

Matthew 5:33-48

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[0 : 00] In his book titled Post Truth, Evan Davis, the journalist BBC correspondent, he calls the current state of political discourse here in the United States peak BS.

! He says that boundaries of true and false, sense and nonsense, opinion and reality have been erased. He speaks about our cultural moment as being unique in that regard. And lots of people agree the book has been quite popular.

I don't know whether it's really that much worse in terms of the content, as long as there have been politicians they have manipulated and lied and deceived.

And you could say that the art of politics in many ways is the ability to do that in a persuasive way to get people to do things. However, it is true, I think it's unmistakably true to say that there has been a shift in the way that those lies have been expressed.

We do live at a time when the nature of the way things are communicated has changed radically.

An article I read last month said this, Straight lies have given way to sinuous spin and open dishonesty disappears behind news speak and double think.

[1 : 24] Open, straight up lies have given way to sinuous spin and open dishonesty disappears behind news speak and double think.

Lying has been at the heart of human interaction all the way back to the Garden of Eden. And the messing around with the truth that we see worked out in our culture today has actually been pushed around philosophy departments in universities for decades.

It's just that we're struggling to adapt to a world where lies aren't immediately obvious and where social media can take that communication and spread it faster and further than ever before.

A lie can circle the globe before a truth gets out of bed in the morning. Well, it's in this world, in this culture, that the question of truth Jesus turns our thoughts to this evening.

And we might not be in the murky world of politics or journalism. We might. And if you are, that's great because we need people of integrity in those places. But we do have a huge number, perhaps an unprecedented number of outlets for words, for messages, for statements, for communication of all different kinds, whether it's spoken or written.

[2 : 52] We have more opportunities than we've ever had, therefore, to play with the truth. So, what Jesus has to say in this passage in Matthew 5 really matters.

Now, by way of recap, we've kind of been ambling through the Sermon on the Mount for a while now, exploring the character of the good life, the life of human flourishing that marks those who belong to the kingdom of heaven.

Those who have put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have been transformed and operate under a new ethic in the world. And it is the way of flourishing, Jesus says.

And we've seen that Jesus has come as God's promised King. He has fulfilled the shadows and the types of the Old Testament. And in this sermon, he lays out what it looks like for people who have come to him in faith, who have been united to him, to live as citizens of the kingdom that he's brought.

And we saw that when he took up the question of the law of God, which was so central to what it meant to be a faithful Israelite, what it meant to belong to God's people under the Old Covenant, when he takes up that question and applies it to its significance in the life of the kingdom, he says he hasn't come to abolish it.

[4 : 07] He has not come to abolish the law, but he has come to fulfill it. And the examples that we get in the sermon from chapter 5, verses 21 to 48, he shows what this means.

What we've got here is another aspect of what it means for the law of God to be fulfilled in Jesus and to be worked out in the lives of his people. One scholar says this, Jesus takes up a command

from the Jewish tradition and without overturning it, shows the true intent and practical reality of the commandment, all the while driving home the point with urgency in light of his own coming.

Jesus has made it clear, said it each time really that we've been in the passage here, that there is to be no gap between the outer and the inner self.

The person that we meet with, the person that you meet when you meet me, and the person that presents to you, is to be the same person externally as internally.

Heart and life are to measure up. There must be consistency there. The follower of Christ is not to be a divided person, saying one thing, doing another, expressing themselves in one way, but having a heart that's going in another direction.

[5 : 22] The Sermon on the Mount is a call to a wholehearted, whole person, whole life devotion to Jesus. And can I say, if you're visiting, if you're not a Christian and you're looking into the Christian faith, this is what you should expect to see in the life of Christians.

Somebody who is committed to Jesus and there is a consistency. Their whole life is ordered around this man, this person who stands at the center of history, who has redeemed a people from their sin, not because of their goodness or their moral striving, but because of his grace.

His finished work on the cross on Good Friday. His resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. Those events transform people. If you were to put your faith in Jesus Christ because of those things, you will be transformed.

Wholehearted, whole person, whole life devotion. That is what it means to be a Christian. We're not one person on a Sunday and a different person the rest of the week.

And a big part of how that will be worked out, according to Jesus in this section in the sermon, is our relationship to truth.

[6 : 33] Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, that's what he's called us to do. Those whose righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, their lives will be marked by honesty.

And that's the one point. This is a one point sermon this evening. Here it is. Kingdom people are honest people. Again, you have heard it said, verse 33, that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all. What's going on here? Well, so, Jesus here in this point doesn't directly quote the Old Testament law, but he brings together several texts.

Leviticus 19, verse 12, and Deuteronomy 23, verses 21 to 23. Now, what is going on there? Those are both texts that concern the law of God.

What is going on there is they're legislating for the making of oaths and vows. Because they're interpreting the third commandment, do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

[7 : 45] They are interpreting that commandment with regards to making promises and making vows. And the law was designed not just to uphold and protect the dignity and the holiness of God's name.

Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. That law is not simply to protect the dignity and holiness of God's name. Although, think of how the Bible speaks about the name of God.

God's name is said to communicate His character. It is tied to His being. The name, Lord, when you see it in the Bible in capital letters, is the word Yahweh, the God of the covenant.

That name revealed that God was the eternally self-existent one, unlike any other. God is not like us.

That is why, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, His name is to be hallowed. To pray, hallowed be your name, is to pray that the name of God would be revered, would be lifted up, because it is the expression of the being and the character of God.

[8 : 52] When we take God's name on our lips, we are speaking of and in prayer with supreme and glorious majesty.

So, we do it with reverence. The Christian will never take the name of God as an expletive or as an exasperation.

It's everywhere in our culture. The culture goes more and more away from God, more and more atheistic in many, many ways, and yet, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the name of God is taken as a swear word and an expletive more than ever.

It is the one thing, when I'm around friends who aren't Christians, it is the one thing that just grates more than anything. They can say all kinds of things, and that's what happens.

You can't expect non-Christians to behave like Christians. While their language can be as filthy as you like, the one thing that really gets my back up is this. And I'll say, don't do that.

[9 : 58] We should never want to cheapen God's majesty in this way. But as much as the law sought to protect the dignity of the divine name, it was also intended to ensure that it isn't used in vain.

That is, making a promise, invoking the name of God in an empty or meaningless way. Using God's name, as it were, to gain people's trust in what you're promising to do, even when you know you're not going to do it or back it up.

So, this law was supposed to restrain lying. Now, with this in mind, the Pharisees had developed an elaborate system of oaths whereby they would not invoke the Lord's name, but they would swear by other things.

That's why we had that reading from Matthew 23. What they've done there is that if they swore by the temple, they weren't bound by the oath. But if they swore by the gold in the temple, they were bound.

If you swear by the altar, you're not bound by that oath. But if you swear by the gift on the altar, you are bound. It's easy to see how ludicrous it had got. A law that was designed to prevent sinful people from lying had been manipulated into a system that actually enabled people to lie.

[11 : 22] We see something similar today. From children in the playground. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. To something you hear people say, I swear on my mother's life.

Dot, dot, dot, whatever. No, honestly, I swear on my mother's life. Now, when the child doesn't follow through on their promise, and you turn up with a needle and say, Could you come over here? Sorry, you promised that I could.

They'll say, Oh, I had my fingers crossed. It doesn't count. Or when you arrive at your friend's parents' house with your kitchen knife, ready to carry out your friend's personally imposed sanctions.

They've broken their word. You say, Well, sorry, I've got to take your mum's life. I didn't mean it. Promises. Oaths. They have lost their currency in this day.

Businesses and employers know this. That's why lawyers earn so much money drafting documents that cover for this. People don't keep their word. It used to be that your word was enough. I never thought I'd get so old that I'd sound like my dad.

[12 : 29] It used to be that a handshake was sufficient. Not anymore. A person's word is rarely trustworthy, apparently. So, Jesus says there's a way around this.

Verse 34. Do not take an oath at all. Just because the law allowed it doesn't mean it required it. He says, So, just don't bother. Kingdom people are honest people. Now, some elements of the Christian tradition have taken this as a blanket ban on any kind of oath. So, they don't sign mortgages.

They don't join the forces. They don't swear in a court of law. That's a matter for your conscience, but that's not what Jesus has in mind here. He is simply ruling out misleading oaths.

He's weeding out dishonesty. And he cuts to the heart of Wyatt's folly to swear by anything. Look at verse 34 again. Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it's 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.

[13 : 37] And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Because of who God is, whatever you swear by, you can't avoid him.

Heaven is God's throne. The earth is his footstool. Jerusalem is his city, and he numbers the hairs of our heads and even decides what color those hairs will be. God is the God of the whole earth. So, no promise can ever be made. No word can ever be spoken without it being made in his presence. Don't think you can miss him, or you can work some clever thing up with a bit of a linguistic workaround, well, I can swear by this, but not this.

God knows, and he sees, and he hears all things. That's what Jesus is saying. Don't make oaths at all. Remember who you're dealing with, Jesus says, when you invoke the name of God, and he is the God of truth.

Interestingly, in contrast, verse 37, can you see, to literally look at the footnote, footnote number seven, literally it is the evil one. Do you see that?

[14 : 49] Let what you say simply be yes or no, no oaths. Anything more than this comes from the evil one, who is the father of lies. It's like Jesus has this as a, by the way.

When you're dishonest, by the way, you're speaking the language of the devil. He says, no. Rather, the citizen of the kingdom will seek to be like God, the God of all truth.

So, 37, just simply yes or no. Yes or no. Let your yes be yes, let your no be no. The instruction is simple.

Say what you mean, and mean what you say. Now, I know some of you will instinctively jump to the hard cases, and you think to yourself, well, what about if you live in a country where Christianity is illegal, and the police come and they call at your door when you're meeting and they ask, are you housing Christians in here?

They might say, call it the Rahab ethic, if you will. Well, you know, well, what about that? You want to ask the questions of hard ethical casuistry. There is a place for those conversations.

[16:02] Of course there is. But that's not Jesus' concern here. He's saying simply, kingdom people are honest people. In the way that we deal with one another, in the way that we deal with those around us, we are honest people.

There is to be a reliability, a consistency, an integrity about your speech. Christians should be known for their truthfulness.

Now, what this means is that lots of things that are common in our culture are out of bounds for the Christian. There will be others, but here are seven.

Let me go through these quickly. Oaths. Number one, oaths. Christians should never say, I swear, about regular things. I swear, dot, dot, dot.

You don't use oaths like that, and it shouldn't be necessary. When somebody says something to you and they say, I will do this, or I did this, or whatever, and you're tempted not to believe them, they will invoke this oath.

[17:07] But you only think that because you think that there's something that's incredible about what they're saying. You should be someone who keeps their word and be known for doing so.

No one needs to pronounce an oath if they are the kind of person who does that. In fact, when I hear someone say, I swear, usually means that I'm going to be suspicious.

Added to this is that we are to stand by the oaths and the vows that we have made, like our marriage vows. When you give your word, honesty and integrity demand that you don't go back on it.

Oaths. Number two, barefaced lies. Now, you'll say, of course I'm not going to say that. Of course I'm not going to tell barefaced lies.

And if I asked you now whether or not you're an honest person, I hope at least most of us would say, yes, I am an honest person. But most of us, if we're honest, say things to people that we straight up know are lies.

[18:09] I came across two different academic studies on this issue. One from 2002 at the University of Massachusetts. And it found that 60% of people lied in a 10-minute conversation. Six out of ten people in a 10-minute conversation are telling lies.

Another study found out that untruths made up 20% of all 10-minute conversations. You say, ah, that's nonsense. That can't be right.

But think about it. I didn't get your email. Tell them I'm on my way. Sorry, I can't make it.

I've got a headache. Oh, I didn't see your missed call. We do it all the time. Straight up lies.

Straight up lies. Number three, evasion. Evasion. When you're asked a question and you're deliberately unclear in the way you answer. Have you read the report I sent? I saw it this morning.

[19:08] Didn't answer the question. Would you like to come over for dinner? I'll check the diary. Let me get back. You know there's nothing in your diary. You just don't want to go.

I have a friend who I've never heard tell a lie. And part of why that is that he doesn't care about social etiquette. Do you want to come to X?

No. Is that it? He doesn't care that that would be a bit blunt. It's just the truth. I've even heard on one occasion, he was so honest, he said, somebody had asked him would he be interested in coming to something a couple of months out and he said, maybe, but if I get a better offer I'll do that instead.

Absolutely no filter. Just said what was in his head. His word was good. His etiquette, maybe not so much, but his word was good.

We evade things all the time. Next one, passive aggression. When people don't like another person's behavior, rather than address the issue with clarity and with openness and with truth, they present like everything's fine whilst trying to undermine the person in a more manipulative way.

[20 : 25] Masking a criticism as a joke. Snide, critical comments delivered with a smile. Finding ways to make your point without making your point. It's just a really dishonest way to communicate.

Kingdom people are honest people. Next, gossip. Spreading news about another person isn't technically lying, but it usually involves it, doesn't it?

Even though we shouldn't do it in the first place, gossip is straight up out of bounds for Christians in any way, we often make the situation worse by accepting the things that people tell us and passing them on regardless of whether they're true or not.

So, we get caught up in the dishonesty. We spread or we retweet gossip because it's juicy without stopping to find out if there's any basis for what is being shared.

And so, we become implicated in the lies. And then, exaggeration. Number six. Stretching the truth to suit our aims.

[21 : 34] Exaggeration is simply lying about details to make the information more acceptable or interesting or shocking or manipulative. Don't exaggerate. I've told you a million times.

Don't exaggerate. That's a joke from like 1979. It's terrible. The second cousin of this is hyperbole, where you overstate things. So, everything is either the best it's ever been or the worst it's ever been.

It's just not true. That was the best ever. No, it wasn't. It was quite good. What happens there is when you exaggerate like that, when everything is hyperbole, your words lose their effectiveness. If everything is awesome, how do you express your pleasure at something that really takes your breath away? When you describe a burger as awesome, what superlatives are left for the Grand Canyon?

Exaggeration. Exaggeration. And then, flattery. Flattery is the act of telling someone something good about themselves in order that you will benefit in some way.

[22 : 48] Your goal isn't simply to compliment the person. You said what you said in order to put them into your debt, in order to manipulate them for your own gain, in order that they would think well of you or like you.

Flattery is about you, not the person that you compliment. It might be effective. It might get you everywhere or whatever, but it's ultimately dishonest and has no place in Christ's kingdom.

Don't be a flatterer. See, when you go down the list, you realize that these are all very common traits in everyday speech. These are the currency that our culture uses to buy influence, and it seems, for the most part, that we're okay with it.

We've become really comfortable with dishonesty. Do you remember Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary with Trump right at the beginning, Donald Trump in 2017?

And he told the world that Trump's inauguration crowd was bigger than it was. He exaggerated. He told a big old pork pie. I saw him last year or a while ago on a U.S. talk show, and he was asked about this.

[23 : 51] And he was smirking and smiling, and everybody was smiling and laughing about it. He told the whole world a massive lie, and it's just a bit of banter on a talk show.

You remember Lance Armstrong, the cyclist, who finally admitted to the fact that for the majority of his success, he'd been spinning this massive lie about not being on drugs.

I've listened to some interviews. I find him a fascinating person, and I've listened to some interviews with him recently. So, all these years after, he finished racing a long time ago, all these years after, and it's just talked about as if it was all totally fine.

He misled all these people, from sponsors to fans to everybody else, this big old lie. And, you know, it's just what it was.

And we're like, yeah, it's okay. Years ago when I worked in business, if you got a deal through by not being straight with someone, it was seen as good business.

[24 : 51] And if an exaggeration of your productivity or your figures meant that you beat someone else to promotion, that was celebrated as a competitive edge. It's just part of what you needed to do to get ahead.

It's part of the game. Dishonesty is baked into the system. Those are the rules of the game. And we have a load of euphemisms for lying that soften the blow, bending the truth.

I might have told a white lie. Oh, a little fib there. A recent addition we have is, alternative facts. What on earth is that if it isn't lying?

Now, we may lament the current cultural issues around truth. We may find blatant dishonesty, the political classes hard to stomach.

But let's not forget how we are implicated in the problem ourselves. Let's admit that lots of our verbal and lots of our online communication is dishonest in some of these ways.

[25 : 50] And let's resolve to root it out. Kingdom people are honest people. Let's refuse to play the games that our culture plays, instead to be distinctive.

We stand out when we don't play those games. And we honor Christ by speaking the language of our Heavenly Father, who is always truthful. And the opposite is, to do the alternative is to speak the language of the devil.

And we do this through the power of His Holy Spirit. He enables us to do this. Why is that? Because the Spirit is the Spirit of truth. And we do it because we know that we're secure in the knowledge that we are in His presence and we belong to Him.

You see, that's the key. That's actually the key. Why do we lie? Mostly because we want to appear better or more accomplished or more impressive than we really are, so that people will think well of us.

At root, we mess with the truth in order to gain approval. But the gospel of Jesus Christ frees us from such a tyranny.

[27 : 02] The gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that God knows the truth, the whole ugly truth about us, but accepts us through the finished work of His Son. We're accepted by the King of glory.

We don't need the praise and acceptance of others. When we turn from our sin and put our faith in Jesus Christ, we are received as sons and heirs of Almighty God.

And Almighty God, in that moment, we come to know Him as our Heavenly Father, the Sovereign Lord of all the earth, the One who breathed the cosmos into existence. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we can call Him Father, and He brings us in.

He welcomes us. That is a place of ultimate security. So, we don't need to put on a mask. We don't need to create a false persona.

Of all people, kingdom people are supposed to be honest people because we take the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the man of truth, but also because we don't need to, to tell lies and to adopt a persona that isn't true of us, because we've been accepted.

[28 : 17] We don't need to hide behind lies and deceit. When the King accepts you, it really doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. It really doesn't.

When the God of all truth sent His Son to die and rise so that you could be accepted into the heavenly family, when He promised you that He would never leave you nor forsake you, that is a promise that liberates.

And in Christ, the liberty is the liberty to be a truth teller. And you can be a truth teller without fear because of that security.

What a freedom. Let's pray together.