

Matthew 5:31-37

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[0:00] Well, good evening.

Happy Fourth of July weekend. Greg and Chris here are keeping a high line if you've been watching the World Cup. They're my defensive high line, keeping me from even getting closer to you as I preach.

But that's all right. We're glad you guys are sitting up in the front. And we're glad all of you are here tonight. We're continuing in a series in the Sermon on the Mount. And so we're going to be looking at that in a minute.

This weekend, my son, Eli, went to a birthday party. And the theme was pirates, which is perfect. He's five years old, about to be six. And he loved it. He got a bandana.

He got an eye patch. He came home with a glow-in-the-dark sword. We were able to take to the fireworks on Saturday night and enjoy its glow-in-the-darkness as he ran around before the fireworks began at dusk.

[1:05] And so as we came home, he said, Daddy, can we play pirates tonight? We said, no, we've got to go to bed. Can we play pirates tomorrow? Yes, we can play pirates tomorrow.

I woke up in the morning. I had other things to do. Daddy, can we play pirates? Yes, yes, we can play pirates sometime. But, you know, at the end of the day, I didn't actually end up playing pirates with him.

It's not that I didn't intend to at one level, but at the end of the day, I wanted to do other things more. And later in the day, the Lord convicted me that I didn't do what I had said I would do.

I was convicted that I didn't keep my word the way I ought to. And, you know, I've been reflecting on this theme a little bit.

We'll see it in our passage in a few minutes. But I've reflected that our culture has experienced an erosion of the fidelity of spoken words, that we say things in our culture and it doesn't matter if they're true or if we're actually intending to keep them or not.

[2:16] I could name names, and I will, just to keep us awake here. So everyone from sports people like Lance Armstrong or Marion Jones, if you remember her, the Olympic sprinter, to some of our great political leaders, whether it be Bill Clinton or Colin Powell, or all of these people have said things publicly and have testified that they were true, when in fact they weren't.

We live in a culture where talk radio uses words as entertainment, not as an exchange about truth. And I think even in our daily lives, in our culture today, being someone whose word is faithful and true is not as valued as it used to be.

I think that we make promises and we think, I'll try to keep it. I'll do my best. I hope I can. In a generation past, it might have been different.

I notice it sometimes in culture of making plans. Hey, can we meet next Thursday? Sure, let's do it. All right, one o'clock, let's see you there. And then I get a call the day before.

Oh, I can't make it. Something came up. And, you know, at one level, sometimes that happens. But that's pretty common in our culture today.

[3:46] And I think a generation ago, it would have been very different. And I was reflecting on why is it? Why do we do these things? Why did I do it to my son? Why did I say something when I really didn't mean it and hadn't thought through?

Why? And I was realizing that for me, it's because I want to say things as long as it's convenient for me in the moment. I said that to my son so that Eli, so that he'd stop bugging me, to be honest with you.

So he'd stop asking me every five minutes, Daddy, can we play pirates? Daddy, can we play pirates? Yes, we'll do it. Stop talking to me. I have other things to do. What I realized is that if I made a promise, yes, Eli, we will play pirates this morning, it impinges on my freedom.

It impinges on my ability to choose. What am I going to do this morning? It creates an obligation for me to follow through on something. And ultimately, it violates my selfishness.

It violates my sovereignty to do what I want to do with my time at any moment in my life. Keeping our word is costly because we give up the freedom to do what we want.

[5:08] We live, I think, so often, I live so often at times, in this in-the-moment ethics of I'll do whatever I need to to get through the situation.

So what does Jesus have to say about that? If you want to turn with me in your Bibles, page 810, we're going to look at the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to be starting in verse 31.

And as you turn there, just to remind you briefly, the Sermon on the Mount is the Gospel of Matthew. The first four chapters is laid out Jesus as this king who's come.

And as he comes, he pronounces to you, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And he gathers his disciples in chapter 4, and then in the beginning of chapter 5, he launches into this long sermon about what life in his kingdom will really look like.

What does it look like when people are under him as king? How are our lives transformed and changed? And what does it look like as a result of that transformation?

[6:17] And we're in this list now that starts back in verse 17 of this seven times when Jesus says, you have heard it said, but I say to you.

Where he's talking to a bunch of Jewish people about what they've heard said about the Old Testament and about the old way. And then, but I say to you, it's this whole pattern of, but this is what the kingdom of God is really like.

And so, this is where we're at in the Sermon on the Mount. Look with me in verse 31, chapter 5.

It was also said, whoever divorces him, or whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

But I say to you, that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

[7:18] Again, you have heard it said, 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. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.

Let's pray as we continue to look at God's word together. God, I pray tonight that you would help us to understand this part of your word. Help us to understand what you are saying to us through it.

Help us to see, Lord, how it is that you want us to live in this world under you as our king. Help us to understand how it is that you, as our king, enable us to do this.

God, I pray you would help me tonight to speak your word, Lord, that you would be with us by your spirit. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[8 : 32] Amen. So what does the kingdom of God look like in issues of marriage and of taking oaths?

Neither of these are probably the things that jump to our mind about how to think about topics, but they're ones that Jesus feels like are so important that he includes them in this sermon. So we're going to look at them in this order and try to explain or understand how it is, what it is that Jesus is saying to us.

So as we look at verses 31 and 32, let me just, as we dive into this particular passage, this particular passage, a brief pastoral note, the issue of divorce is a particularly painful one in our culture today.

It's a particularly difficult one because it's a pain that many people have gone through. And there's a huge diversity of views on it in our world.

And I want to say tonight that I want to speak faithfully from the scriptures, what it says, but I want you to also know that in my pastoral counseling and in my care, and even for some of you, I want you to know that I know how painful it can be.

[9 : 47] If this is something that has been a part of your story up until now, please know that God's heart and my heart for you is that you'd experience the grace of the gospel in the midst of that pain.

So let me just start with that and we'll come around at the end when we talk about some application. This may be a hard word for some of us. It's going to challenge some of our cultural assumptions potentially, but it's a good word for us.

So let's look at it together. Jesus begins in verse 31 and he's talking about, he jumps right into the issue of divorce, but one of the things that's really important to see is that there's an assumption that Jesus is making.

He's starting with an assumption as he's talking about marriage that a vow was made. A vow was made between two people to have and to hold from this day forward for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part.

That's the old classic prayer book vows that happen in a wedding. And Jesus is assuming that that's the basis upon which marriage has been entered into.

[10 : 59] And in light of that then, he's trying to deal with something that was going on in the first century that was based on an understanding of a part of the Old Testament law.

If you went back to Deuteronomy 24, verses 1 through 4, you would see this long sentence that says, now if a man divorces his wife and gives her a certificate of divorce and then he marries another one and then he divorces that wife and then, and it has this long set of conditions that seems to be, when you read it carefully, the whole point is, of the law in Deuteronomy is to say that if you've divorced someone, you can't remarry them after they've married someone and been divorced again.

Okay? That seems to be actually the point of it. And it's, at some level, a pretty obscure part of the law and its purpose, as you look at it in context, is to deal with what happens when marriage doesn't work the way it's supposed to.

Right? What happens when marriage isn't all, isn't all that we hope it would be? What happens when divorce, and, and the particular regulations were meant to protect and to care for people in the middle of this broken situation.

Okay? So that's the Deuteronomy context from which this idea of a certificate of divorce came about. Now, in the first century, and you can read through, there were rabbinical schools that taught, that sort of had a debate about how did this happen.

[12:38] There's a conservative school that said, well, there is this thing, but really, this certificate of divorce can only be given in very, in a very circumscribed set of conditions.

And then there was a broader category under the Rabbi Hillel, actually, whose name is still kicked around today, where, in fact, it had a very expansive view that a man could divorce his wife for all sorts of reasons.

In fact, it specified that he could divorce his wife because she burned the food or simply because he found another woman that he liked better than his wife.

It was a very broad understanding. And somehow, in the first century, this text in Deuteronomy that had a very narrow, circumstantial application became the basis for a whole theology of men who were saying, I can leave my wife whenever I feel like it, whenever it seems good to me, whenever I don't like something about her, or I like something else more.

This viewpoint was what Jesus was addressing in verses 31 and 32.

[14:03] Look at it with me again. It was said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. Okay? So he's saying, that's what the old law is.

And in that was all of this understanding of this expansive freedom for men to just abandon their wives and give them a certificate of divorce so they could remarry someone else so they wouldn't be abandoned.

And in the first century society, that would be a terrible thing because a woman who had been divorced was basically on her own and she'd have very little means to support herself.

She would have very little opportunity to take care of herself. And it's really, it would, so that certificate of divorce was not completely without merit. But he's, but this was the understanding of it.

And then he goes on, he says, but I say to you, everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

[15:08] What is he saying here? Turn with me really quickly to Matthew 19. You don't have to, we're not going to read the whole thing, but it's really helpful to see that Jesus kind of summarizes in this passage in verse 5 what he's saying more broadly in verse 19.

The Pharisees come to him and say, you know, when is it lawful to divorce? And Jesus expansively says, you're asking me about, on what conditions can I break my promise of marriage?

And he comes back and he says, he quotes from Genesis and he says that God created humanity, male and female, and that the two, right, that a man, verse 4, right, God, in the beginning he made the male and female and then he said, and he's quoting from Genesis 2, now, therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

They are no longer two, but one flesh, what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. So people are coming to him saying, hey, what are the grounds on which I can do this?

And he's saying, whoa, whoa, whoa, let's step back and make sure we get the right things right first. God wants you to understand what he's doing in marriage. Marriage is this sacred, beautiful union that he has created and it was in the very fabric of creating humanity that men and women would come together in this marital relationship and in their coming together the two would become one flesh and they would become a union that is not simply a contract.

[16:48] It's not simply a mutually beneficial agreement for as long as they both think that it's beneficial, but instead it's a mystical, spiritual, but very real union where two become one flesh.

Right? It's like when I was in high school I went to this Saturday morning like science thing and I don't remember very much. I was a history major. My science acumen was pretty low, but I remember they did really cool experiments.

That's what I remember. We like stuck a rose in liquid nitrogen and shattered it and that was really cool and we figured out about gravity and deceleration. One of the things we did was polymers.

Right? And I can't tell you a bit about the chemistry of polymers, but all I know is that polymers can be made where you take two things and you stick them together. Right? And the place where they gather together, all I remember is this big jar.

You guys, some of you are chemistry majors. You're like, yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about. A big jar that was clear and had a blue liquid on top and a red liquid on the bottom and the guy reached in with some tweezers and grabbed the place where those two things met and he started to pull it out.

[18:02] And the place where those two things came together, a polymer was formed by the chemical reaction between the two of them and the fiber of it became something else.

And once he pulled it out, you couldn't then separate it back out into blue and red. It was a new thing. And this is what God does in marriage. He takes two people, two independent people created in the image of God and he brings them together in a union that is unique, that is special, and that is meant to be lifelong.

And that union is meant to be unbroken. Marriage vows unseat our independent selfishness by saying, I'm committing to you.

And it's a huge cost, isn't it? For those of you who are married, it's a huge cost to say, I will have you no matter what. But in that, there's a great gift.

There's joy and freedom and beauty and power in that two becoming one in that union. And so when Jesus hears a question about divorce, he goes back and he wants to remind you, God wants you to maintain your marriage.

[19:29] That's the first thing he wants you to do. And he wants you to recognize that any time divorce happens, it's a rending of something that was meant to be together. It's trying to pull apart a polymer.

And he goes on and he says, oh, and if adultery has happened, that's already been a rending of that relationship.

And so that may be a case where divorce may be legitimate. But if it's not, if you divorce someone for some other reason and then you send them out and the assumption is they would get remarried, then you make your spouse an adulterer.

If you divorce your wife and she goes out and she's alone in the world, well, of course she's going to remarry. But by remarrying, she's now, you've now rent the thing that God has put together and sent her off to do this thing that she ought not to do.

So Jesus is saying to us, this is life in the kingdom where we take very seriously our marriage vows. We count the cost. We count the cost of the loss of our freedom when we enter into it.

[20 : 50] And we don't take lightly divorce because divorce is a violation of those vows and of the meaning that God gave to marriage.

marriage. And even when divorce may be legitimate, it is only in the context where that marriage has already been broken. Biblically, there are a few other grounds.

Desertion is the one most obvious one where you're abandoned by a spouse. There are other grounds potentially where divorce may be legitimate biblically.

But I think we maybe live in a culture where we're very much like the first century, where people think, hey, we're going to get married as long as it's convenient for us. And, you know, I mean, what's the classic line when you read celebrities who break up?

Irreconcilable differences. We're still friends, we just don't want to be married anymore. God wants us to take our vows far, far more seriously than that because he has made it far, far more significant than that.

[22 : 05] For those of you who aren't married and for those of you who are married, another implication of this is to recognize that the physical union of sex is meant to be a consummation of a marriage relationship.

And so it's really significant. And adultery is a rending of that. And sexual union outside of marriage is a violation of God's intended purpose for that.

We need to recognize that this is meant to be a hole for us in God's kingdom. And again, to recognize that our selfish use of our physical bodies with other people outside of marriage is not characteristic of God's kingdom.

God wants us to count the cost of living in his kingdom and pursue sexual purity in our lives. Finally, why is this so important to God?

Well, you should read the book of Hosea. It'll talk about how faithful God is to his promises to his people, even in the face of unfaithfulness.

[23 : 27] Even he talks about his people as being prostituting spiritual people who run around and sleep with other gods spiritually.

And yet, in it, there's this picture of a God who relentlessly pursues his people. He will be faithful to his promises to pursue his love that he has set on his people.

And marriage is meant to be a physical picture of that in the world. So, Jesus says, this is what it looks like in the kingdom as we think about marriage.

And then he goes on, he talks about oaths. Go back to Matthew 6, if you're, or Matthew 5, starting in verse 33. Now, I don't know how many of you grew up with the King James Bible, but you even see it here in verse 33.

And you've heard it said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely. When I was growing up, the only part of that I ever heard was, you should not swear, which I thought meant don't curse, don't use foul language towards other people, because that's ungodly, that's bad, don't do that.

[24 : 45] I thought it was just about not having a clean mouth instead of having a potty mouth. But it's not that at all. Right here, what he's talking about is making an oath, making a promise, or swearing by something in two contexts.

One, when you're publicly testifying, right? So if you go into a courtroom, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help me God, right? You put your hand on a Bible, you put your hand up in the air, and you swear that you're going to testify that what you are saying is true.

Or the other time is sometimes we use it to try to give greater weight to a promise. I swear in my mother's grave, I'll be there. Right?

Sometimes we even vote God, by God, I promise I will be there. And when we say it that way, what we mean is, in the old-fashioned sense of it, may God judge me if I do not do what I say I'm going to do.

It's calling God as a witness. And so you see this in the Old Testament at times. You see people making oaths, you see them swearing even by the name of God.

[26:03] In fact, this is what the third commandment is about in Exodus 20 verse 7. You shall not take the Lord's name in vain. Again, most of the time I thought that just meant don't curse, don't use Jesus' name when you stubbed your toe and you're really angry.

Right? But what he's actually saying is don't swear by God. Don't presume to bring God in and to make him the guarantor that your word is true.

There are other places, Leviticus 19, Numbers 30, Deuteronomy 31, where there are other places where you see what Jesus is referring to in the Old Testament basically saying don't swear by the Lord falsely.

If you swear by the Lord, you better make sure you do it because otherwise God will come and judge you. That's the Old Testament picture that you see.

But by the first century, the Jewish rabbis, the Pharisees had developed an incredibly complex system by which you could swear by some things and you'd have to do it and it would mean it.

[27:23] And you could swear by other things and if you did it, it's okay, but if you didn't, it's okay too. Right? It's kind of like when in grade school you'd like, yeah, I promise I'll come over to your house after school but I'm not going to come because I crossed my fingers behind my back.

Right? So there was this whole system whereby, and it was a religiously sanctioned system whereby you could swear some things and you kind of had to do them but then you could swear other things and it didn't matter if you did them or not.

Right? And people were selfishly using this system to manipulate their words with others in order to get what they wanted, in order to manage their life so that they wouldn't be over committed.

They wouldn't lose their freedom by actually having to follow through with the things that they said. And that's why Jesus says, but I tell you, don't make an oath at all.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. It doesn't matter what you swear by. And part of what he's getting at is if you swear by the throne of God, you're swearing by God himself.

[28:41] If you swear by earth, well that's no better because the earth is God's footstool. If you swear by Jerusalem, well that's no better because that's the city of the king. If you swear by your own head, the fact is you don't have any sovereignty over your own head.

God is the one who makes your hair white or black or brown or whatever it is. And so no matter what you're swearing by in this world, ultimately you're swearing by God.

And Jesus says, in my kingdom you should not need to swear by God because you can simply let your yes be yes and your no be no.

no. How hard is this for us to let our yes be yes and our no be no?

When you make a promise to meet someone for lunch and it becomes inconvenient, how hard do you work to keep your appointment? I know this is unlikely in our current economic culture, but if you have two job offers, do you play them along for a while to figure out how you can get the best deal out of it?

[30:07] How quick are you to make sure that when people say things about you that sound good but may not be true, that you are willing to clarify to make sure that your presentation of truth is consistent and real?

How about your big promises? Things like marriage, things like financial commitments to other people. I'll pay my bills.

Part of that is because you've made a promise in some ways. I get a service from you and I'm going to pay you. I'm going to do everything I can to follow through to be a person whose word is trustworthy in that.

When we follow this, we need to recognize that it's costly, isn't it? It's costly to keep our marriage vows no matter what. It's costly to keep our word no matter what.

It's costly for me to say to my young son, yes, Eli, I will play pirates with you and to put everything else aside, all the other things I hope to do that day, all the other things I think I need to do that day, and simply to be with him because I told him that I would be.

[31:37] I would be. Why does Jesus care about this so much? Well, because he wants us to be characteristic of us in his kingdom because it's characteristic of him.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 1, the apostle Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, and they've accused him of waffling.

Are you coming or are you not coming? Are you coming or are you not coming? He said, I am coming. I'm doing everything. Verse 17, he says, what is I vacillating when I wanted to do this?

Do I make plans according to my flesh and say yes, yes, and no, no, at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no.

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes.

[32:46] For all the promises of God find their yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory.

Friends, this is why it's so important for God's people in God's kingdom to be people who keep their word because we follow a God who has kept his word.

And he has kept his word by promising to redeem for himself a people from every tribe and tongue and nation. If you listen to the scripture from 1 Peter that was read earlier, that God was going to gather people from every tribe and nation not because they were righteous, but because they were sinful people.

And in gathering them to be his people, he knew that he could not simply overlook their sin for that would be not keeping his word because his word is that sin must be punished, that evil must be dealt with.

But he counted the cost of that promise that he made. And he sent his own son, Jesus Christ. And in Jesus Christ, all the promises, the promise to punish sin, the promise to rescue people who are sinful and to make them his own.

[34:14] Those promises are kept in Jesus because Jesus came and lived the sinless life that we couldn't live and died the death that we deserve for our sin and rose from the dead so that in him he could both be just in punishing sin and the justifier, that is, the one who welcomes in ungodly people and accepts them because of what Jesus has done.

He counted the cost, the cost of his very own son when he set his love on us and pursued us.

He counted the cost and he gave Christ for us so that in Christ all the promises of God might be yes for us.

And friends, because Jesus has paid this price for us, because he has given us new life in him, because he works then in our heart to know God, we are able now to count the cost and be men and women of our word in our marriages and in every other context.

Let's pray. God, these are sobering words, for they challenge us to think about how we live in very practical ways.

[36 : 00] God, I pray that you would help us, Lord, to think deeply about what it really looks like to live in your kingdom. Lord, I pray you would expose our selfishness and the ways that we so easily want to live for ourselves.

God, I pray that we would see Christ who did not live for himself but gave himself up for us so that, Lord, we might become his.

And in seeing him, we might know how to walk down this path of being oath keepers, vow keepers, people who pursue your kingdom for your glory, for your name's sake.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.