

Telling the Truth

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg's sermon emphasizes the critical importance of truthfulness and integrity in the lives of Christians, urging them to be straightforward in their speech and commitments.

Duration: 41:12

Scripture: Matthew 5:33, Matthew 6:33, James 1:2-4, James 1:19, James 4:7, James 4:10, James 5:12

Topics: "Truth"

Description

In this sermon, Alistair Begg addresses the issue of dishonesty and lying in our culture. He emphasizes that as Christians, we have a unique opportunity to stand out by being people of integrity and truth. Begg highlights the prevalence of lies in our society and the importance of facing the reality of God's law. He encourages listeners to come to Jesus, who is gentle and truthful, and to seek forgiveness and freedom from the need to lie. The sermon concludes with a reminder of the consequences of dishonesty and the call to say no to duplicity and yes to integrity.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. Father, we thank you for the words of the song, which we want to be the prayer of our hearts, that you will open to us the bread of life, that we might meet with Christ, who is the very word of truth, and that our lives may be changed as a result of our encounter with you by the Holy Spirit, through your word, the Bible. And we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5 and verse 33. Jesus is addressing the people that he has called to him in what we refer to routinely as the Sermon on the Mount.

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord. But I tell you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

Simply let your yes be yes, and your no, no. Everything beyond this comes from the evil one. And then to James, and to chapter 5, and to verse 12, which is our text for this morning.

James 5, verse 12. Above all, my brothers, or my brothers and sisters, do not swear, not by heaven, or by earth, or by anything else. Let your yes be yes, and your no, no, or you will be condemned.

James has had a tremendous amount to say concerning the tongue in the course of these five short chapters. In fact, there is more emphasis on this than on, I think, any other subject that he has given time to. He began the letter, as some of us will recall, when we began studying it about a year ago from now, by emphasizing the importance of trials producing perseverance or patience.

And he said then that if you lack patience, you should ask for help. And if you were lacking in wisdom, that God would supply that in answer to your prayers. And now as he comes to the end of his letter, it's almost as though he is recapitulating.

He comes back around again with the emphasis on the importance of patience in verses 7 through 12, and then from verse 13 to the end, back to the issue of prayer. So he began with patience and prayer, and he now ends with patience and prayer. The twelfth verse, I think, follows fairly logically from verses 7 to 11.

The followers of Jesus were to be those who were waiting patiently on the return of Jesus. The oppression, the injustice that was around them, that would be a cause of pressure to them, was not to be the occasion for them to take matters into their own hands. And that was the emphasis of the section that we dealt with last time.

Be patient, brothers, until the Lord's coming. And it's almost as though he recognizes that one of the manifestations of impatience in times of stress or affliction, especially if the followers of Jesus managed not to take the law into their own hands, would be to take the law, as it were, into their own mouths. That having managed to restrain ourselves, to control ourselves, not to engage people in a physical way, it is distinctly possible that by the abuse and misuse of our mouths, we would actually manifest the very impatience that James has warned against.

And certainly the temptation of taking the Lord's name in vain, of employing God or that which is associated with God as a mechanism for our own ends. What James is calling his readers to is three things, I think, or two things with a third by way of emphasis. First of all, to say no to duplicity, and then obviously to say yes to integrity, and then to do so in recognition of the gravity that attaches itself to both issues.

And if you keep those words in mind, duplicity, integrity and gravity, then you will be able with me to navigate your way through this study this morning. To be guilty of duplicity is just to be deceitful. It's to employ language or life in a way that deceives or at least intends to deceive.

And James recognizes that that kind of double dealing must not be entertained by those who profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, in chapter 1 and in verse 18 he had written to these people that they should rest in the awareness of God's goodness to them because he has given them birth and the instrument that he has used in bringing them to birth is the word of truth. And his intention in bringing them to birth is that they in turn might be a kind of first fruits of all that God has created.

Therefore, it is inconceivable that those who have been brought to faith by the word of truth, the gospel embodied in Christ himself, should then become those who play fast and loose with the truth. It is imperative that the followers of Jesus, who is the way and the truth and the life, should themselves be

truth tellers. And this, of course, is particularly important in an era where truth itself is arguably up for grabs.

It was in a very different way from what is ours to deal with, but there are distinct similarities as we will see as we go along. Jesus, when he was interviewed by Pilate, said to Pilate very straightforwardly, For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. I've come to bear witness to the truth.

And so, James, echoing again, as we've said before, the words of Jesus, his brother, leads us to a very straightforward understanding of this call to unequivocal truth telling. Now, maybe you'll be helped by turning again to Matthew 5 before we come back to James 5, where Jesus, in the words that we read earlier, reinforces the Old Testament demand for a person taking an oath to be true to the oath that they've taken. Jesus is essentially quoting from Leviticus chapter 19.

Long ago it was said to the people, Do not break your oath, but keep the oath you have made to the Lord. And then, in this instance, as in the matter of adultery before and the matter of murder before that, Jesus turns, as it were, the screws on his listeners and he takes the demands of the law up a notch, or in some ways in a notch. He internalizes that which has been kept from an external point of view in the law keeping of the Old Covenant.

And so, as in the matter of adultery, where he says, You've heard that it was said, Don't commit adultery, but I tell you about looking at people lustfully and in the same way you've heard that you should not murder. And that is true, but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And now in this matter of oaths, you've heard that it was said to the people, Don't break your oath, but keep the oath you've made to the Lord.

But I tell you, do not swear at all. So they were to make oaths and keep them. And now Jesus says, I would rather that you just didn't make any oaths at all.

I don't want you swearing by heaven. After all, it's God's throne or by earth. It's his footstool or by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king.

And don't bring your head into it. You can't change the color of your hair by making oaths. And frankly, why don't you just say yes and mean it and say no and mean it, too? Now, what we need to understand is what Jesus is addressing in this, because we understand quite clearly what is being said.

But we always need to understand the framework in which Jesus makes his statements. And for this, we can stay in Matthew and go to Chapter 23. And in Chapter 23, Jesus addresses the religious hucksters.

He addresses people who are using pious language as a mechanism for trying to make themselves appear different from what they are, either to appear more holy or to use it as a mechanism for allowing them to weasel out of promises that they've made because of the nature of the oaths that they're taking. It becomes clear as you follow along from verse 16 of Matthew 23. Woe to you, blind guides.

Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. You say now in this, you say it's not that he's saying you say to yourselves as much as you are the guides. And when you give guidance, this is what you say.

So in your role as a guide, you say, if anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he's bound by his oath. You blind fools, which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred.

You also say if anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift on it, he's bound by his oath. You blind man, which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred.

Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

Now, what is Jesus tackling? Well, he's tackling the use of frivolous oath taking of the employing of terminology. For example, heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the temple, the altar. In such a way that divorces the use of that language from the use of the name of God himself.

And what these guides were saying was this. You can make oaths by the temple, by Jerusalem and so on. And as long as you don't invoke the name of God, then these oaths are of no account.

You don't have to abide by them. And no one really needs to pay any attention to what you're saying. However, it's good if they think that they're supposed to, because that will allow you to be duplicitous in the exercise of your duties.

So, Jesus takes them on. He says, you can't play that game. Because the reason that Jerusalem is holy is because of its association as the city of the great king.

The reason that heaven is holy is because it's where God lives. The reason the earth is holy is because it is his footstool. Now, if this all seems very far away to us, perhaps we just need to go back into our childhood, onto the playground.

Where in making promises to our friends at play, we told them that we didn't have to keep a promise because we had crossed our fingers. Right? No, I don't have to do that. I crossed my fingers.

No, I didn't see you cross your fingers. Well, I crossed my fingers behind my back. So, now we've become a double liar.

One, we didn't cross our fingers. Two, we said we did it behind our back. And all because we're trying to weasel out of allowing our yes to be a yes, or our no to be a no.

In our affirmations, we employ another mechanism. Instead of just saying, this is what I believe, or this is the truth, we affirm it by saying, cross my heart and hope to die. Right? What are we saying? You can't trust my word.

The only way you can trust my word is if I affirm it in this way. But, of course, you would be probably wise not to pay a particular amount of attention to my affirmations, since, of course, I always may have my fingers crossed behind my back. Now, the Pharisees have become expert at finger crossing.

And Jesus will of none of their subtlety. They're not allowed to divorce God from heaven or from the holiness of the temple or the altar, because all of it is tied to God. Therefore, Jesus says, no frivolous fooling around with swearing by any of these things.

You're supposed to make an oath and keep it. I'm saying to you, just don't make an oath at all. Just say yes or no.

Just say what you mean and mean what you say. That's what I want my followers to be marked by. Okay? Straightforward.

And James picks up on it, comes towards the end of his letter, and he says, I want you to understand this. Well, let me anticipate a question that always comes when addressing these verses. And that is, do these words demand that we should not take an oath in a court of law? Right? And people ask this all the time.

Well, if Jesus says, do not take an oath at all, that sounds pretty categorical. And it does. I admit that to you.

What I'm about to say, I say in light of my understanding of that. Those of you who've been around for a while know that we've said it is important for us to take the Bible in its literal genre and context, but not to apply it in a way that we would regard as being wooden, wooden, that it would have no flexibility to it at all. Let me say this, that plenty of people brighter than me and more godly than I believe that Jesus' statement here and the echo in James chapter 5 categorically say that a Christian should never take an oath or swear an oath or put his hand on the Bible in a court of law.

And in the Reformation, the Anabaptists got themselves in deep water over this very issue. And they were countercultural. They were counter civil jurisdictions.

And they made a royal circus of the event because they were unwilling to bow on this or bend on this matter. I don't gainsay that in any way, but I don't actually believe that that's the case. So, for example, if you get called for jury duty, as far as I'm concerned, James 5 or Matthew 5 does not preclude our willingness or our ability to make in a civil context an affirmation concerning the truthfulness of the words that are about to come out of our mouth.

The fact of the matter is we shouldn't have to, but it's not a problem to affirm it in a context such as that. You may disagree with me, but I think that what Jesus is addressing here is the misuse of swearing and oath-taking in everyday conversational life, in the common interchange of life, so that people are employing mechanisms either to appear to be something they're not or to disavow something that they have already affirmed. And Jesus is saying, I don't want you to be doing that.

I want you just to say yes and yes and no and no. I don't believe that what is addressed is the notion of official or specialized oath-taking in a court of law. It's not a main thing.

It's not a plain thing. You're sensible people. Judge for yourselves and do as you choose.

What is absolutely without question is that the positive side of this transcends culture and time and everything. Namely, that if to say no to duplicity in relationship to oath-taking calls in question the civil litigation aspect of it, the call to absolute integrity is mitigated by nothing, by nothing. So, the call that is issued is first of all to say no to duplicity and secondly to say yes to integrity.

Verbal integrity is what's involved here. Truth-telling from the very core of our being. Remember in Psalm 15, the psalmist says, Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary and who may live on your holy hill? Answer, he whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart, who speaks the truth from his heart.

Epicenter truthfulness, core truthfulness. In contrast to the description again in the Psalms, Psalm 55 this time, not 15. In Psalm 55, the psalmist says, my companion attacks his friends.

He violates his covenant. Listen to this. His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart.

His words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords. OK, so the divorce is between the words that are spoken and the heart from which those words proceed. And the call is a call to unconditional truthfulness.

Christian believers, by God's enabling in obedience to God's word, are to distance themselves from all duplicitous, deceitful use of language. The use of language that became in the last 15 years classically characterized during the discussions that surrounded the Monica Lewinsky hearings vis-à-vis the issues of the White House. And at that point in our culture, we suddenly realized that the notions of truth and truth telling were moving significantly from that which was based upon an understanding of objective truth.

So that we were treated to discussions about it depends what being alone means. It depends what being means and so on. And the inference was that nothing actually in the use of language really means what it says and says what it means.

The only way that we can determine meaning is by inference and by context and by every other thing. So that the plain meaning of issues is flushed. The same is true in universities where professors have fun with this kind of thing.

And they tell their students, you know, that there is no real objective truth to which we can refer. But if they get overcharged on their BP bill, then they'll have a question of truth real fast on the phone with the headquarters. Hey, it wasn't 97, it was 73.

To which the person might legitimately reply, but professor, what's 93 to you? It's 73 to me, you know, or vice versa. It's clever stuff. But when push comes to shove, it's silliness.

None of that high sounding, high minded stuff works in the radiology department. Works in the issues of oncology. Works in the matters of air traffic control.

Works where people understand that that which is true needs to be defined in terms of objective truthfulness. The Pharisees were forerunners of this kind of relativism. And Jesus is saying, and James is reinforcing it here, isn't he? Just make sure that you are known as being people of irreproachable honesty.

Irreproachable honesty. So that when the Christian says, you have my word for it, everybody's able to relax. Business associates, assistants in the office, the scientific community, children in the house, a wife, a husband.

You have my word for it. We don't have to say, for heaven's sake, I told you, you have my word for it. Or in the name of Jove, I have your... No.

Listen to me. Yes. No.

Without clouding the issue. Without playing any games. Were you there? Well, it depends what you mean by there.

I mean, I was sort of there, but not really there, there. Were you there? Yes. Did you say that? Well, I mean, say it.

I mean, I don't know if I said it, but did you say it? Yes. That's to be the Christian. Interestingly, coming back to the issue of the law court, the very fact that we need to make vows and say things in a court of law is a tacit acknowledgement upon the fact of so much dishonesty in everyday speech.

I mean, isn't that why they do it? They say, now look, fella, you're going to come up here and someone's life, future, business, marriage is going to rest on what you're saying. So don't come up here with any funny business. I want you to tell me that you will tell the whole truth.

Nothing but the truth. God helping you. The very fact that we do that in civil litigation is on account of the fact of so much funny business in everyday conversation.

A Christian's word ought to be their bond. That's what James is saying. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Our word should be just as reliable as a signed document. Our word should be as good to take to the bank on as if it had been signed in triplicate and witnessed by five Supreme Court judges. Is it? Are you a truth teller from your heart? Are you an equivocator? Am I? Am I evasive? Am I inconsistent? Do I employ language, technical language, theological language, biblical language in such a way as to exaggerate, to make it appear as though I am something that I am not? When someone else exaggerates on my behalf, do I correct them or do I like it so much that I just leave the lie standing out there? And what about in relationship to our spouses? We tell the truth.

Our whole marriage bond is based on telling the truth, isn't it? I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, to take you for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death parts us. What is the girl got to go on? Your promise. Your promise.

Nothing else. That's why it's so important. It's so important with our children.

I don't doubt that one of the sources of exasperation to which Paul refers in Ephesians 6 where he says, Fathers, do not exasperate your children but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. One from both my own poor example and by observation, it is pretty obvious to me that one of the greatest points of exasperation for a teenage boy or girl is to have their mother or their father be an equivocator. So that the child never knows where they are.

Just tell me if I can do this or cannot do it. I don't want a philosophical discussion on it with various accretions and additions. Just tell me yes or no.

I mean, I may disagree. I may disobey. But I would appreciate clarity.

Do you know how many kids are just driven nuts by the evasive inconsistency and flowery language of their mother or their father and they haven't got a clue what their parents are saying? It's a very short step from that to their own manufacturing of language to suit their own ends. Well, finally, because our time is gone. The last word is gravity.

Gravity. There is gravitas to this. This is a grave matter.

This is not a matter that is to be dealt with in some kind of casual way. A little piece added in. Just a funny little verse 12.

Suck in between verse 11 and verse 13. No. James addresses the importance of this.

Look at how he begins. Above all, my brothers. Above all.

What does he mean? Beyond what I've said about adultery and murder and those other things? Clearly not. Clearly not. He's urging them to pay particular attention to this area of Christian living.

He's mentioned the tongue again and again, and it would appear that his people, he understood them. He knew what his people were like. They were prone to sins of the tongue.

He's warned them against grumbling. They'll be judged, he says in verse nine. And now he warns them again.

And his above all, which is the opening phrase, is championed by his concluding phrase. You will be condemned. You will be condemned.

It's a very sobering thought, isn't it? All of our temptations at double meanings or misleading affirmations or little white lies employed to extricate ourselves from tricky situations or to try and make our clients think that we are able to supply when we're clearly unable to supply or we will be able to meet the deadline or whatever it might be. We understand, don't we? And some of us must very quickly take Isaiah's words as our own. I dwell in the midst of a people.

I am a man of unclean lips, and I live amongst people who also have unclean lips. Our culture is impregnated with lies. Although it is apparently based on the foundations of truth, when the foundations are destroyed, then something else will fill the gaps.

And the great skill in litigation now is in trying to discover who in the world in the midst of all of this can we start with that is prepared for one moment to tell the truth. And the Christian in a culture like that has a tremendous opportunity to stand out. Such a simple thing.

I was at the funeral of a man the other day, and someone gave a eulogy and said that this man was a gentle man. And I had only met him, I think, three times, but I thought, he certainly was that. He was a gentle man.

And then I thought about what it would be like to be a gentle man. And whether I had enough time left in life to become one. Jesus was gentle and lowly in heart.

Jesus told the truth. The purpose of God the Father from eternity is to make his children like Jesus. Truth tellers.

When I don't tell the truth, I actually line up under the evil one. That's what Jesus says in verse 37 of Matthew 5. He says, say yes and say no, and anything beyond this comes from the evil one. All your funny business, he says.

All your clever use of language. All your swearing of oaths to make it appear that it is when it isn't. Or to weasel out of it when you have made an affirmation.

All of that, he says, is from the devil. You see the distinction in the Bible between truth and lies. Jesus was really clear.

Remember, he says to the Pharisees on one occasion, I know you think you have Abram for your father. But if Abram was really your father, you would do what Abram did. As it is, your father is the devil.

And he's a murderer from the beginning. And he is the father of lies. And when he lies, he speaks his native language.

And when you or I are tempted to lie, we line up under the evil one's banner. It's quite a thought, isn't it? It's a huge warning. And it also, and finally, provides a great welcome.

Because, once again, the searchlight of the Bible shines in upon our lives. It's like an MRI. I haven't had one.

I'm afraid to have one. But I've seen them. I heard them.

And, you know, you walk down the corridor and apparently you're good. Good to go. Then they put you down there, down the tube.

Then they tell you how you really are. And, you see, that's what happens when we study the Bible. Because the Bible is like an MRI.

I'm doing pretty good. No murder this week. No peculiar coveting of anybody's donkey.

I've done pretty well on that. No, it's pretty good. How about lies? How about the third commandment? How about taking God's name in vain? Oh, well, I mean, it depends what you mean by vain.

You know, I don't know. It's vain. What are you going to do when you realize that if you break the law at one point, you're a lawbreaker, and the sentence for lawbreakers is death? It's not like breaking a cup, and you have a dozen of them, so there's eleven more.

To break the law of God, said Jesus, at one point is to break it in totality. It's like a chip in your windscreen. As soon as it goes, it's gone.

Your windscreen is broken. The whole windscreen is broken in one place, but it's all broken. And the law of God is broken when we tell lies.

And as liars, we fall under God's condemnation. And that's the bad news. And the reason we need that bad news is to arrest us, to show us that while we thought we were perfectly healthy and really not a bad soul, that in actual fact, under the MRI of the Scriptures, we realize that we've got all kinds of cancer inside of us that we had never realized before.

And when we get the bad news, then the good news makes sense. And the good news is just this, that not only do we have in Jesus a Savior who is the way, the truth, and the life, one who has fulfilled the precepts of the law in their entirety, one who has paid the penalty of the law in the fullest extent, thereby providing for us a righteousness not our own that becomes ours when we are united by faith to him, so that Jesus is the one before whom we can all be completely honest. Jesus frees us from the need to tell lies.

You see, if you don't think you're good enough to get into heaven, you'll have to fabricate it, won't you? You're going to have to lie to yourself. Well, I've really been a lot better this last, I mean, since the 90s weren't really good. But, you know, the first decade, I think I'm doing not bad on that.

How good do you think you're going to have to be? What if the law of God condemns you as it does? Where will you turn? Well, the instinct is to hide, isn't it? To hide in our use of language, to hide in all kinds of ways. And Jesus says, why don't you just come out into the truth? Come out into the light of my truth and acknowledge what you are. Acknowledge who you are.

You don't need to lie to me. You can't lie to me. I'm the one who frees you from all the need ever to lie again in your life.

Because he's the one who knows the worst about us and loves us just the same. There is no one else like that in the world. No one else can take the penalty.

No one else could keep the precepts. I wonder where you are in relationship to this. And a final thought.

I recognize that we go back out into an environment that is completely opposed to just about everything that we've been discovering this morning. And I want just a quote to you from my files from 10 years ago. Some Christians are agonizing about how to reach their friends who are relativists.

OK, no objective truth. Everything's on a sliding scale. We're told that people today can't stomach doctrine, particularly hard, negative doctrines about sin and judgment.

They want a tolerant God and tolerant churches with no demanding content. Sometimes we're told that the way to reach these folks is for the church to become relativist itself. But that won't work.

The church must reach them by first helping them face reality. This is not hard since reality always intrudes itself. Relativists, when caught in their own devices or facing real life problems or driven to the point of despair, can become honest with themselves.

They need to face the devastating truth of God's law. Then they can be introduced to the truth of the gospel, the grace and forgiveness that comes from the objective work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one to whom we may come and before whom we may be completely honest.

And Jesus is the one who frees us from the need to tell lies, to exaggerate, to make ourselves appear better than we are. Well, the call is clear. A call to say no to duplicity, to say yes to integrity, to recognize the gravity of what's involved and then to come in penitence to God and cry out to him.

Well, let us pray. Father, we thank you for the truth of your word. We pray that you will help us, that you will show us ourselves and show us our Savior.

Some of us have been convincing ourselves that we really had never broken your law, certainly none of the big ones. But we have told lies. I guess that makes us liars, liars who will never inherit your kingdom.

We even lie to ourselves about ourselves. And now here we find you saying, come now and be clean, be honest about where you are. And then be honest with others as you deal with them.

Well, what we do not know, please teach us. What we do not have, please give us. And what we are not, please make us.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with all who believe now and forevermore. Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg.

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