

# The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”  
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”  
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

## **Tell The Truth**

**May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Matthew 5:33-37**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I would love for you to open it now to Matthew 5:33-37. As I mentioned last week, the Sermon on the Mount is not a sermon about how to get saved, it is a sermon about how saved people should live AS THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST in a broken and fallen world. It is aspirational – it is NORMATIVE. It is the standard that we are to acknowledge and pursue by the grace that God supplies.

Today in the paragraph that hopefully lies open before us now, Jesus is telling his disciples that they need to be known as the people who tell the truth.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

“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.’<sup>34</sup> But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,<sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.<sup>36</sup> And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.<sup>37</sup> Let what you

say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (Matthew 5:33–37 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Remember, this entire section of the Sermon on the Mount is about Jesus correcting some WRONG interpretations that were running around in the culture of the day with respect to what was involved in being the people of God in the world. Many of those interpretations went back to the teaching of the Pharisees and this was no different. The Pharisees in Jesus’ day had all kinds of elaborate rules in terms of which oaths were binding and which were not. So for example, they said that if you swear BY JERUSALEM then your oath isn’t binding, but if you swear TOWARD Jerusalem then it was binding. Similarly, if you swear by the temple then your oath is not binding, but if you swear by the GOLD of the temple, then it is binding. They invented a SYSTEM that they were the masters of so that they could APPEAR to be telling the truth when actually they were deceiving you and lying to your face.

And Jesus condemns and rejects that sort of nonsense out of hand. My people aren’t going to be doing that. My people are going to tell the truth.

Jesus gave this teaching again later in Matthew’s Gospel, this time however, addressing the scribes and Pharisees directly. We get a little extra content there – and we get a sense of how important this whole issue was to Jesus. So in Matthew 23:16-22 he says:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’<sup>17</sup> You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?<sup>18</sup> And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’<sup>19</sup> You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?<sup>20</sup> So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.<sup>21</sup> And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.<sup>22</sup> And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.” (Matthew 23:16–22 ESV)

So again – this is Jesus NOT ACCEPTING THE BAR that was commonly embraced within the culture. The scribes and Pharisees had invented a system that provided numerous LOOPHOLES and exceptions so that people could basically escape the requirement of the Bible that they be truthful.

“ENOUGH”, Jesus says! “You’ve poked so many holes in this that I reject your system entirely! My people will have nothing to do with it. If you are my disciple, then you aren’t going to swear by the temple, the gold of the temple, or anything else. You will just let your yes be yes and your no be no – and that’s that. I’m officially readjusting the BAR”, Jesus says. “I’m expecting more from you than this system devised by the scribes and Pharisees.”

Remember, for much of this sermon Jesus is RAISING THE BAR from where the scribes and Pharisees had placed it. He said in Matthew 5:20:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20 ESV)

Now remember, as we’ve said a few times now over the last few weeks, Jesus DOES EXPECT MORE from his disciples because he is going to GIVE MORE to his disciples. When you become a Christian you get a new heart, a healed conscience, you receive the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the benefit of Jesus’ ongoing prayers – so on the basis of all of that – YES! Jesus DOES raise the bar. A lot! He is going to demand more from you because he is going to give more to you – that’s the deal.

So it’s all of grace – but with the grace that he supplies, he is telling his disciples that they need to be RADICALLY committed to telling the truth. That’s the basic principle here, however there has been some controversy within the Christian community as to how we should APPLY this principle so perhaps it would be better to start with what this passage DOESN’T MEAN. It does not mean that you can’t take an oath in court.

**It Does Not Mean That You Can’t Take An Oath In Court**

Over the years of course, the Quakers, the Anabaptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses have taken this passage in exactly that way; D.A. Carson says helpfully here:

“Some people think this prohibits them from taking oaths in a courtroom, or from taking an oath of allegiance. Their desire to obey God's Word is admirable; but I submit they have really not understood it. As usual, Jesus is preaching in antithetical fashion; and it is important to discover just what he is saying before we take his statement with such insensitive absoluteness.”<sup>1</sup>

“Insensitive absoluteness” – that's a good phrase. As Carson points out, Jesus is teaching here in antithetical fashion – meaning he is CONTRASTING the way of the Kingdom with the accepted standards of the culture at the time. “You have heard it said, but I say to you...” That's antithetical teaching. So Jesus is not saying that all oaths are bad – he is saying that the whole system of oaths as conceived by the scribes and Pharisees and as practiced and legitimated in that culture IS BAD.

Now, how do we know we're right about that? Well, for one thing, the Apostle Paul put himself under oath in Romans 1:9 and 2 Corinthians 1:23 when matters of truth were at stake and then, most compellingly of all, Jesus testified under oath at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 26:63-64 says:

Then the high priest said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

<sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:63–64 NRSV)

So if Jesus testified under oath in Matthew 26, obviously what he says here in Matthew 5 does not mean that his disciples can't testify under oath. Rather what he is saying here has to do with their personal conduct AS BELIEVERS.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 47.

That's so important for us to understand. Jesus is not giving instructions to the government here, he is giving instructions to his individual followers. Martin Luther points that out in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, he says:

“Christ does not wish here to interfere with the secular authority and ordinance, nor to detract at all from the powers that be; but he is preaching here only for the individual Christians, how they are to conduct themselves in their ordinary life.”<sup>2</sup>

So followers of Jesus IN THEIR ORDINARY LIVES are not to say: “I swear by heaven that I will do such and such” or “I swear by the Virgin Mary that I never did such and such” or “I swear on the grave of my mother that I never said such and such”. Followers of Jesus don't do that, Jesus says, they just tell the truth. The whole truth and nothing but the truth – EVERY TIME.

But if the government wants to invoke an oath in court – knowing that many regular people need to be frightened into telling the truth – then fine, obey the government on that – but in your ordinary life – just tell the truth. Don't look for the loophole. Don't cross your fingers behind your back. Just tell the truth! I want my followers to be known as people who tell the truth in every situation.

That's the essence of the passage – now what does that look like for people like us living in the world that we find ourselves in today? For followers of Jesus in the first century that meant NOT engaging in the elaborate oath system designed and perpetuated by the scribes and Pharisees, but that system is largely a thing of the past – so what would this look like for the followers of Jesus Christ living in this culture TODAY?

That's what I'm asking.

I want to suggest to you that it means at least the following three things. First of all, the followers of Jesus should be known as people who tell the truth even when the truth is embarrassing.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary On The Sermon On The Mount* in Lexham Classics, translated by Charles A. Hay (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2017), 118.

## **The Followers Of Jesus Should Be Known As People Who Tell The Truth...**

### **1. Even when it's embarrassing**

That's one of the things we notice when we read the Bible, isn't it? The Bible tells the truth, even when it's embarrassing. The Bible tells the story of David and Bathsheba – don't you think that's amazing? If the Bible had a PR department there is no way that story makes the final cut! David is arguably the most important character in the Old Testament! He is the clearest anticipation of Jesus in the Old Testament! He establishes the pattern for Kingship and Leadership in the Old Testament! HE IS A MAXIMALLY IMPORTANT CHARACTER - so why in the world would you preserve the story of his greatest sin and most spectacular failure?

And the answer of course is, because it's true. And God's people need to know the truth, and God's people need to tell the truth, even when it's embarrassing.

Hiding the truth – covering up the truth – can never be a strategy for the people of God.

Many of you are probably aware of the independent report released this past week detailing the horrific levels of sexual abuse that were poorly handled and improperly reported by the Southern Baptist Convention. A couple things need to be said about that. First of all – we need to express sympathy for the many victims who were abused by people in leadership and who were not believed when they reported what had happened to them. All of that is out in the open now and it does not make for easy reading. Horrible things were done to vulnerable people and the fact that those things were done by leaders claiming to represent Jesus makes it a million times worse. This is soul crushing stuff, so our deepest sympathies and our most sincere condolences must go out to all the individuals and families that were affected by this tragedy. We need to weep with those who weep, first and foremost.

And then secondly, we need to mourn and lament the dishonour that is being heaped upon the name of Jesus as a result of these events. I kid you not my friends, the fallout from this will be

significantly worse than the fallout from the Televangelist Scandal back in the 1980's. This is, as Russel Moore put it: "The Southern Baptist Apocalypse"<sup>3</sup>. There will be no coming back from this. This was no fringe group. This was the largest evangelical denomination in America and I tell you this, evangelicalism will never be the same again in this culture. You will be answering questions about this here – even in Canada – even though we have no formal relationship with the SBC – you will be dealing with the fallout from this SCANDAL for the rest of your lives, brothers and sisters. The Apostle Paul said to the corrupt Jewish leaders of his day:

“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:24 ESV)

Well so it is again today. A select group of people – bearing our name and claiming to hold the same faith that we hold - has done terrible, despicable things that have now been associated with the name of Jesus Christ to our everlasting shame.

We need to be mourning that today!

And yet – if there is one positive thing that can be said about all of this, it is that the Southern Baptist Convention MESSENGERS FORCED their denomination to TELL THE TRUTH – PUBLICLY - knowing that it would embarrass them, knowing that it would DESTROY them, knowing that they would now be explaining this DEBACLE to their friends, neighbours and loved ones for YEARS and even DECADES to come.

Why in the world would they do that?

Because Christians tell the truth – even when it's embarrassing. The truth is always the best policy! This thing happened – and therefore, this story needs to be told. For the sake of the victims, for the sake of all those who were not believed when they came forward, and for the sake of the many who will come behind. That's what the bible says! In 1 Timothy 5 the Apostle says:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/southern-baptist-abuse-apocalypse-russell-moore.html>

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.<sup>20</sup> As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. (1 Timothy 5:19–20 ESV)

Do you see that? Paul says, “We’re not going to deal in casual slander, ok, but if there is credible evidence of misconduct then we are going to rebuke those leaders PUBLICLY. Not behind closed doors. We’re not going to hush things up for the sake of our reputation. No! We are going to bring it out and deal with it transparently in the LIGHT! No matter what it exposes – no matter who it brings down – so that the rest may stand in fear.”

Are you seeing that?

That’s what it takes to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation! You’ve got to live your life in the LIGHT! No matter what it reveals and no matter what it exposes.

The followers of Jesus have to be TRUTH PEOPLE, even when the truth is embarrassing and even when it is PERSONALLY disadvantageous.

## **2. Even when it’s personally disadvantageous**

This is a slightly different thing than what we were just talking about. It is one thing to tell a truth that makes US look bad, it is another thing to tell a truth that makes YOU look bad or that results in personal consequences.

King David, who as we said, learned a few things about the necessity of telling even the hardest truths, wrote in Psalm 15:

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

<sup>2</sup> He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;

<sup>3</sup> who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

<sup>4</sup> in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; **who swears to his own hurt and does not change** (Psalm 15:1–4 ESV)



I like that phrase “who swears to his own hurt”. To “swear to your own hurt” means telling the truth even when it costs you! It means telling the truth even when doing so will INCREASE the punishment or the consequence that you experience – but that’s what the Bible requires of anyone would be closely associated with God, Old Testament and New.

When I was in grade 10 a buddy and I thought we had figured out a fool proof way to skip school. We were rural kids so we rode the bus to school – which meant that our moms would know whether or not we got on the bus, but they wouldn’t be there to see what we did when we got off the bus. This was before that automated phone call that you get now whenever your kid is skipping school – they probably invented that because of us because we figured out a way to beat the system! We rode the bus to Aurora High School, just like we did every day, but on THIS DAY, we executed THE PLAN. We got off the bus and instead of going to Home Room, we walked straight down to McDonalds and we bought as many Big Macs as we could afford and we spent the whole day eating Big Macs and smoking cigars and playing video games at the convenience store across the road.

That was our great plan!

Now, I’m not advocating for any of that, ok, I’m just telling the truth.

Anyway, after our day of rebellion and nonsense, we walked back to the school and got back on the bus and went home – feeling pretty proud of ourselves for having DEvised an absolutely fool proof plan.

When I walked into the house my mom was standing there and she asked me: “How was your day at school?”

I said: “It was actually really good! I learned. I grew. I made progress against my life goals. It was a really great day, thanks for asking.”

“That’s funny”, she said, “because you had a dentist appointment today at 2 o’clock and when I went to the school to pick you up, the office couldn’t find you because they said, you never came to school. So how about you tell me again, son, how was your day at school?”

Ha!

My mom was a Ninja!

I tried to sin but her and Jesus had some kind of thing worked out and all my best efforts went exactly nowhere – thanks be to God!

But anyway, that’s not even the point of the story, the point is, the jig was up. The school was on to us because of my ridiculous dentist appointment, so now we were facing the possibility of suspension. My friend got his mom to write him a note saying that he had been absent with her permission. I asked my mom if she would write me a note but that didn’t go very well.

“But mom! I could get suspended if you don’t write me a note! If I get suspended, it will go on my permanent record!”, I argued.

“Well you should have thought about that before you spent the day smoking cigars and eating Big Macs at McDonalds”, she replied.

So the next day, she marched me into the principal’s office and she sat there in the waiting area listening in on my confession through the crack in the door. I had been directed to confess my sins and to cast myself upon the mercy of the court. Which I did. “I am a sinner and I ate Big Macs and smoked cigars at McDonalds instead of going to class and I gladly and humbly accept whatever punishment you see fit to apply.”

The principal looked at me and he looked at the angry face of my mother through the crack in the door and he figured that there was nothing he could do to me that would compare to what I was likely already going through, so he let me off with a warning – BUT – I learned an important lesson that day. If you're going to tell people you are a Christian, as I had done, then you have to be known as a person of truth. You have to tell the truth in every situation – even at the cost of your own hurt.

Followers of Jesus tell the truth when it is embarrassing, they tell the truth when it is costly, and then lastly today, the followers of Jesus tell the truth EVEN when no one in the world wants to hear it.

### **3. Even when no one wants to hear it**

That was the job given to Isaiah the prophet in the Old Testament, do you remember that? “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord” – and he was high and lifted up and his train filled the temple. The angels cried holy, the angels cried holy, the angels cried holy is the Lord?

Anyway, we love the start of that story, but have you ever read the whole thing? Isaiah sees the Lord, he says woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, an angel touches his lips with a coal and then God says: Whom shall I send, and Isaiah says:

“Here I am! Send me.” (Isaiah 6:8 ESV)

Right! But have you ever read his commission? His commission is the most depressing commission in the entire Bible. God says:

“Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”

<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

<sup>11</sup> Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste (Isaiah 6:9–11 ESV)

So God says, go and preach to a bunch of people who are too far gone to pay any attention at all to what you are saying. Preach justice and mercy. Call on them to repent and return to me. But understand this – no one will listen. No one will care. No one will come.

So of course Isaiah says, “how long will that be? Like, for a week? A month? A year?”

And God says: “To the end. You are preaching past the point of no return. You are preaching at a time when people are hard and uncaring so they will keep on sinning and rebelling right up until the time of judgment, destruction and exile that I have ordained for them.”

That was the commission given to Isaiah! Tell the truth in a season when absolutely no one wants to hear it!

And so he did! He spoke truth to power! He told the truth about sin and holiness and judgment – at a time when no one was listening – and as the story goes, he paid the ultimate price for so doing. Jewish tradition says that Isaiah was **SAWN** in two by the wicked king Manasseh – which by the way is the story we believe lies behind Hebrews 11:36-37 in the Faith Hall of Fame – do you remember that? The Apostle says:

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup> They were stoned, **they were sawn in two**, they were killed with the sword. (Hebrews 11:36–37 ESV)

That’s what happens to people who tell the truth in a time when no one wants to hear it!

Do you have that kind of courage church? You may need it in the years and decades that lie ahead – because Jesus’ people tell the truth! They tell the truth when it is terribly embarrassing. They

tell the truth when it is personally painful and they tell the truth even when no one else in the world wants to hear it.

No matter the circumstances, no matter the implications, no matter the cost.

Oh God help!

Let's pray together.