

# When Words Become Cheap:

How to Model Integrity in Your Speech

Matt 5:33–37

**Central Truth: Kingdom citizens are marked by faithfulness to telling and living the truth.**

**Engage: ILL:** Writing letters of recommendation can be hazardous—tell the truth and you might get sued if the contents are negative. **Robert Thornton**, a professor at Lehigh University, has a collection of “virtually litigation-proof” phrases called the Lexicon of Intentionally Ambiguous Recommendations, or LIAR. Here are some examples: \*To describe an inept person—“I enthusiastically recommend **this candidate** with **no qualifications whatsoever.**” \*To describe an ex-employee who had problems getting along with fellow workers—“I’m pleased to say that this candidate is a **former** colleague of mine.” \*To describe an unproductive candidate—“I can assure you that **no person** would be better for the job.” \*To describe an applicant not worth consideration—“I would urge you to **waste no time** in making this candidate an offer of employment.” (Larry Pryor in *Los Angeles Times*.)

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* Alice has a conversation with Humpty Dumpty about words and their meaning. Alice comes to Humpty Dumpty confused about how he uses words and their meanings. The conversation comes to this point: “When **I use** a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what **I choose** it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be **master**—that’s all.”

“**When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.**” We live in the era of Humpty Dumpty. In the days when Lewis Carroll penned these words, Humpty Dumpty would have been seen as speaking a certain amount of foolishness. In our day, Humpty Dumpty would be a university professor, or perhaps a politician. **We live in an age when words have become cheap.** Truthfulness appears to have been tossed out the window. With a **blatant disregard for integrity in life and lips**, many find a way around honesty without feeling guilty. Lying for political strategy and gain seems to be the norm. Oftentimes we find it difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. Media exaggeration and cover-up in reporting often colors one position against another.

**How widespread is lying in daily life? Can you name even one arena where lying has not planted its deceitful foot?**

**Set the Stage Biblically:** Lying is nothing new. Just before the moral rot from within the southern kingdom of Judah brought about its downfall with the Babylonian captivity, God said to Jeremiah: “*Go up and down through the streets of Jerusalem. Look around and see for yourselves. Search through its public squares. See if any of you can find a single person who deals honestly and tries to be truthful. If you can, then I will not punish this city.*”<sup>5:2</sup> *These people make promises in the name of the Lord. But the fact is, what they swear to is really a lie*” Jer 5:1-2 (NET). This morning we are going to see that God challenges you and me, “**Be that person. BE that person who deals honestly and seeks truth.**”

Today we return to our study on the Sermon on the Mount. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord has just stated His own thoughts on divorce. He shows that lying is really

connected in this regard by the use of the word “again.” In other words, **breaking the marriage vow and common lying have the same roots of unfaithfulness.** Lying affects all of life.

**Focus:** But this is not to be the norm for you and me, as believers in Jesus Christ. In our passage of Scripture today from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the issue of words, and what they mean, and what we mean when we say them.

**Preview:** This morning we are going to see that as Jesus’ followers telling the truth should be an essential part of our lives.

**Scripture Reading:** Turn with me in your Bibles to **Matthew 5:33-37**

Jesus’ point, most immediately in our passage, is that of the taking of oaths. But when we get into what Jesus is saying, we soon come to see that there is more to what he is saying than simply the issue of whether we are free to make oaths or to be placed under oaths. **In first century Judaism, people often made oaths for themselves, as a way of trying to underscore or give strength to what they were saying.** This is the same kind of thing that happens when someone tells you something, and you ask in reply whether what he is saying is true, and he says something to the effect of, “**I swear to God,**” or, “**I swear on my mother’s grave.**”

This is where you & I, as kingdom citizens, must be different! While telling the truth should be an essential part of everyone’s life, unfortunately it is not. A wide array of lying displays the darkness of our hearts in every corner of life. We have grown accustomed to people in the business and sports world breaking contracts—another form of lying. **But we who know the saving grace of God are to be distinguished from the common practice of lying. As Christ’s followers, Christ calls you and me to live lives of truthfulness.**

**TO FAITHFULLY TELL THE TRUTH MARKS ONE AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.**

Jesus tells us that as kingdom citizen’s we should have a radical view of truthfulness that testifies of the power of the gospel to change lives. How do we do this?

**SEEK TO FAITHFULLY TELL THE TRUTH IN ALL AREAS OF YOUR LIFE.**

Why is telling the truth so vital for us? **The natural human tendency is to navigate around truth.** Jesus initiates this discussion on integrity as he has done with the three previous paragraphs — by referring to a reference of Old Testament law. This particular one is actually a combination of a number of passages that summarize the common view regarding vows and oaths. “**Again, you have heard that it was said to an older generation, ‘Do not break an oath, but fulfill your vows to the Lord’” Matt 5:33 (NET).** At face value, this is a clear statement. Don’t make false vows. Fulfill the vows that you make to the Lord. Simple. But the “**ancients**” had a way of navigating around the truth in order to have their own way. At heart, they sought ways to avoid standing upon their word. **Integrity meant little as long as things looked good outwardly. It is this disposition of heart that we are prone to as well, that of dishonesty in word and deed that Jesus Christ corrects. Legalism** prompts us to seek to avoid **the guilt** of sin while still **committing it.**

As Jesus explains & clarifies the root sin of murder, adultery, & divorce He addresses our tendency to seek to avoid the guilt of those sins while still committing them. The Pharisees did this through legalism. **What legalism does is to put a nice border around a particular law or offense, & regard anything within the border to be wrong.** The legalist will fuss & fume,

scream & holler about any offense within the border he has painted. But if it is outside the border then it is permissible behavior.

**EXPLANATION:** In the case of vows or oaths that were so common during the first century, the legalist proposed that the way one worded a vow determined whether or not he had to keep it. Notice the language. **“Do not break an oath, but fulfill your vows to the Lord.”** The phrase, **“TO THE LORD,”** is critical in the legalist’s approach. **He or she carefully worded their vows to avoid using the divine name in an authoritative way.** Consequently, they could disregard their vow and claim no guilt over their breach, since it was not technically a vow **“to the Lord.”**

Thus, the Pharisees interpretation of the law on honesty and truthfulness fell short of God’s standards. In the law God said: *“You must not swear falsely in my name, so that you do not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord”* **Lev 19:12** (NET). **This was conveniently interpreted by the teachers of the law to mean that swearing falsely by any other name was allowed.** God also said, *“If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath of binding obligation on himself, he must not break his word, but must do whatever he has promised”* Num 30:2(NET). The vow (נָדַר, *neder*) was a promise to donate something of oneself or one’s substance to the Lord. The solemn oath seals the vow before the Lord, perhaps with sacrifice (cf. NET notes).

Now the religious leaders of Jesus’ day conveniently interpreted this as permitting a person to back out of any oaths made to anyone but God. The legalist would be involved in a conversation, and in order to convince the other party of some point he was making, he would assert, **“I swear to heaven that this is true.”** Or he might say, **“By Jerusalem, I’m going to do this thing.”** In each case, he carefully avoided making an oath with God’s name, picking something lesser so that if he decides not to fulfill his commitment he can walk away without guilt.

**God is not limited by simply the use of His name. Jesus condemns dishonesty in our speech and actions.** Notice what Jesus says (recorded for us in Matt 5:35-36). Jesus says: *“But I say to you, do not take oaths at all—not by heaven, because it is the throne of God,<sup>5:35</sup> not by earth, because it is his footstool, and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King”* Matt 5:35-36 (NET).

However hard you or I might try, Jesus says, **we cannot avoid some reference to God. Why not? The whole world belongs to God.** We cannot eliminate God from any of it. (Cf. John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 101.) Jesus demands that as His followers our word be a reflection of His own truthfulness and faithfulness.

**TO LIE OR TO DECEIVE OR TO MISREPRESENT—REGARDLESS OF HOW CLEVERLY WE MANEUVER OUR WORDS—DISRESPECTS THE CHARACTER OF GOD.**

In the OT God is pictured as a rocky summit who protects and keeps safe his people. God is described as one who is never unjust, but rather demonstrates fairness and uprightness in all his action. Yet, **if you & I want God’s protection** (the One who is never unjust) **then we must show our allegiance to God by being truthful ourselves in our speech & actions.** [SLIDE of Deut. 32:4] *“As for the Rock, his work is perfect, for ALL his ways are just. He is a reliable God who is never unjust, he is fair and upright”* Deut 32:4 (NET). (The description of God as the Rock reminds us that our God is totally reliable.)

So how do we obey Christ's instruction here in Matt 5:33-37? You say, "I see that God does expect and demand my honesty in my words and actions. How do I obey?"

### **AVOID NATURAL DISHONESTY**

The problem that causes such corraling of oaths to convince others of our intentions is the natural dishonesty in our human heart. **It is not that we learn to lie. We are born liars.**

Deceit—like that of "the father of lies" (**John 8:44**)—is bound up in our hearts so much so that Paul, in agreement with the Psalmist, can say of all people, "*Their throats are open graves, they deceive with their tongues, the poison of asps is under their lips.*" <sup>3:14</sup> "*Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness*" Rom 3:13-14 (NET).

**CONTEXT:** Keep in mind what Jesus Christ is doing in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by setting forth for us the character of kingdom citizens in the Beatitudes. **Then he explains how we as kingdom citizens are to behave.** Jesus' standards go far beyond what "**you have heard that the ancients were told.**"

**\*\*APPL:** You & I cannot be satisfied with an outward conformity to God's Word. Jesus demands that we conform to his own faithful conduct—the true intent of the OT Scriptures. *How can this happen?* **Our hearts must be transformed by God.** When we put our faith in Jesus Christ alone, God by His Spirit enables us to obey his demands. **Only as new citizens—those born again through faith in Jesus Christ alone—can we be led away from the natural dishonesty bound up in our hearts. Christ demands integrity in our speech & conduct.**

### **BEWARE OF COMMON WAYS THAT WE CAN BE DECEPTIVE TODAY.**

We must be aware of common ways we can be deceptive today. The deceptive speech Jesus warns us here about continues today. We share the common spiritual ancestry in the fall and the same disposition of heart that tries to weasel out of truth **if it will be to our advantage.** The ancients were doing these very things, so Jesus brought it home to the present tense, "*But I say to you, do not take oaths at all*" Matt 5:34a (NET). The problem is the same; it is just dressed in more modern jargon.

Let me put it like this. If you constantly need to rely upon some form of oath or swearing or promising in order to be believable, then your problem is not one of poor communication. It is one of **a desperately darkened & deceived heart.** Jesus is telling us that there is no need for you & me as his followers to resort to oaths or promises in order to assure truthfulness. **As Christians we are to be so radically different from the world that truthfulness & integrity distinguishes our conversation.**

**APPL:** **Are you believable when you open your mouth?** It may not be that you resort to what is termed an "**out-&-out lie.**" But do you **dally in deceit** or **make constant use of exaggeration?** Do you stretch the truth when it makes you look better or use some other creative form of lying? Recognize that these have no place in our lives as those who belong to Christ.

### **TAKE THE TRUTH SERIOUSLY**

**Jesus tells us here take the truth seriously.** What our Lord insists upon is that we take truth seriously—that we **be conscientious in what we say**, how we express ourselves, and even in the way we say something so that there will be no dishonesty in heart and lips.

**APPL:** In our own time, we have seen a President lie about his behavior, and then defend himself by quibbling over the meaning of words. As Humpty Dumpty said it, "When I use a

word, it means just what I choose it to mean—nothing more or less.” Yet, much of what passes today in modern higher education is the philosophy of Humpty Dumpty. Much of our modern education comes out of the perspective of postmodernism, a philosophy that teaches, basically, that words only mean whatever meaning we give them, that in and of themselves they don’t mean anything. Thus, a book (like the Bible) doesn’t mean anything in itself. It only means whatever meaning its interpreter gives it at any given time. Therefore, what a word means for you may not be what that word means for me.

This philosophy is at the heart of the struggles that are tearing our culture apart, and that tearing homes apart. To help us understand what it means to take truth seriously, let us focus on the forthright demand of Jesus Christ for kingdom citizens.

### **UNDERSTAND CHRIST’S CLEAR COMMAND.**

Jesus makes his command quite clear: **“But I say to you, make no oath at all.”** Jesus refers to the spiritual terms used for making vows, **heaven... earth... Jerusalem.** Then he adds one of personal reference, **“Do not take an oath by your head, because you are not able to make one hair white or black”** Matt 5:36 (NET). The use of oaths trivializes the truth. Or as Don Carson put it, **“Swearing evasively becomes justification for lying”** [*The Sermon on the Mount*, 47]. Now I do think that a clarification needs to be made concerning this command.

We normally think of oaths as that which is used in the court: “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” Even that kind of oath has to be explained because of the devalued concept of truth in our day. By truth the court means, “the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” rather than half-truths or deceit or cover-ups. **Does Jesus then imply that we are to join ranks with the Quakers and refuse to take an oath in a court of law?** Such an interpretation misses the whole point our Lord makes since **oaths are part of divine law as well as exemplified in biblical characters.**

**It is only false swearing that is prohibited not an appropriately administered oath.**

**Leviticus 19:12** warns, *“You must not steal, you must not tell lies, and you must not deal falsely with your fellow citizen. <sup>19:12</sup> You must not swear falsely in my name, so that you do not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord”* Lev 19:11-12 (NET).

The Lord gave instructions on oaths through Moses in **Num 30:2 [SLIDE]:** *“If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath of binding obligation on himself, he must not break his word, but must do whatever he has promised”* Num 30:2 (NET).

**Again, an appropriate oath is not forbidden, rather keeping the oath is demanded.**

**Deuteronomy 23:21-22** even expected that **God’s people would be making vows to Him.**

*“When you make a vow to the Lord your God you must not delay in fulfilling it, for otherwise he will surely hold you accountable as a sinner. <sup>23:22</sup> If you refrain from making a vow, it will not be sinful. <sup>23:23</sup> Whatever you vow, you must be careful to do what you have promised, such as what you have vowed to the Lord your God as a freewill offering”* Deut 23:21-23 (NET). **The important thing was to honor one’s vows.**

The wisdom writer adds, *“When you make a vow to God, do not delay in paying it. For God takes no pleasure in fools: Pay what you vow! <sup>5:5</sup> It is better for you not to vow than to vow and not pay it. <sup>5:6</sup> Do not let your mouth cause you to sin, and do not tell the priest, “It was a mistake!” Why make God angry at you so that he would destroy the work of your hands?” <sup>5:7</sup>*

*Just as there is futility in many dreams, so also in many words. Therefore, fear God!*” Eccl 5:4-7 (NET).

We find **Abraham** making his servant swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites, even calling this a binding oath (**Gen 24:2-9**). **Joseph** made the sons of Israel swear to remove his bones from Egypt and carry them back to the Promised Land upon their return (**Gen 50:25**). **Our Lord** was silent before his accusers until he was put under oath, then he gave testimony of himself and his divine sonship (**Matt 26:62-64**).

**\*\*\*We can conclude from this that what Jesus addressed in our text was not the legitimate use of oaths in formal settings such as legal documents or court cases.** But what he does refer to is the normal use of speech. Oaths were resorted to because lying was so common, making even oaths to seem trivial. While the ancients would avoid perjuring themselves in a law court, many had no problem using a similar oath to deceive someone in normal conversation. It is this that seems to be most prominent in our text. Certainly we are to tell the truth when under oath in a court. But more importantly, we are to **be truthful at all times so that we have no need to resort to swearing to make ourselves believable.**

**Christ’s clear command: BE TRUTHFUL AT ALL TIMES so that you have no need to resort to swearing to make yourself believable.**

If you must swear to make something true it is because you have a problem with truthfulness. Just tell the truth. How can you be truthful at all times? **Follow a simple practice.** That is precisely what Jesus meant by his closing statement, **“Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’”** Matt 5:37 (NET). What comes out of your mouth needs no embellishment as a kingdom citizen. In other words, your “Yes” really does mean yes and your “No” really does mean no. **Your word is believable because in the character of your life you are seeking to conform to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.** You have such intent of obeying Christ that you will jealously guard your words so that you speak truthfully.

[Now, this should go without saying, but in case you miss it, This does not mean that if you say something out of spitefulness or anger, to do something that is unbiblical that you become stubborn and say, “Well, I said I would never kiss you again sweetie, so I’m going to stick to my guns, and keep my word.] **This also does not mean that we show no tactfulness....**

**What does it take to follow this simple practice?** (1) remember that the Lord hears every word you and I speak. One day we will give an accounting for our words. [Slide of Matt 12:36] *“I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak”* Matt 12:36 (NET). (2) Also remember that your words are important in giving evidence of your relationship to Christ. [SLIDE of Matt 12:37] *“For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”* Matt 12:37 (NET). As one Christian leader has noted: **“The avoidance of one small fib..... may be a stronger confession of faith than a whole “Christian philosophy’ championed in lengthy, forceful discussion”** [Thielicke, quoted by Hughes 129].

And **third, let’s take our words so seriously that we regularly inventory what we have spoken.** We need to reflect on our conversations. Have we stated the truth? Have we exaggerated some claim so that truth is embellished and our vanity elevated? Have we misrepresented the truth by carefully navigating our words just as the ancient legalists did? Have we cheated on a

test or homework or our tax forms or our time sheet at work or our expense account? Have we deceived someone to make a sale or to gain popularity or to avoid a conflict?

**Samuel Johnson** was right. “It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying, that there is so much falsehood in the world” [Hughes 129]. **Are you careful or careless with truth?** Let your “Yes” really mean yes, and your “No” really mean no. Trans: Now what is Christ’s rationale for truthfulness?

## UNDERSTAND CHRIST’S RATIONALE FOR TRUTHFULNESS

We have enough reason for truthfulness by the fact that our Creator is ever true in all He says and does, and that as kingdom citizens we have added reason to live as redeemed citizens like our King. But Jesus adds one more rationale that must arrest our tongues when considering duplicity of speech. **A failure to be truthful has its roots in the devil. “Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’ More than this is from the evil one”** Matt 5:37 (NET). Jesus tells you and me, “Let your word be reliable at all times.” When you or I are not truthful in our speech, when we are deceptive, this is inspired by the Devil.

Jesus explained to the religious hypocrites that were trying to condemn him that they were just like the devil. Specifically Jesus states that the religious hypocrites were the devil’s offspring. The apostle John records Jesus words in **John 8:44** *“You people are from your father the devil, and you want to do what your father desires. He...does not uphold the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies”* John 8:44 (NET).

Here in Matt 5:33-37 our Lord tells us: To embellish the truth or to deceive or to exaggerate or to cheat or to lie is to act from the fountain of all lying — the devil. A pattern of lying calls into question the reality of our profession of Christ. A pattern of lying reveals we are following the Devil’s pattern for our lives rather than God’s. As kingdom citizens we should not resemble the evil one. Christ demands our attention to truthfulness in word and deed. Does truthfulness in word & deed mark your life?

**Appl** [cf. Allistair Begg, “Sent, Sold Sad, Safe (Gen 37:17-36) in Providence Vol. 1: CD 3, track 7)], speaking about Joseph’s brothers in Gen. 37): In a message on Genesis 37 Allistair Begg recounts the heartbreaking story of Joseph’s brothers betrayal of Joseph. Their betrayal leads to his brothers selling Joseph as a slave to Midianite traders. Then the brothers weave themselves a web of lies and deceit that trap themselves for the next twenty years. Begg gives this warning to any of us who are tempted to lie or be deceitful. “I want to say a word of warning to you this morning, especially if you are a young person, and you’ve started to take refuge in lies. You might be ten, twelve, fourteen, whatever it is, let me tell you something on the authority of God’s Word: If you keep this up you will **destroy** your life. If you become **a liar** you will **weave** a web for yourself that will **strangle** you in the end. And will trip up countless other people in the process.

“If you started lying in your business, and you have woven a web of deceit in your business dealings **you know** you are in the worst of all positions, for your **integrity** is **shot**, your personal conscience is ruined, you are always trying to work out what the other person is thinking, saying, doing, imagining, because you have become such a liar, and you’ve assumed that everyone else lies just like you. Perhaps they do.

“If you imagine telling lies as if you are taking a piece of thread out of your mothers closest, when she sews the buttons on your shirt. You take one piece of thread and wrap it around two of your fingers just once. And that’s the first couple of lies you told. Just break it apart with your fingers. You can do it. You say to yourself, “See that wasn’t so bad. I got away with a couple of things. I covered up a couple of things, and nobody found out. My Dad doesn’t know, and my teacher doesn’t know, and it worked quite well. So when Tuesday dawns we do it again. This time we wrap a second string. On Thursday we tell a couple more lies, couple more on Friday.... the following Tuesday two or three more. Let’s say you told an average of a lie a day; 365 a year. So after you’ve been going at it for ten years you have a backlog of 3,650 lies. You have your finger so tied up you can’t scratch your head properly again for the rest of your life.

I’m speaking to someone this morning. You’ve begun to weave a web of lies in your life. It is keeping you from the kingdom. It is keeping you from usefulness, and it will destroy your life. And I say to you, “Repent of it. Be done with it. And ask God’s help to liberate you from it.

Perhaps there is one here who says, “My whole life has been a lie; my whole lifestyle has been a lie.” You say, “I’m living a lie in front of my family, and my family doesn’t know all that is going on inside of me and behind them.”

That is what Joseph’s brothers did for the next twenty years in front of their father Jacob. They trap themselves in their lies. “Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny.”

Someone says to me, “You can’t deal with him. He’s a pathological liar.” How did it begin? “No, I didn’t touch the cookies. When we lie we weave a web where we tie ourselves up and trap ourselves.

**There is no pit deep enough, there is no cistern wide enough, there is nothing that we can find to hide our sin from the eye of an all-seeing God.**

**Transition & Conclusion:** There is only one way to deal with our lying and deceit. **We must come clean.** Come clean today. Clean it up and move on. Otherwise you trip yourself up, and others will fall down with you.

**III:** As God’s child, God wants to help you and me come clean of any lying or deceit that has or is taking place in our lives. That’s why I am so encouraged with the brief testimony you are about to hear of how God helped one man gain freedom and release after a failure in this area that had occurred many years before. Would you join me in welcoming **Doug M.** as he comes to share a testimony in this area with us. **[TESTIMONY OF DOUG M.]**

It’s not easy; it takes great courage; but there’s a great freedom that comes with going back and making things right with someone we’ve wronged in the past and never made things right. I pray God will give each of us the grace and wisdom we need to do this in our lives.

We must not limit truthfulness to simply words as we have seen. It is applicable to our marriage vows, to our commitments at work and school, to the vows we have made to God, and to the covenant we have made with the body of Christ — the church. **Kingdom citizens are marked by faithfulness to telling and living the truth. By God’s grace, let’s make every effort, let’s do what is necessary so that our lives give testimony of Him who is the Truth as we live and speak.**