

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

Jesus' Definition of Integrity

Matthew 5:33 – 37

Introduction: Commitments Despite My Feelings

I'd like to talk about integrity and commitments. At the end of my junior year, I made a commitment to be a leader in my Christian fellowship. So during my senior year, things were going along really well. I was enjoying my role as a leader. Until about January, when there was this girl. Her name was E. She was a sophomore, and she was also a leader in the fellowship. I noticed that she really wanted to invest in the freshmen girls, and I admired that. She also cared a lot about the people in her life, loved to talk about Scripture, and liked ballroom dancing! So I asked her to go with me to one of Stanford's big deal events, the Viennese Ball, a tuxedo and gown affair. It was such a big deal that you had to line up overnight outside to make sure you got tickets. My roommate A took his girlfriend J. We were going to double date; the guys were going to cook dinner beforehand. But somewhere in the leadup to the dance itself, I developed feelings for E. I talked to some mentors of mine and asked them what they thought I should do. They asked good questions about what qualities I liked in her, whether I thought I was really interested in a relationship and ready for one, whether she was, and whether I should ask her about it before the dance. Because I'm kind of bad at hiding things like that, I shared those feelings. Her response was, 'I've only thought of us as being friends.' Awww... I know. So then I felt stuck. I felt awkward still going with E to the Viennese Ball. I felt awkward being on the fellowship's leadership team with her. And I felt awkward being in the same circle of friends.

But I had given my word. To my roommate that we would do this double date. To my fellow student leaders that I would serve out that year in leadership. And although I hadn't made an explicit verbal commitment to be friends with everyone involved, it was implicit, and I wanted to. I hadn't been in that kind of situation before, torn between my emotions and my commitments. My friends and mentors, David and Derek, advised me this way. 'Look Mako, most of these feelings are about embarrassment. But think it through. Would anyone fault you for liking E? No: She's a great girl. Would E fault you for liking her? No. If she knows she's a decent person, then why would she blame you for recognizing that? You haven't done anything wrong. So really, what is there to hide? You can just laugh at yourself and at the situation.' After praying about that, and letting Jesus remind me that he defines who I am, and my feelings don't define who I am, I was able to tell A that I was still in. And I talked to E and said, 'Well, if you're still ok with going with me, I'd still like to go with you, as friends.' She said yes to that. 'I want you to know ahead of time that A and I are going to make dinner for you and J. But just take it at face value. We just wanted to do some fun things altogether.' She was good with that. And that year in ministry wound up being the best year out of my four years. I was involved with 4 people giving their lives to Jesus. I mentored a few younger guys, and all the leaders worked really well together. I not only learned to keep my word, but how to deal with my own emotions in order to keep my word.

Relevance

Now I'm not saying that once you make a commitment that you absolutely must keep it, no backing out. But I am saying that giving your word to other people, making a commitment, is a big deal. A bigger deal than you think. At the heart of the Christian faith is the character of God. God makes commitments by His word. He says what He will do, and then He does what He says. Hebrews 6 says that God cannot lie. He cannot break His word. He cannot be unfaithful to the commitments He makes. So as we get to know this God, know His love and His character, His heart is that we become people of our word.

Context:

Now the context of the passage I'm about to read is important. It is part of the curriculum that we use at ACF in mentoring because it is absolutely central to understand about Jesus. It is part of the larger pattern of Jesus retelling your story. Jesus goes through water and wilderness and then arrives at a mountain. That is Matthew 3, 4, and then 5. Why does Jesus do that? Because Israel went through water and wilderness and then arrived at a mountain. Jesus is retelling the story of his people, as an example that he would retell our stories too. Jesus begins by saying, 'Again, you have heard that the ancients were told' and then he retells that commandment in a new form. What is Jesus doing? Israel did not meet with God on the mountain face to face. They sent Moses up instead. So Jesus is

going up the mountain for Israel and implicitly, for us, to stamp the deeper truer law of God upon his human nature. He is truly human.

Text: Matthew 5:33 – 37

This is the passage I'm going to look at: ^{5:33} Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. ³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil'. I want to make three points. First, integrity is unity of your word and your deed. Second, integrity is hard. Third, integrity is godly.

Integrity is Unity of Your Word and Your Deed

How many of you have ever said, 'But I really mean it this time'? Or, 'I swear'? 'Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye'? But why did you need to do that? It's because your word and your deed didn't match up. People took/take oaths when they need to reassure other people that 'I really mean it this time.' Jesus is addressing not just the issue of how to speak, but the larger question of our integrity. One definition of integrity is a unity between your word and your deed. At the time of Jesus, some Israelites believed that swearing by God was really serious, but swearing by less holy objects like 'heaven' or 'Jerusalem' was not as binding.¹ Jesus is saying it's not whether you put your hand on a Bible or not. It's not about whether you swore to do it or not. You either said 'yes' or 'no.' Your word ought to be your deed.

For any of you whose parents are divorced, or whose marriage is without much love, you know that broken integrity means a great deal. When you are part of a group project, and you don't do what you said you would do, you lose integrity, and it means a lot. When your word and your deed don't match up, that can cause a lot of problems.

Integrity is Hard

And yet especially today, it is hard to have integrity. I've noticed that on Facebook events, people will say 'Join.' But they didn't really mean it. How many of you have done that? Why do you do that?

Lack of self-awareness: "what limits?" So the first common reason why people fritter away their own integrity is because they lack an awareness of their own limits. They are overconfident or optimistic that they can do it all. As an example, some freshmen just join everything! "What limits?" Or, there are resume packers who get involved in leadership in too many organizations. They think they can survive on 4 hours of sleep a night. Not only will that burn years off your life, it will damage your friendships. You weren't made to live like that. If you are going to be a gift to other people, you have to accept the fact that you need sleep, that you have limitations. That is very related to the next reason:

Idolizing 'options': fear of missing out on something better later; fear of having to sacrifice and lose out. Now I've seen this happen in different ways. My wife and I were counseling a younger couple in their premarital counseling. One thing that came up as they were planning their wedding, their honeymoon, and where they would live is that the guy kept wanting to save money so much that he wanted to switch photographers, switch honeymoon locations, switch move in dates to their new apartment. He would say, 'Yes' to something and then want to change it later. It

¹ In the Old Testament, Israelites made certain vows as a public commitment to God for some purpose or other (Lev.27; Num.30). It was usually of a specific duration, maybe involving a journey (Gen.24:1 – 4; 28:20) or a promise of faithful conduct (Num.21:2). People also made vows to other people to honor promises or agreements (Gen.21:22 – 24; 25:33; 47:29 – 31). Breaking oaths, vows, and sworn promises was considered sinful; it polluted the vow-breaker and required ceremonial cleansing (Lev.5:4 – 5). Swearing by the name of God was a holy bond (Gen.24:3; Dt.6:13; 10:20); breaking that promise was to 'profane the name of God' (Lev.19:12). Regarding vows, Jesus critiqued the scribes and Pharisees for separating holy things (Jerusalem, the Temple, the altar, etc.) from God Himself (Mt.23:16 – 22). So should we not swear to tell the truth, in court? Should a Christian President not make an oath on a Bible when elected? Quakers and Mennonites do decline to make oaths, which can get them into trouble by governments that require oath taking. Leo Tolstoy also understood Jesus as banning all oaths; he went a little far and argued for the abolition of all courts. However, the apostle Paul made a vow (Acts 18:18) and swore his truthfulness by the name of God (Gal.1:20; 2 Cor.1:23). So it seems like Jesus was using hyperbolic language. It is still appropriate to remember or invoke the name of God when we are giving promises, making vows, declaring our truthfulness, etc. Thus, most Christian interpreters recognize that Jesus is making an implicit point with his audience.

stressed her out because she was in medical school at the time, and there were only so many balls she could have in the air at once. We said, 'Can't you just decide something, and then close the door on other options?' That was actually difficult for him.

Now for some of you, it might work out differently. Let's say that you get chronically overcommitted. What Jesus is saying here is that you have to work on knowing yourself better. Making commitments requires that you know yourself, to get perspective on your own emotions. Or you may need a different view of time. You don't have to do everything while you're in college. Believe it or not, there will be time for you to take art classes after college. Cramming everything in now doesn't make the dollars you're spending worth it. Why are you feel guilty? Why do you feel afraid? Jesus' call to integrity drills down deep into other issues. Henri Nouwen wondered how we develop integrity, and he said, 'I think by no other way than to find the courage to enter into the core of our own existence and become familiar with the complexities of our own inner lives. As soon as we feel at home in our own house, discover the dark corners as well as light spots, the closed doors as well as the drafty rooms, our confusion will evaporate, our anxiety will diminish, and we will become capable of creative work.' (Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*)

People pleasing: fear of disappointing people that just pushes things off to the future. As an example: I am a terrible long distance friend. I'm really good in person, but I have a hard time keeping in touch. A friend of mine who used to live out here in Boston and now lives elsewhere asked me, 'Your friendship is important; could we keep in touch more often?' I said, 'Sure, but it would really help me to get a sense for how often you might want to talk.' He said, 'A couple times a month?' I was tempted to say, 'Ok' to that, but realistically I had to say, 'I would be more comfortable with once a month. If you're okay with seeing how that plays out, we can try that.' Helping people to have accurate expectations of you is important.

Fear of conflict: harboring reservations and not bringing them up early. I have been a part of men's accountability groups where this has gone badly and where it has gone well. For any of you who don't know, an accountability group is a group of people who meet to encourage one another to grow in Christian character and mission. One time, a friend of mine was sharing that he was irritated with this other person and thought this other person was doing something wrong. I let him share, and then asked, 'Are you going to talk with this person about that issue?' He seemed a bit surprised that I asked that. So I said, 'Well, I made a commitment to Jesus to encourage reconciliation. If you want to talk things out here and process, that's fine. But we can't just use this group to gossip. Part of my integrity, and our integrity, then, is to help you think through it in whatever way we can, but to help you decide whether this is important enough to talk about with this other person.' My friend was surprised about that, and we're not the tightest of friends because of it. But that is Jesus' definition of integrity. As Dumbledore said, 'It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to your enemies, but a great deal more to stand up to your friends.' (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*)

So let's be hopeful. There was a Boston Globe article published on October 27, 2013 called 'Morality, Secret to Popularity: A new study suggests it's less important to be friendly than to be good.' It says, 'The researchers believe we value morality over warmth because it's a better predictor of whether someone will help or harm you. "Friendliness can be quite disingenuous," Goodwin says. "It can conceal darker motives." The new findings raise real implications about how we present ourselves. Given our usual assumption that friendliness means likability, Goodwin says, people might feel pressure to produce extroverted displays to achieve social success—but "perhaps that's less important than people think." In other words, you'll earn more points for staying after a party to clean up than for being the one to creatively make the mess. But appearing moral is harder than appearing warm—you have to be moral. "To convince someone that you are fair you actually have to engage in certain behaviors that require much from you," Piazza says. "You can't just fake it." Strohminger says her results have made her friends "think more about their own relationships and what they really value." When you're choosing a friend or romantic partner, in the beginning you might pay attention to whether they share the same interests or how funny or good-looking they are. But moral traits, she says, are "actually what ends up making the relationship last, because those are the ones that you're ultimately keyed into." As a friend of mine who's had some health problems recently posted on her Facebook wall: "It's pretty easy to be fun. It's a lot more impressive when a person is fun *and reliable*." (emphasis mine)

Finally, the last reason I think we overcommit (and sometimes undercommit) is *Lack of love and respect for people: not taking their commitments seriously; carelessness.* I think we do need to make the appropriate kinds of

commitments to other people. In many ways, we are defined by our commitments, not by our independence from commitments.

Integrity is Godly

Ultimately, integrity is godliness. What kind of person is Jesus calling us to be? Trustworthy, yes. But Jesus' goal is to make us more like *God*. God is always true to His word (Hebrews 6:17). In fact, He is so closely identified with His word that this laid the groundwork for saying that God *is* His word, which is personalized as Word (John 1:1 – 4). So Jesus wants to make us people of our word.

In what areas of our lives? In witness and in service. Word and deed are related in witness. The truthfulness of our word about Jesus is directly dependent on our deeds. Why? Because if we are speaking to others about the one who can heal and transform them, then we must let him heal and transform us first. We have to give evidence of that. For the earliest Christians, they did not point to the New Testament and attempt to prove that it was historically accurate, true, factual, etc. As important as that is to us, that wasn't an option available to them. They also had the Old Testament, but what was really important to the earliest Christians was the power of their lived experience of Jesus.²

Illus: leadership

Does Jesus take our commitment to him as a vow? Is a conversion a vow or promise? Yes, scary as that is!! We are committing ourselves to him, in every way and in public and private matters. Not only that, we start to participate in the very life of this God who is absolute integrity between His word and His deed. Because: He has spoken in Jesus to transform human nature, first in Jesus, and then in us by the Spirit. That is what He is doing, and what we are participating in.

Illus: 'Iris' Learned more about God's love.

What if we fail him? If we sin, there is cleansing. And by confessing, we still testify to the truth, that we are in process and that he is still at work in us.³

Application: Ultimately, are you a person that God and others can count on?

1. Let's start now, long before you get married, if you do. How can you be a person of your word? Ask your friends whether they think you are a reliable person.
2. Don't say you'll come to events on Facebook or tell someone 'yes' just to be polite. That is people pleasing. Be more honest. Set expectations well. Communicate clearly.
3. If you change plans on someone, communicate well. Don't just text the person. Also, if you think it might be a bigger deal to the other person, then ask, 'Hey, I'm sorry I have to change my commitment. I want to know if this affects you in any way.' Hear their feelings about it. You may need to apologize or make it up some other way.
4. Look at the leadership standards agreement. It says that the character standards for leadership are nothing more than what Jesus calls all his followers. Even if you were not to be a leader, would you agree to that portion?

² The counterexample of integrity of word and deed was Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1 – 11. They sold some land, and brought only a portion of it to the apostles to give to the needy, saying that it was the whole amount he had gotten for the sale. Simon Peter didn't fault him for keeping some of the proceeds; he acknowledged that Ananias and Sapphira had every right to dispose of the proceeds as they wished since it was theirs. Instead, Simon Peter rebuked them for lying about bringing the whole amount, as if they had made a more heroic and charitable act. Ananias and Sapphira had destroyed their own credibility and integrity, in a day and age when the witness of Christians to the truth of Jesus rested on their own word-deed integrity. So God took their lives and took them home. Even though we don't expect God to do that today when we lie and damage our own integrity, nevertheless He could! And that story is a cautionary tale.

³ See 1 John 1:6 – 10: ⁶ 'If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;' ⁷ but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.'