and it was attractive to her. It attracted others. Jesus spoke the truth in love in a way that was attractive, and Jesus spoke the truth in a way that was costly. It cost Him His life.

In John 18, we see that Jesus comes before Pilate, and Pilate says, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' And Jesus says, 'You say that I am a King, for this purpose I was born. For this purpose, I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.' And Pilate says those famous words, 'What is truth?' And what he doesn't see is that he has truth right in front of him. Truth is a person. Truth is not some abstract thing out there that we're all searching for, it's not an impersonal truth, truth is a person that put on flesh, that came to live the life that we couldn't live, and die the death that we should have died so we could live in relationship with God. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.' On the cross, He paid for our dishonesty. He paid for our broken promises. He paid for our lack of integrity. Paul says that all the promises of God were yes and amen in Jesus. On the cross we see the great cost of our dishonesty. We see the great love of God, that God loved us so much that He gave His only Son for us. Our dishonesty was more sinful than we could ever imagine, but in Christ we are more accepted than we ever dared to hope. That's the truth that transforms us. So, because of that truth, we have a stable identity. We know that God doesn't love the ideal us, He loves the real us.

I don't have time to tell you the full story, but there was a pastor named Nate Larkin who was living a double life. On the one hand he was pretending to be this loving pastor and husband and father, on the other hand he was addicted to immorality, and eventually, he got caught. All the truth came out. He was stuck in a continual cycle, even in his recovery, he was stuck in a continual cycle of brokenness and sin and he never really got free, until he realized that the core problem that was driving him to all his addictions was, he had this ideal self of who Nate Larkin was, and he thought that ideal self, that was the self that God loved, that was the self that God died for. But it wasn't until he realized that God didn't love the ideal Nate Larkin, he loved the real Nate Larkin, and God died to save the real Nate Larkin, that truth is what set him free. The truth that will set you free, is the truth that God doesn't love the ideal you, He loves the real you, in all of your brokenness, in all of your weakness, in all of your sinfulness. Because of that truth we have a stable identity, and because of the truth of the gospel we can develop true community, because we can be honest.

I was pastoring a couple a few years ago, and one of the spouses was lying, and he was caught in a lie, and so, we sat down, and we talked about it and we began talking about his lies and I began to ask him, when did he start lying, and how did he start lying, and what did his lies look like? He began to tell me the story about how throughout his life he had told little lie, after little lie, after little lie, after little lie, and then all of a sudden, he realized that all of those little lies had turned into a great big lie. I looked at him, and I said, 'You know what your deepest problem is? You're a liar. And until you admit you're a liar, you can't be set free. When you bring your lies to the Lord and you've let Him forgive you and cleanse you, then you can be free. Then you can find hope. And then, you guys as a couple can have a true relationship.' They went through that process of forgiveness and reconciliation, and now their marriage is stronger than it ever was! Because they began living for the truth and loving the truth. In his book, the one I quoted earlier, Smedes goes on to say that when we keep our promises, we create a sanctuary of trust in a jungle of uncertainty. When you tell the truth and keep your promises, you're going to create a sanctuary of trust in a jungle of uncertainty for those in your family.

Lastly, because of the gospel, we can do work that gives dignity instead of taking it. One of my friends was working for a company that was doing work for another company and in the process of them doing this work, the main company realized that my friend's company was robbing them, was defrauding them, was stealing money from them, and so, they came in and

they did a huge investigation and they investigated everybody and all the processes and all the money and things. It turns out that my friend was the only person who was not cheating and stealing from this other company. So, the other company bought his company and they made him the CEO of that company because he was working with honesty and integrity. He wasn't robbing people and defrauding them, he was giving dignity.

Now, our honesty may not result in being named the CEO of a company, but Jesus gives us a much, much, much better promise. Jesus says, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' and 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.' That's our promise. That's our hope! That through the gospel we can see God and He sees us, and He knows us, and one day we'll inherit heaven! Don't you see how that frees you up? It doesn't matter if you don't have somebody's approval. It doesn't matter if you don't have control over your life. It doesn't matter if you're not rich and famous! What matters is that the Lord of heaven and earth loves you and knows you, and He has promised to be with you and to give you His kingdom. To the degree that we see that and believe it and experience it, then we will experience the good life on earth. Let's pray together.