

Matthew 5:31-37 – “Divorce & Oaths” – Dec. 4, 2022

1. By telling this story, I am not blaming anyone, nor do I desire to pass on any guilt, resentment or hanging on to a past hurt, nor do I need anyone to feel sorry for me
 - a. Sharing exclusively because it demonstrates the ripple effect of what Jesus is talking about
 - b. I’m also sharing to demonstrate something that we probably all know in our age – many of us here have been impacted by divorce in some form or another
 - c. The topic of oaths may be somewhat theoretical and detached, but the topic of divorce hits home for many of us, and sends out many ripple effects
 - d. Story of it being my day to bring kindergarten snack while staying at grandma Pletts and telling Hulda Plett my parents had died

2. VV.31-32 – *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*
 - a. Last week Chris framed this passage in a helpful way
 - i. When Jesus is raising the bar of what people thought the law was, He is not changing the standard; rather He is showing the standard that has existed all along
 - ii. The underlying concept is that we shouldn’t divorce the letter and the spirit of the law, the spirit of the law is the root, and the letter of the law is the fruit

1. If we allow disease into the root, that will eventually show itself in rotten fruit
2. If we violate the spirit of the law in our hearts, it's only a matter of time until bad fruit emerges above the surface when we violate the letter of the law
 - a. If we indulge lust in our hearts, eventually we will see real-life problems showing up in the form of pornography, fornication, or adultery
 - b. If we allow the disease of anger to rot away at the roots, eventually we'll find ourselves reaping a crop of bitterness, fighting, and in extreme cases, murder
- b. The same "root and fruit" principle of the spirit and the letter of the law is going to show up again, but now application is made to divorce and keeping our word
- c. In parallel accounts of Jesus teaching on divorce, the Pharisees demonstrate that they don't understand the law of Moses
 - i. Matthew 19:3-9
 1. *"And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man*

separate.” 7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

ii. Part of the assumption of the Pharisees is that because there was a provision for divorce in the law of Moses, that it was okay if it became normalized

1. They even speak appeal to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as if it was really about nothing more than instructions about administrative procedures for how to provide a woman with a certificate of divorce

d. Divorce is an epidemic in our culture, but we are not the first to face this epidemic

e. There was a very strong divorce culture among the Jews in Jesus day, with two main rival factions

i. Hillel – this was the liberal school. Hillel interpreted ‘some indecency’ in Deuteronomy 24 to include pretty much anything from a wife spilling food to making her husband unhappy in any way

1. In this liberal school of thought, one rabbi, Rabbi Akiba, taught that a man may divorce his wife if he found ‘*another fairer than she*’

2. In other words, you could divorce your wife if she wasn't as pretty as another woman
 3. There were no brakes on this system, just like there are no brakes in our time, and divorce spread rapidly
- ii. Shammai – this was the conservative school. Shammai understood that divorce was permitted only in cases of infidelity
 1. Naturally, while Shammai was correct, his view was much less popular
- f. Understanding the background here is important because if you read v.32 closely, we'll see it's a difficult passage
- g. The uniform teaching of Scripture is that marriage is not a contract, but a covenant
- i. A contract can be broken by mutual agreement
 1. Smith and Murphy may negotiate a contract where Smith is going to provide 100 widgets to Murphy at a set price, but if Smith's factory burns down and Murphy has a customer back away from an order, they can mutually agree that invalidating their contract is best for both of them
 2. In a contract, two equal parties negotiate and set their own terms
 - ii. A covenant is stronger, because it isn't mere mutual agreement – it involves a sovereign
 1. A covenant is “*a solemn bond, sovereignly administered, with attendant blessings and curses*”

2. Marriage is a sovereign covenant administered by God
 - a. Husband and wife are both to enter by mutual agreement, of course, but they don't set their own terms – God does
 3. Because it's sovereignly administered, the parties are not free to negotiate their way out on their own terms
 4. If a wife is unhappy with her husband around the same time that the husband finds a more attractive woman, they are not free to nullify their marriage like Smith and Murphy because they are in a covenant, not in a contract
- iii. The sovereign terms of this covenant means that the marriage is only lawfully exited in the case of sexual immorality, because that sexual immorality has itself destroyed the covenant bond as one person has entered a one-flesh union with someone outside the marriage, and we later see in 1 Corinthians 7 that being abandoned by an unbelieving spouse is also lawful grounds for divorce
1. In both cases, the divorce is a recognition that the covenant of marriage has already been abused
 2. Lawful – in keeping with God's law
 3. Legal – what is permitted in the legislation of a nation
 - a. During the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Canada followed the same destructive path of many other nations by allowing no-fault divorce

- b. In western legal tradition, which has historically honoured biblical law, divorce required legitimate grounds, such as adultery or abandonment
 - c. No fault divorce means that any marriage can be dissolved provided both parties sign off on it
 - d. This is a contractual view of marriage instead of a covenantal one
 - i. This means that many divorces in Canada are legal, but not lawful according to the ultimate standard
- h. Having said all that, let's look closely at v.32 and the problem it appears to present
 - i. If a man divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, he makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries her is also guilty of adultery
 - ii. Now we know it's obvious that if this woman had actually committed adultery, the husband would have grounds to divorce her, and it would be redundant to say he's made her commit adultery because she actually had
 - iii. The difficulty here is that it sounds like the innocent party is guilty because of the actions of her husband. It sounds unfair
- i. Two things must be said
 - i. Because the Hillel school was the prominent one, legal but unlawful divorce was all around, which meant many women were victims of unjust divorce

- ii. The cultural assumption was that people would get remarried whether their divorce was legitimate or not, and thus
- iii. If a virtuous and godly woman was victimized by an illegitimate divorce and she wanted to get married again, she's had the waters muddied by her husband's unlawful divorce
- iv. Her husband has abused her and put her in a bad spot where she's without a husband, and not able to enter a new marriage without fear of that marriage starting out as adultery
- v. This is hard for us to conceptualize because we live in an egalitarian culture where we treat men and women more or less interchangeably, so we don't see the full weight of how significant a husband's treatment of his wife is, and we are so accustomed to divorce and remarriage that we often fail to see its significance
- vi. But God's law is like gravity. It always wins.
 - 1. Male headship is inevitable. Men have always led, they lead today, and they will always lead in the future. This is an inescapable concept, which means the only question left for us is what kind of men we will have leading.
 - a. Pirates, Vikings, and vandals? Or Puritans, cavaliers, and gentlemen?
 - b. The former use women and destroy society, the latter honour women so that together men and women can build society

2. Women are the losers in the sexual revolution. They were promised liberation, and they have received burnout and misery. Women are the ones who bear the consequences of cheap sex in their bodies, they are the ones who have to be beautiful, look cute in a bikini next summer, have a career in the corporate world, and be fulfilled in mothering. We can't treat women like men and expect happy results. The promises of the sexual revolution should mean women in our time should be happier than ever, but since the serpent is always a liar, study after study shows that middle aged women in North America are some of the unhappiest and least fulfilled people in the world
 - a. For those of us who are biblically literate, this should be no surprise
 - b. Our treatment of men and women, of sex, marriage, and divorce could be compared to an army of people trying to sweep water uphill.
 - i. They are fighting nature
 - ii. But because we have collectively lost our grip, rather than accommodating the reality of gravity, we just yell at everyone to sweep faster as though that's the problem. If some conservative Christian somewhere doesn't obey the orders to sweep harder, and stops and looks around and suggests that

working against nature really doesn't make a lot of sense, it is *him* who is seen as the problem

- j. If we can escape our own cultural folly, and get into the biblical conception, we'll see that a man genuinely bears responsibility for how his wife is doing, and he is responsible for the position he puts her in
- k. In v.32, a husband victimizes his wife by divorcing her without biblical grounds
- l. This leads to the second thing which must be said as we try to understand this
 - i. The translation makes it difficult for us to note that the wife, who is innocent in this case, is a passive victim of the adultery
 - 1. She's affected by it and she bears the scars, but she's not herself guilty of it
 - 2. Assuming our hypothetical woman here is a godly and virtuous woman, and her husband convinced himself that he deserved better and took advantage of his society's no-fault divorce, she has done no wrong, but this doesn't mean she doesn't pay a price
 - 3. Given the biblical conception of the marriage covenant, where the man is the head and the woman is the glory to be cherished, for a woman to be hurt this way is a different kind of thing than if a friend lies to you or someone steals from you
 - a. It's the stronger party who has the responsibility to love and cherish who has violated a sacred bond and harmed the very woman he was tasked to care for and love

4. The husband is the active subject in this passage. He has sinned and she has not, but she's the one carries the weight of the violation. It's exactly backwards of how it should be – she's exposed instead of protected. To use the same root language – she has been harmed or *adulterated*.
5. William Hendrickson – “*The Greek, by using the passive voice of the verb, states not what the woman becomes or what she does but what she undergoes, suffers, is exposed to. She **suffers** wrong. He **does** wrong.*”
6. John Calvin – “*As the bill of divorcement bore, that the woman had been loosed from her former husband, and might enter into a new marriage, the man who, unjustly and unlawfully, abandons the wife whom God had given him, is justly condemned for having prostituted his wife to others.*”
7. *In conclusion, what does “makes her commit adultery” mean? The husband is quite literally casting his wife upon the mercy of another man. A good man would be stricken by the adultery of his wife. But this man is so deranged that he acts to transform his wife into an adulteress. He is sending her to the arms of another's embrace. She might not move onto another man specifically, but in most cases she will be forced towards dependency on another, whether the other be a man, the state, her parents, or the church. By the delinquency of his action, he communicates that he is okay*

with his wife having sex with another man. He has emasculated his honour. He removes his own glory. In one sense, he is no man at all. And the woman he casts off has suffered immeasurable harm by his disgrace, but she is not guilty. No she's not guilty, and she would not incur actual guilt by marrying another because by divorcing her, her ex-husband has abandoned her, and we know from 1 Corinthians 7 that an abandoned spouse is free. She lives in the shadow of his disgrace, and that disgrace touches her without making her share in the actual guilt. She is without guilt, but her relationship to her husband is so unique that he, by his unlawful divorce, has made her to be the adulterated and/or the victim of adultery.

- m. For those here who have not been touched by abandonment, adultery, or divorce
 - i. Be thankful to God
 - ii. Keep from going there by reminding yourself over and over of what marriage is
 - iii. Remember, the real world is the world of symbols and copies
 - 1. Husband – Christ
 - 2. Wife – Church
 - iv. The worst part of sexual immorality and broken families is not just the emotional toll, or the toll and confusion it takes on children, or the way it disrupts normal life, as real as all those are

1. The worst part is that when a wife will not honour her husband, she is telling a lie about the church, Christ's bride
 2. The worst part is that when a husband abandons his wife, he is telling the world a lie about who Christ is
- n. For those who have been affected by this or had loved ones affected by divorce, consider what Tim read this morning about our sins – such *were* some of you
- i. Christ didn't just die to take the legal guilt of our sin away, he also died to take the shame away
 - ii. If your sins are forgiven, you don't need to look down at your toes anymore – you can face the world as one who is genuinely free, forgiven, and accepted by Christ, and no matter the circumstances by which a remarriage has occurred, if it is a male-female marriage, a genuine one flesh union has taken place, making it a real marriage which can be sanctified and made holy by Christ
 - iii. Matt Chandler story about the rose
3. *VV.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.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

- a. Lest we think that Christ is just arbitrarily jumping from topic to topic, notice that all these specific applications – anger, lust, divorce, and now oaths are in the context of His teaching that He came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.
- b. In many ways, what he’s doing here is a more in-depth teaching on the law of Moses – He’s showing the root of the matter that was the foundation of the law God gave to Moses
 - i. Many of these things are tied to the 10 Commandments – murder, adultery, and now bearing false witness
- c. Jesus starts by the simple truth that we ought not to bear false witness
 - i. He’s repeating the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 5:5, that it is “*Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.*”
- d. Here too we may run into difficulty if we consider what the Bible elsewhere says about oaths
 - i. Jesus Himself speaks under oath (Matthew 26:63)
 - ii. Paul invokes a kind of oath, calling God as his witness (Romans 1:9)
 - iii. God Himself confirms His promise with an oath (Hebrews 6:13-18; Acts 2:30)
 - iv. Some places in the law prescribe oaths under certain circumstances (Numbers 5:19, 21; 30:2, 3)
- e. So, taking the whole of Scripture, this seems less like a categorical forbidding of oaths under all circumstances and more like an opportunity to consider how our words should always be honest and truthful

- f. Part of the problem of the customs of the day was that people would have a scale of how serious they took their oaths
- g. Jesus mentions some of the things that people swear by – heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one’s own head
- h. The problem with legalism and gnat straining is that it’s often looking for a way out, a loophole
- i. If your heart’s desire is to be honest, then why would a graded system of oaths be necessary?
- j. The reason the Pharisees had all these different things to swear by was because some of their oaths were taken more seriously than others – it became a game of swearing by something lesser so you had an out if needed
- k. Kids do this on the playground – maybe others also remember “*cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye*” could get escalated to “*I swear on my Mother’s grave*”
 - i. These kinds of things show how vain many of our words are
 - ii. To swear on your mother’s grave is a silly prospect – in the grave your mother has no means to hold you accountable
- l. Ultimately it is God who hears all our words and all the commitments we make, and so all our pledges, oaths, commitments and promises have God as their witness
- m. Our word should mean what we say it means at all times, because in one sense we are always speaking before the face of God
 - i. We should speak the truth even in the absence of an oath

- ii. An oath has the weight of public witnesses, of ceremony, and of clear threats if we break them, but this should serve as a reminder to us of the weight of things that we do, like getting married in front of witnesses or keeping our word to a customer or a business partner
 - 1. A boy can promise whatever he likes in the heat of the moment in the back of a car, but the public ceremony of going to the front of a church and making vows in front of God and witnesses puts the proper weight and perspective on his words
 - 2. This isn't an excuse to be careless in other circumstances however
- n. When I served on one farm board, one of our key employees left to take a job on a farm where he was promised an ownership stake and an opportunity to take over with time
 - i. As time went on, it became clear that some of these promises were made to attract a talented individual and there was no intention for the owners to follow through
 - ii. Nothing was in writing, so there wasn't anything illegal that happened, but the morality of saying one thing and doing another doesn't change based on whether there's a formal oath
 - iii. The farm owners did not let their yes mean yes and their no mean no
- o. We are to be people of the truth, and this means keeping our word even when it's not under oath
- p. This has a practical application in everyday life with our families
- q. If we tell our children we'll do something, we need to

- i. It's easy when kids are pestering to say "yes" in order to get the pestering to stop, but if we say yes, we're obligated
 - ii. If you have no intention, then don't say it
 - r. The same goes the other way too when we threaten discipline
 - i. If discipline is promised, then follow through
 - ii. Kids learn very fast that empty threats erode authority and they will adjust their behaviour accordingly
 - iii. I often think of this when I see parents counting to 3 with a disobedient young child
 - 1. First off, why are they allowed to defy their parents for a set amount of time?
 - 2. Second, counting to 3 generally ends in the parents slowly stepping away
 - a. 1..2.....2.5.....
 - b. The countdown slows as the child calls the parents on the bluff – he already knows that the words are empty, so why bother with quick obedience?
- 4. In one way, we've seen two applications of keeping our word here – the first is with marriage and the second is with oaths
- 5. In both cases we understand the principle better when we see that we are to image God
 - a. Our marriages are to image God, and us keeping our word is to image God
 - b. As we see the deeper root principles, it becomes easier to keep both the letter and the spirit of the law because we have an understanding of what these things mean

6. CHARGE

- a. *Marriage and oaths both carry the theme of bonds, promises, and covenant keeping. God is the ultimate author of the covenant of marriage, and of the concept of truth. As such, our actions in these areas are external fruit of how we see God deep down. As we keep our marriage vows, as we keep our word, we are showing that we honour a God who is always faithful, who always keeps covenant, and who can always be trusted. Far too often when we look around us, and when we look into our own hearts, we see lies, self-service and deceit instead of faithfulness, and this once again drives us to the gospel of grace. Apart from being energized by the grace of God, we don't have the desire, the perseverance, or the resolve to keep our word to our spouse or to anyone else. When we see where we've failed, Christ would not have us stay in despair and in shame, but delights in forgiving us, in removing our shame, and then giving us strength as we press on ahead.*

7. BENEDICTION

- a. 2 Timothy 2:11-13
 - i. *“The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; 13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”*