Matthew 5:21-37

**21**“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ **22**But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. **23**So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24**leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. **25**Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. **26**Truly I tell you; you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**27**“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ **28**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29**If your right eye causes you to sin,tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. **30**And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

**31**“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ **32**But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

**33**“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ **34**But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, **35**or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. **36**And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. **37**Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Just last Sunday Jesus was calling us the salt of the earth, and the light on a hill. But today we hear Jesus dig deep into the law, and it’s almost like he’s making up for all those nice things he said at the beginning of his sermon on the mount with an equal number of new rules and requirements. Crickey, now we have another laundry list of things to do and not do.” And not only is Jesus upholding the old laws but he’s also making them **infinitely** more difficult to keep.

Well, times have changed since the time of Jesus. We have come a long way from a woman being the property of a man. I refer to the line “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”. That’s about as good as the commandment, thou shalt not covet, that classes the ownership of a woman along with a man’s livestock. Women are no longer the property of someone else, and such a view is no longer appropriate, such a commandment is no longer appropriate, so let’s just leave it at that.

Furthermore, the prohibition of oaths presents what seems like an unrealistic demand. Only a few sectarian groups today retain the prohibition as it is given here. But when one moves beyond the prohibition to ask about the positive implication of the text, it has an interesting far-reaching significance. Does it say that taking an oath to guarantee one’s word implies that otherwise one cannot be trusted?

Christians are required to give oaths of truth in the courts and elsewhere such as a lawyer or Justice of the Peace. This reading implies that we Christians are called to truthfulness and faithfulness, whether under oath or not!

We certainly expect the world to see us as Christians by our love for fellow people, but even a short tour of church history reveals that anger, rage and embittered judgements give an unflattering view of churches of the past.

It can be tricky living lovingly in any community, and it is easy for misunderstanding within a community. Here Jesus insisted that an angry worshiper should make amends with his or her estranged sister or brother before giving a gift to God. But what church, in any era of Christianity could survive if it required its members to be reconciled with estranged neighbours, spouses, business partners and declared enemies before we could begin our worship? The call to worship at the start of each service, could come to a screeching halt.

Throughout his service on the truth and reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew on the wisdom of Jesus in today’s text to differentiate between vengeance and justice. He spent a remarkable lifetime, arguing that this part of Jesus’ sermon is anything but a nonsensible and non-achievable piety. In fact, it is an unfailing path to redemption, and to a new life, where reconciliation is based on forgiveness. True forgiveness is actually based on confession, penitence, contrition and sorrow.

Referring to swearing, Jesus was not talking about workshop language; he was talking about the truth. Nothing but the truth as we have all probably heard when people are called to give evidence in court. Truth means the truth. It does not mean an approximation of the truth, plausible deniability, information based on a need-to-know basis, or any other ancient or modern convolutions created to circumvent honesty. In fact, it was the courts who added, “so help me God”.

Truth means integrity, or simply a matter of trust. It is also an ethical requirement of decent people. I remember years ago selling a house in Pakuranga, a suburb in east Auckland. The real estate agent brought a couple to view the house at 7 O’clock on a Saturday night. They asked me if I would drive over to Howick with them and sign the sale agreement. I said I was due out for dinner and would sign tomorrow. The lady insisted and speculated that I might sell it to someone else tomorrow. I gave them my word that I would not. The woman still insisted, and her husband turned to her and said, “my dear, the man has given us his word, that’s good enough for me”.

These were such times when a person’s word, or a handshake was as good as an oath taken on a stack of bibles, when members of a community trusted each other sufficiently to leave doors unlocked, even when one was away. In fact, it was considered an insult to ask a neighbour to sign a promissory note or take an oath – formal or informal – in order to participate in any transaction, since it indicated a lack of trust between the parties involved.

Well, sadly, nowadays people can drift away from those principles, resulting in the expectation of compensation for broken promises, whether implied or explicit.

I remember my boss in Hamilton having such an overnight verbal agreement to buy a house, but the deal was not signed. Consequently, before the papers could be drawn up, the seller got a better offer and sold it to someone else. My boss’ wife was furious. I hope he was bright enough to understand the slightly cryptic message he got, when she told him that they had a gentleman’s agreement, and sadly, a gentleman’s agreement only works if gentlemen are involved.

Truth telling is at the core of every major issue in politics, business, medicine, religion, family life, the economy, international relations, health care, and the judicial system.

Jesus basically cut through any manipulation of truth and integrity. Truthfulness is characteristic of the life of lived under God. But integrity sometimes makes the truth more difficult at times. If someone brandishing a knife came rushing in here and yelled, where’s Robert Schibli, I’m going to kill him. I would say, she’s just gone out the back door. Um, I wasn’t truthful, but I had integrity. It is a balance with both truth and integrity.

We can all struggle with the truth in our lives. Truth telling and integrity in business, marriage, family and even here in the church have many dimensions. Jesus obviously raised the bar and challenged the system. Simply tell the truth. Replace legalism with faithfulness, replace manipulation with commitment. Be congruent. As such we really are a true Christian community and hopefully, a reflection of Christ himself. Amen.