

How to live with integrity: Jesus on faithfulness

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 5)

Matthew 5:27-37

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 26 June 2005

Introduction

What would you be willing to do for ten million dollars? That was a question put to Americans in a survey, the results of which were published in a book called *The Day America Told the Truth*. Guess what these people – people just like you and me – said.

- abandon their entire family (25%)
- abandon their church (25%)
- become prostitutes for a week or more (23%)
- give up their citizenship (16%)
- leave their spouses (16%)
- withhold testimony and let a murderer go free (10%)
- kill a stranger (7%)
- put their children up for adoption (3%)

Extraordinary. But I wonder if these statistics say less about our attitude to money than our attitude to commitment, and faithfulness. If you read the back page of the *Herald*, you may have seen the picture in Sideswipe. Faithfulness or integrity is in short supply in our world today. Over the last few weeks we've been reading the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon Jesus teaches that if we want to know real happiness and have a positive influence on the people around us, it'll mean living with integrity. In Matthew 5:27-37 he explains how to live with integrity – how to think, how to act, how to speak with integrity.

How to *think* with integrity (27-30)

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'²⁸But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

I was looking at the *Women's Weekly* the other day (not that I normally read the *Women's Weekly*; it was at the supermarket checkout). On the front page: "Brad and Angelina's hot new relationship." Two of Hollywood's hottest stars in an apparently adulterous relationship, and it's being celebrated. Normalised. Our society tells us there is nothing wrong with adultery – sex outside of marriage. But Jesus insists there is. In fact, he goes beyond the religious experts of his day – who limited the scope of this command to the physical act of adultery – and says: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (v 28). Now Jesus is not saying here that you can't look at a beautiful woman or that it's wrong to feel physical attraction towards someone. The word for "look" is in the present tense, suggesting someone who *continues* to look rather than just casting a passing glance. In other words, Jesus is saying, "Don't cultivate in your mind a burning desire for someone." That's adultery. It starts here, in your mind. Now let's be honest. This is an issue for most men. Pornography is the single most profitable industry on the internet. In the United States the porn industry grosses more money than all professional sports combined. I'm not surprised. Lust is incredibly addictive and consuming.

I read just this week about a Christian leader who was on a trip away from home and was lured into going to a striptease show. Years later his is what he said: "Ten years have passed since that awakening, ten years never far away from the presence of lust ... I learned quickly that lust, like physical sex, points in only one direction. You cannot go back to a lower level and stay satisfied ... Lust does not satisfy; it stirs up ... where I ended up was ... incomprehensible to me when I started." Although he never committed the physical act of adultery, it had a profound effect on his marriage as he began to devalue his wife as a sexual being and focus on her minor flaws. It also had a devastating effect on his relationship with God. Matters came to a head when he went to another pastor and unloaded some of the guilt he felt, only to discover that this pastor had the same problem. Indeed, he took out of his pocket a pad of paper showing the prescriptions he took to fight the venereal disease he had picked up along the way. The lawyers were already dividing up his house, his possessions and his children.

Impurity, unfaithfulness, in our thoughts can lead to actions and eventually a pattern of life that leads to hell. So Jesus urges us to take extreme action (vv 29-30). Some people have interpreted his words literally. Origen, the third-century theologian actually made himself a eunuch in an attempt to overcome sexual temptation. But

Jesus is simply using hyperbole – deliberate exaggeration – to emphasise that drastic action is necessary if we want to live with integrity. If, for example, your eye causes you to sin because of the temptation that comes to you through your eye, don't look. Behave as if you were blind. Cut out that source of temptation. What does that mean for you? Maybe it means deliberately refusing to read certain magazines, watch certain programmes, visit certain websites, or talk to certain people.

How to *act* with integrity (31-32)

Jesus' discussion of adultery and lust leads naturally to the issue of marriage and divorce.

³¹"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'³²But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

You may have read in the *Herald* last weekend that New Zealand has the second highest rate of single parent families in the world. There are several reasons for this, such as the domestic purposes benefit and our no fault divorce laws. But one of the main reasons is the change in our view of marriage: "Instead of serving as our primary institutional expression of commitment and obligation to others, especially children, marriage has increasingly been reduced to a vehicle – and a frail vehicle at that – for the emotional fulfilment of adult parties. 'Til death do us part' has been replaced by, 'As long as I am happy.'" Marriage, as an institution is under threat. It was no different in Jesus' day. The Old Testament (Deut 24:1-4) allowed a man to divorce his wife if he found something "indecent" about her, and then presented her with a written certificate of divorce in the presence of two witnesses. One school of rabbis, interpreting "indecent" very widely, said you could divorce your wife if she burnt the dinner or had a bad hair day. It reminds me of a story about two men walking their dogs. The first one says, "I got this poodle for my wife." The other guy says, "Sure wish I could trade mine in for something like that."

Against this view, Jesus insists that marriage is for life (v 32). This verse has raised all sorts of difficult and painful questions for people who have been divorced. Is Jesus saying that in most cases divorced people can never remarry? Well in Matthew chapter 19 Jesus repeats this verse and with it quotes the passage from Genesis that says when a man and a woman are united in marriage they are "no longer two but one." They become "one flesh." Marriage is not just a piece of paper, a legal contract that can be terminated with written notice. It's a profound emotional and spiritual union between two people. Jesus is saying that in God's plan marriage is for life. But the reality is this: we live in a broken world. Relationships do sometimes break down. In those cases where gross unfaithfulness destroys a relationship, divorce is permissible – it's a simple recognition that the marriage has already ended.

So what are the implications of this for us and our actions? If your marriage is in trouble, explore every possibility of reconciliation. A study of divorced couples with preschool children shows that after a year of divorce, 60% of men and 73% of women feel they made a mistake and should have tried harder to make the marriage work. Walking away from a relationship may seem like the better option, but most of the time it isn't. This applies to any kind of relationship. But there's another implication. If you are happily married, don't take your marriage for granted. At a *Promise Keepers* conference I once heard these three tips:

- Walk hand in hand: spend time having fun together.
- Talk face to face: prioritise times of regular and intimate communication. More relationships break down through lack of communication than any other reasons.
- Kneel side by side: pray together. One in two marriages in New Zealand currently ends in divorce. But studies have found that when a couple prays together, the rate of divorce drops from 50% to less than 1%.

How to *speak* with integrity (33-37)

Having dealt with adultery and divorce – our thoughts and our actions – Jesus moves finally to the issue of oaths – our words.

³³Again, 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.'³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

We've got a general election in a couple of months. You can sense it. The politicians are already outlining their election promises. For most of us the primary question is not "Who is promising the most?" but "Who can I trust?" Politicians are famous for their dishonesty. We live in a world rife with dishonesty. The society into which

Jesus was speaking was just as bad. People often made vows to assure others of their commitment. They would call on God to witness their oath and punish them if they broke it. The Old Testament insisted that these vows should be kept. The third commandment says, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God" (Ex 20:7; Deut 5:11). But reading this law in a typically narrow and literalistic way, the religious experts argued that vows which included God's name were strictly binding. But vows which did not mention God's name – oaths by "heaven" or "earth" or "Jerusalem" were not binding. Like little children crossing their fingers behind their backs, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were using oaths to avoid keeping their promises. A system designed to inspire truthfulness became a breeding ground for dishonesty.

So Jesus confronts this practice head-on by explaining that every oath is made in God's presence. He is everywhere. Heaven is his throne. Earth is his footstool. Even the hairs on our head are his. So you can't divide life into compartments, those where God is involved, and those where he's not. Promises we must keep. And promises we can break. Our words should be consistent, whether we're at church or at home. So Jesus says, "Do not swear at all ... simply let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No." Make it your aim to be known for your truthfulness, known as someone who keeps their promises, who speaks with integrity.

I once heard of a godly man nicknamed Gibbo, who used to work as a clerk at Selfridges, the London department store. One day, when the owner Gordon Selfridge was there, the telephone rang and Gibbo answered it. The caller asked to speak to Gordon Selfridge. Gibbo passed on the message and Selfridge replied, "Tell him I'm out." Gibbo held out the receiver to him and said, "You tell him you're out." Selfridges took the call but was furious with Gibbo. Gibbo replied, "If I can lie for you, I can lie to you." Do you ever lie? Do you ever say words that you don't really mean? "I'll pray for you." "I'll be there at 7.30." "I'm doing fine." Ever bend the truth? Ever shade what you say to put yourself in the best possible light? If I'm honest, I struggle with this. But I suspect we all struggle at some point to live up to the standards Jesus is setting in this passage.

Conclusion

Yet, earlier in this chapter, Jesus says that our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matt 5:20). As his followers, we're called to be different from society, people whose thoughts, actions and words are marked by integrity and faithfulness. Have you ever wondered why Jesus sets such an impossibly high standard? It's the secret to a happy life. But I think there's more to it than that: It's the way God behaves. God is faithful. One of the primary images that God uses for himself in the Old Testament is that of a husband spurned by his wife. But even though his wife – his people – are faithless, he remains faithful, willing even to woo them back (Jer 2:1, 3:1, 4:1; Hos 2:1-23). Willing even to give his life for us. God's extraordinary standards are more than matched by his extraordinary grace. When we have been unfaithful, he wants to forgive us, he wants to give us the strength to change. Will you let him?

Questions

1. In 1972 less than 5 percent of fifteen-year-old girls had engaged in sexual intercourse. Just twenty-five years later, 38 percent of fifteen-year-old girls reported that they have had sex. The church is not far behind. According to some studies, seventy percent of evangelical Christians engage in premarital sex. Why do you think adultery appears to be on the increase in society today?
2. What does it mean to look at someone lustfully? Why does Jesus call this adultery?
3. How should we put verses 29-30 into practice?
4. A little while back it was reported that there are about 20,000 marriages in New Zealand per year, and 10,000 divorces. Why do you think the divorce rate is so high?
5. Do you think couples who have been divorced should be allowed to remarry? How does Matthew 19:3-12 clarify this issue?
6. What practical steps can people take to avoid divorce?
7. How were people in Jesus' day abusing the practice of making oaths? In what ways do we make the same mistake today?
8. Does Jesus forbid us from ever taking oaths of any sort?
9. What practical steps can you take to ensure you speak with integrity?