

## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

# GRACE TO LIVE

## THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE

### Matthew 5:33-37

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.” 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. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

Jesus is addressing here a culture that had developed an elaborate system of secondary oaths, swearing on something other than swearing on God. That system carried with it varying degrees of integrity. That’s a terrible thing to say, but they were not bound in the same way, depending on what they swore upon. It’s kind of like when you were a kid. Did you ever cross your fingers? You would say something, but if you had your fingers crossed, it wasn’t necessarily true? Then if you crossed both fingers, you showed them one, but a double negative equals a positive. Then if you crossed fingers and toes, by the time you finished you were confused and they were, and you had no idea.

Jesus attacks that system of secondary oaths as a way of calling us to integrity from the heart. For the last two Sundays we talked about sex. We talked about sexual wholeness and sex in marriage. If nothing else, it was engaging. You may be thinking, “Okay, we’re going to talk about taking oaths today,” and I would tell you that this message is every bit as challenging and needed as everything we’ve said in the last two weeks. It’s revealing, because we do tend to sin by way of technicality.

We do it with sex, to borrow from last week. You have the person who is really committed to sexual purity. They are following Jesus. They want to walk in sexual wholeness. But then they are asking the question: How far is too far? They are trying to find those technicalities, those loopholes. We do the same thing with our words, with integrity. We justify ways of diminishing or hiding the truth.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

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And in the end, we deceive just as much, really, as when we tell an outright lie. So Jesus comes to us and he challenges this.

I want to give us three thoughts today, three main ideas to unlock this. One is:

- I. The Power of Integrity. Let's call it this: The Power of Deception and the Power of Integrity.
- II. The Posture of Integrity, and
- III. The Problem.

Let's start with The Power.

- I. The Power.

We learn from scripture that it's not a technicality when we run from the truth, hide the truth, and deceive. It's actually tremendously significant. In fact, Jesus told us that we have an enemy, a spiritual enemy, and that his desire is to absolutely destroy your life. You know how he does that? He tells you lies. He tells you lies and deceives you. That is his basic strategy.

Now, I'm aware that the whole idea of a personal, spiritual force, a personal, spiritual evil that opposes you may seem like a dated idea. But I want to suggest to you that if you try to explain your reality, your experience and what we are experiencing in the world strictly on naturalistic explanations, you will be hard pressed to do it. We are going to look at a little bit of an overview of deception and truth, and how it works in our lives, and the way it works. This message actually really helps us understand a lot about the nature of the world that we live in and the spiritual battle that is taking place, which is very real.

There is a tremendous power. Let me give you a couple of verses that support this. Jesus says in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus again in John 8:44-45 is speaking about evil and personal evil, the devil, Satan - however we want to describe that. "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Listen to this; this is fascinating: “But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

Satan has a strategy to deceive us and to bring destruction into our lives. In fact, the way it works is that we become unable to distinguish falsehood from truth. If we tell a lie long enough, we believe it. If we hear a lie long enough without absolutely rejecting it, we believe it.

There was a movie five or ten years ago with Leonardo DiCaprio: Inception. It was a fascinating movie, where individuals would find a way to enter into a person’s dreams, into his or her sleep, then they would plant ideas or thoughts that the person would later think were their own thoughts. They would also extract business secrets. In the story, the individuals that are engaged in this eventually have difficulty distinguishing between the real and the unreal. His wife commits suicide because of this blur and the confusion between the imaginary and the real.

That’s what happens for us. We see the power of a lie to impact the real and as we tell that lie and we believe that lie, we become unable to distinguish between the real and the unreal. Jesus said, “Truly, truly I say to you...” Whenever you see this in scripture, this is really bringing it home to say, “Listen, this is true. Don’t run from it. Don’t try to deny it.” “I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” That’s what happens. We fudge the truth and then we become a slave to that deception.

The destruction for us is personal. That is, we are bringing destruction on our own lives. But there’s something that’s so powerful about this passage. Jesus is saying, “If you pay attention to your words, and if you purpose to really tell the truth, you will begin to gain insight into how your words reveal what’s in your heart, how your tendency to deception reveals something in your heart.”

My wife and I, for example, lie for different reasons. That statement troubles you, doesn’t it? Now, we never think we’re lying. We never set out to lie, but if we are tempted to justify a marginal truth, we would have different motivations. She is like, “Where are you going with this?”

Here is where I would be tempted to lie. I would be tempted to lie because I don’t want to disappoint people. Someone might say to me, “Hey, I’ve got a surprise birthday party for so and so. Can you come? It’s on Friday night.” I’m thinking, “I have a commitment I cannot get out of on Friday night and I should say right now in this moment, “No, I’m sorry. I have a commitment.” But I don’t want to disappoint that person, so I say, “Let me check my schedule.” That’s not a lie. When

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

in reality, I won't be there in a million years. I don't do that now. All these sins are way in my past, right?

Some people might be tempted to lie to control people. We embellish or exaggerate or push in order to make them do what we know they need to do and they don't have enough sense to do it. So it's controlling. No one shall be named.

You see how just that little parenthesis pushes me to say, "No. Let your yes be yes and your no be no." It exposes this thing in my heart where I've believed a lie. I've believed a lie that the key to my life is making you happy. "Oh, I'm sorry, I've tried to make you happy and you're just never happy!" That is a trap! There are a lot of us here in this room - that's our default setting. We are people pleasers. There is an enemy who seeks to steal and kill and destroy. You'd think that this is going to lead me to life, but it leads me to bondage. It leads me to anxiety. It leads me into a place of realizing I can't control, I can't please.

To unpack this idea a little bit, let me show you how this works. This is what I want you to see about the power of deception and the power of integrity. The power of deception is that it reinforces darkness in our own hearts, believing and following a lie that leads to destruction. Look at this. In a positive way, when we practice integrity it helps us expose those and grow them. Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." That is a powerful statement, right? It means there is so much of something in your heart that it's going to get out. No matter how much you try to suppress it, there's just too much of it.

C.S. Lewis used the image of rats in the cellar. He said if you make a lot of noise going into the cellar and you let all the critters know that you're coming before you get there, you'll see nothing. But if you startle them in an abrupt moment and you flip on the light and you see a rat scurrying across the floor, you find out you have rats in the cellar.

This is very insightful. It's a helpful picture, because what he teaches in that is that we think in those startling moments that's not really the way we are. We think when we catch the rat running across the floor, that's not the real condition of our hearts. In other words, someone angers us in a moment and we respond and junk comes out of our mouths, or our kids provoke us, or our spouse or our friend or our work associate, and what do we say? "It's their fault. I don't really have rats in the cellar." No, there's an abundance, and under the right conditions eventually it comes out.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

I told you, this is worse than the sex talk, isn't it? Okay, so the good person out of his good treasure brings forth good." In the same way, as Jesus begins to transform our hearts, in unexpected moments good comes out when you expect evil, and you say, "Wow, that's Jesus. Jesus is working. That was a miracle. Did you see that? That was a miracle!"

So good comes out of the heart. And the evil person, out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. There's a lot here, but it's what we're treasuring. It's what we're loving. It's what we're believing ultimately is going to bring us happiness.

I love my wife. She is a treasure to me. I used to actually have a fear of losing her. It's still obviously an extremely unpleasant thought. But that godly affection can become ungodly if I believe the lie that she's God in my life and that my life depends on her. Because as great as she is, she's not God. So if I treasure her in an ultimate way, as I should only treasure God, I'm in trouble.

This is my least favorite verse in the entire Bible. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." I speak for a living. I have a lot of careless words. This is a disturbing reality, but here's why. If you go further, "...for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Your words inevitably reveal what's in your heart.

I want to give a parenthesis here to anyone who says, "I'm just checking out this thing about Jesus and what this means." The message is not: You have to achieve your own perfection and righteousness. The message is that Jesus has achieved it for you, and he gives it to you as a gift. That's the message of the Bible, the mercy of God. And when that love comes in and explodes in your heart, it frees you to say: You know what? I do treasure things other than God, and it does get me in trouble, and I'm free now to just admit that. God begins to bring a transformation in our hearts. So on the day of judgment, if you live long enough, there will be enough fruit that could only come from God living in your heart. It's proof that Jesus showed you his mercy and grace and brought transformation.

Really, I'm making this first point of the power because it unlocks everything else, so we'll spend most of our time on this first point. Let me demonstrate how it is a power that brings destruction in the lives of others. It's not just dangerous for us spiritually to tell a lie so that it brings destruction and we become enslaved.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

Look at what Paul says about how we should speak when we follow Jesus. In Ephesians 4:25 he says, "Therefore, having put away all falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, (look at this) for we are members of one another." The Bible would teach us that you can summarize what pleases God in two commands: Love God with all that you are, and love other people in the same way that you love yourself -- same energy, same enthusiasm, same commitment. We love God and we love people. So lying is a sin against God, but it's a sin against ourselves, bringing destruction, and it also hurts other people.

I'll give you a few examples. Paul is telling us that we are members of one another. This is building on that idea of loving people the way we love ourselves. I don't have the luxury of using you, because we are creatures made in the image of God. I've already talked about the first couple. Controlling people is a way we bring destruction to them.

My mom used to do this. She could never get us to the dinner table, so it was: "Okay, dinner's on the table," but dinner wasn't on the table. Dinner wasn't on the table until my mom said, "It's getting cold." That meant dinner was on the table. But she would say these things. It's like when you're trying to get everyone in the house: "Hey, we have to leave in five minutes," which being interpreted means, "We have to leave in 25 minutes." But I know if I tell you 25 minutes, you won't be ready. You'll think you have forever and you need to start right now.

There is a sense in which we look at those kinds of things and say, "That's all kind of innocent." But when we see how our words reveal what's in our hearts, we begin to step back and say, "How much do I really feel like I have to control people in my life?" They are figuring out this secret code anyway. We have to get more and more radical in order to appropriately communicate.

Pleasing people - another way that we do harm to others. How about using people? These tend to be business lies. We are using people to convince them of our position. We say things like, "Well, I'm selling this to you at cost." Now, I happen to know that I've built everything into that cost. You are thinking, "I'm selling it to you for the material cost I paid for it, but I've actually built in all of my overhead, a nice commission for me, and a lot of other things that I am calling my cost. We say, "Hey, this model has outsold all of its competitors, when what I'm really thinking is, "Well the competitors don't have an exact comparative model, so I'm comparing this to an imaginary nothing." We develop these ways.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

You're saying, "Oh, Brain, this is so petty." I told you, it was easier to talk about sex. It's difficult to say, "Okay, I'm really going to follow a path of integrity." Stay with me because there is good news coming. Let me just give you a few more examples. I want us to unpack this for a minute. Some of the ways that we destroy or hurt other people are the lies that are just hateful. These often happen in marriage where we are unfaithful and we lie to cover it up. Or we say things that are really an exaggeration, like "You always..." or "You never..." Of course, those things aren't true, yet in a moment of frustration we are often communicating something that is not helpful or loving.

There are the lies that we tell when we look down on people - the whole Jack Nicholson: "You can't handle the truth." I believe that I'm intellectually superior to you, or I know so much more, so I'm going to justify keeping the truth from you and just tell you something that will pacify you.

This is a bad one. We tell lies that divide people. James 3 talks about how there is this wisdom that seems like it's wise. It's actually evil wisdom. It's a way of thinking where we divide people and we create factions. We flatter them and then try to draw them away from an affection to other people. The godly person is a peacemaker, is creating unity, when the insecure, fearful person driven by ambition is tempted to create factions.

We tell lies just to avoid people. I had a beautiful brother in this church who was talking to a couple of us on a Sunday morning. He said something was bothering him. It was right before the service. I gave him a bit of a pat on the back and said, "Wow, that's interesting." He came back a week or two later and said, "Hey, you know, that's not really what I was looking for in that moment. I was looking for a little bit more real conversation." That was really helpful for him to come to me and say that. Thank you. I need to realize when those moments are happening.

But sometimes we do just tell people what we think they want to hear. It's like, "What do you think of my new hairdo?" "Yeah, that's a new look, that's a great look," when we really should say, "Wow, can you get your money back?" Or "Can you go back?"

We could go on just talking about these ways. We don't want to be unkind. We don't want to be unloving. We don't want to be brutal. We are not trying to encourage some kind of uncharitable living where we just say: "Well, it's the truth." No, we do the right and loving thing. We speak the truth in love.

Let's go on, if we could, to The Posture.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

### II. The Posture.

The posture of deception, of integrity. This is what Jesus describes for us. He says, “Okay guys, you are swearing on the temple or on a part of the temple and this is not dealing with the reality. You are not assuming the correct posture. The posture that you should have is: God is always present. I’m in the presence of God right now. And if I’m aware of that, then I’m going to speak with the knowledge that God is listening.

I was dealing with a friend many years ago. He lives in another city now; he’s long gone. He had asked me to be his accountability partner. He came in to see me and he was struggling with something, so I said, “How are you doing?” He said, “I’m doing great!” I said, “Good! No problems?” “No problems!” Hmmm. “Okay, let’s just pray. Father, I ask for your Spirit to come in this room right now. We want to know that you are present here with us.” I prayed one two more sentences and he said, “Ah, no. I just lied to you. I’m not doing well.” You see, the moment I began to invoke the presence of God, he became aware: “I don’t mind lying to Brian, but God is a whole different level.” Well, God was there all the time, right?

Again, I’ve been in situations just sharing with people where they will say, “You know, I’m going to do this. I think God is okay with it because God wants me to be happy, and God won’t care.” They are talking about God as if he’s maybe in the next room or maybe down the hall or maybe somewhere else. Sometimes it just helps to say, “Okay, let’s go talk to God right now. You tell God that you think he’s completely okay with what you want to do.” And they’ll say, “No, no, no. I don’t want to do that.”

I get it. Yes, I understand. This is a really difficult thing we are talking about. But do you understand that you have an enemy who is telling you a lie and his plan is to wreck you, to destroy you? It’s not the kind of thing you can dabble with and be okay with later. Because the further we go down that road, the harder it is for us to distinguish truth from error. Jesus really does have a better way for you. So, the posture is an awareness of God’s presence.

Jesus is helping us internalize truth. Just a couple thoughts here on what we see on the surface. On the surface, obviously Jesus is telling us to walk in integrity. Oath-taking is not necessary if your word can be trusted. And oaths are necessary because we are not trustworthy, in terms of human nature.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

Jesus is saying, "Live in such a way that your word is absolutely trustworthy." I do not think, friends, that God is forbidding oaths in court or under any circumstances. I think it's appropriate to go into court and to take an oath. It's legally binding. There are legal consequences. There are oaths all over the Bible. God himself takes an oath. The Quakers, for example, have interpreted this passage in a way that they will not take an oath of any kind and the courts have accommodated that. While it's very commendable that they are really taking seriously the words of Jesus, I don't think it's the right application. I think Jesus is pushing us towards integrity.

But he is also pushing us towards humility. Humility, because this idea of saying, "Let your yes be yes and your no be no," and if people don't believe you, okay. "No, they have to understand that I'm right!" Jesus is challenging that. You find an incident in John chapter 5, where Jesus is talking to the religious leaders. They are coming at him so blatantly and he says, "You know what? My heavenly Father gives testimony to me. The Holy Spirit gives testimony to me. My miracles testify to me. The word of God testifies to me. There's only one witness that I don't have right now and that's your witness. It's the witness of people. But you know what? I'm okay with that. I'm okay with that because I have the witness of God and that's what matters. I'm pleasing him."

Wow, he just rests in God. Imagine this. You are the eternal Son of God - all-knowing, all-powerful - in a human body, and someone is saying, "You're a phony." What would you do? "Everybody step back." Right? No, there's a humility. There's a resting in God. I'm going to let the Father take care of this. I'm going to let the Father direct us. How much better off we'd be if we would just step back and say, "Okay, God, I'm going to make space for you to act."

Can I tell you? God loves the truth. This was a powerful truth for me as a pastor, as a husband, as a dad, to learn that either God has called me or he hasn't, and he will establish me. And if he doesn't, well there are other jobs I can do! And I'm better off! This is where you say, "No! No! Don't even mention it!" Do you understand what I'm saying? We have to rest in this: God calls us. It's his calling that establishes us.

Okay, stay with me here. Let's leave this point with the emphasis: Our posture is going deeper than integrity, deeper than humility. It's an awareness of God's presence.

Then we will end with this: The Problem.

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## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

### III. The Problem.

Here is the problem. I want you to consider the challenge from God's perspective, that we believe a lie and are unable to distinguish the truth from a lie. And at the heart of that lie is an accusation toward God himself and his character. So at the heart of the lie is this: God can't be trusted. He doesn't love you. He wants to keep you from fun and pleasure and happiness. His way is the bad way. Or: He doesn't even exist. He is a lie. He is completely nonexistent and it's just something people use to manipulate you. Then everything on top of that which really is life-giving is undermined by a system of lies.

How does God address that, so that he comes in and restores to us the beauty of who he is and the truth? Do you know what he does? He speaks to us the truth. Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." It's really the truth of his magnificent love that comes in and redeems us and restores us from our heart condition and sets us free.

Isn't that wonderful good news? Yeah! It's fantastic! I was thinking about the applications of this. I was thinking how pastors have to grow in this. You know, you meet a pastor. As a pastor, I get asked this question: "So, what size is your church?" It seems like this is somehow the sole indicator to people of what a church is. It's crazy. We know scripturally that's not the case. But there is this temptation: "Well, we are between 3 and 4000." 3 and 4000. Right? You'll get it after lunch.

I grew up in a denomination that did Sunday school. We went all in on Sunday school. Sunday school was all these classes, age graded, right before or right after the main worship service. Our denominational leaders told people that if you really were godly you went to Sunday school, and that Sunday school was not optional. You could barely be a Christian if you didn't go to Sunday school. I mean, we ramped this up and leveraged it to the max. Then one day we discovered, "Wow, small groups are better than Sunday school! At least in our culture." But we have a problem, right? Because we've told people that you are not even a Christian if you don't go to Sunday school.

So then when we went to stop Sunday school and do small groups, what happened? "Well, you're not even a Christian! Stop talking like that! Everyone knows that any real Christian is committed to Sunday school. You're undermining sacred truth here." It's the: When you create a Frankenstein and you go to kill it, what does it do? It kills you.

## Grace to Live - The Truth Shall Set You Free

Matthew 5:33-37 | Sunday, September 2, 2018 | By Brian Brookins

We're not talking like the church is immune from this. No. The beauty of Jesus' command is that he says, "I don't care if you're a pastor or not. I don't care if you're religious or not religious. If you hear my word, you will hear this beauty. Your words right now are indicating what you treasure in your heart." And if you look deeper than just a bald-faced lie and you listen to the nuance of it, you'll see that there is a pathway to real life in Jesus. There is a freedom and a forgiveness. It's good news. It's glorious good news.

I'm going to ask you to bow your head, if you would.