

Series Sermon on the Mount Honoring Commitments

Scripture Matthew 5:31-37

We are in a portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus compares the understanding of the religious leaders with the true meaning of the Old Testament Law. Jesus was concerned about two interrelated issues: the incorrect and misleading interpretations of the Law as taught by the religious leaders, and the need of His listeners to have the correct understanding of the original and authentic intentions of the law. Jesus introduced this portion of His teaching to His listeners with the statement, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (*Matthew 5:20*). The fact that the religious leaders were not qualified for the kingdom undoubtedly shocked those who heard that statement, so, beginning in chapter 5, verse 21, Jesus began to give examples of ways in which the religious leaders of Israel were not fulfilling the Old Testament law.

In the first two examples, Jesus described the teachings of the religious leaders in regard to the Old Testament commands about murder and adultery. The religious leaders put the emphasis on literal actions. Jesus, in contrast, focused on attitudes. Jesus said that hatred and anger were the same as acts of murder, and that lusts of the mind and heart were the same as the acts of adultery. These statements would have led the listeners to think, “If this is what the law really means, then no one could be qualified for the kingdom of heaven.” This is, of course, true since the law reveals that all are sinners and we need the Holy Spirit’s help if we are to live as we should.

Jesus did not stop with just two examples. He quickly presented more examples to illustrate the differences between the thinking of the religious leaders and Himself. The two examples we will think about today have to do with “Honoring Commitments.”

Read Matthew 5:31-32

In a previous example describing the interpretations of the religious leaders, Jesus indicated that lust for someone other than a marriage partner was one form of marital unfaithfulness. The subject of divorce in verses 31-32 is a continuation of that subject. The desire of a person to dissolve his or her marriage through the legal process of divorce is another way. In fact, it is the most overt and deliberate way, to violate the marriage vows.

Divorces were not uncommon occurrences throughout Israel's history. God made it clear in Scripture that He hated divorce (*Malachi 2:16*) and never intended for married couples to part ways, but He realistically anticipated that some marriage relationships would fall apart, and so He gave instructions in the Old Testament law to regulate the circumstances of divorce. The quotation in verse 31 is from Deuteronomy 24:1. Jesus quoted this verse in order to point out how the religious leaders had been misapplying it.

The religious leaders were focusing on the wrong part of the verse. They were concerned about the divorce procedure, not the fact of divorce. Their emphasis was on the "certificate" which had to be issued. The commandment in Deuteronomy 24 actually dealt with a specific and very rare situation which prohibited a man from divorcing his wife, allowing her to marry another, and then taking her back again. The intent of this part of the law was to make certain that the first marriage, once it was ended, could never be restored.

The formal certificate of divorce was intended to provide legal protection for divorced women. A husband could not simply become angry or unhappy with his wife and throw her out of the house. The certificate limited the husband's authority and power. Preparing the written certificate took some time and effort. Writing was a skill that the general population did not have when the law was given. This meant that the husband had to seek out a person who had the ability to produce the divorce certificate. Thus, for several centuries, the law prevented the husband from carrying out sudden, capricious divorces.

This law was also a way of strengthening the personal rights of wives. In the ancient culture of Israel, women did not have such rights. Their status was not much better than household slaves. Wives could not initiate divorce. Only husbands had that right, and, as the Jewish tradition developed, husbands had gained the right to divorce their wives for any number of insignificant reasons.

The religious leaders had taken the Old Testament passage completely out of context. They ignored the purposes for which the law had been given and focused on the process, the certificate. They had lost the true meaning of the sanctity of marriage.

There were two Jewish schools of thought concerning the permanence of marriage and the rules for divorce. One of the famous rabbis, Hillel, taught that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason. Her poor preparation of a meal could be cause for divorce. Her untidy appearance could be a cause of divorce. An opposite view was held by the conservative rabbi, Shammai. He taught that the only rationale for divorce was some type of impurity on the part of the wife. There were many debates about the interpretation of the laws concerning marriage and divorce between the representatives of these two schools.

Jesus Himself agreed with Shammai, to some extent. In verse 32 Jesus said, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery." In other words, if the wife was an adulterer, the husband could divorce her, but he had no other grounds for divorcing his wife. If the husband issued the certificate of divorce for other reasons than adultery, he put his former wife at risk of becoming an adulteress. This would arise from the fact that a divorced woman would most likely remarry, because unmarried Jewish women on their own had no means of support. The new marriage, whether from the perspective of the divorcee or the man who married her, would be an adulterous marriage. As Jesus pointed out in verse 32, the responsibility for the adulterous second marriage would be on the husband who originally initiated the divorce.

This explanation by Jesus would have sent shockwaves among His listeners. They would have recognized that Jesus was describing the marriage relationship differently than the religious leaders. The religious leaders assumed that divorce was necessary and permissible, and they had long and heated debates about the circumstances of divorce, and exaggerated the importance of the certificate.

Jesus called attention to the principle that husband and wife were united in a bond relationship that should never be broken. By implication, He called attention to the loose morals prevailing in His day. Could a marriage relationship possibly be permanent and indissoluble? The listeners on the mountainside would have been skeptical. Even the Twelve Apostles, in another passage related to this subject, reacted to Jesus' teaching by saying, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (*Matthew 19:10*).

The fact that there were laws about divorce in the Old Testament was acknowledgement that divorces were inevitable in Israelite society. Jesus stated, in another place in Matthew, that the law permitted divorce because the "hearts of the people were hard" (*Matthew 19:8*). The religious leaders were among those who did not take the institution of marriage seriously enough.

Jesus did not here quote the words from Genesis chapters 1 and 2 which described the permanence of the marriage relationship, but He did in a later chapter of Matthew. After the Lord had brought together Adam and Eve, He had stated: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. ... So they are no longer two, but one flesh." In His comment on this quotation, Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (*Matthew 19:4-6*). Divorce was never in God's plans for humanity, but through the law He made concessions because of the rebellious nature of people.

With just a few words, Jesus discouraged divorce, refuted the misinterpretations of the law, and reaffirmed the true meaning of the law. By severely limiting the right of divorce, He emphasized the permanence of the marriage relationship and demanded that married couples respect one another, and to do their utmost to make their marriage relationship work. They were to honor their commitments to each other. Jesus' prohibition of divorce was very similar to His prohibition of anger and lust.

In this third example of the practices of the religious leaders, Jesus added yet another characteristic to the list of characteristics expected of kingdom citizens. Kingdom people are expected to honor their commitments. As Jesus stated earlier in the chapter, the righteousness of kingdom people must indeed be greater than the righteousness of Israel's religious leaders.

The next verses continue our theme of "Honoring Commitments."

Read Matthew 5:33-37

This example does not begin with a single quotation but rather verse 33 is a summary of several Old Testament passages about the declaring of “oaths” or “vows” (see *Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 5: 11, 6:3, 23:21-23; there are other verses*). The Old Testament permitted a person to swear by the name of God to substantiate a promise or affirm a declaration. God Himself swore oaths when He gave the covenant promises to Abraham. Oaths, in and of themselves, were not a bad thing. However, they were to be considered as a serious matter. The Old Testament demanded that the individual making the oath not fail in carrying out what was sworn.

Here are some examples of the law:

“You shall not swear by my name falsely” (*Leviticus 19:12*).

“When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or swears an oath ... he shall not break his word” (*Numbers 30:2*).

“When you shall make a vow to Jehovah your God, you shall not be slack to pay it” (*Deuteronomy 23:21*).

As you can recognize from these three verses, the emphasis of a vow was on, first, truthfulness and accuracy of the words which were sworn, and, second, the faithfulness of the individual in carrying out what was promised. As originally given in the law, casual attitudes about promises, irreverent use of the Lord’s name, and broken and incomplete fulfillment of vows were forbidden. Once God’s name was invoked, the vow to which it was attached became irrevocable and inviolate.

However, by the time of Jesus, some of the religious leaders had adopted the opinion that there could really be several levels of seriousness in the giving of oaths. They held that the oaths which invoked the name of the Lord were the most binding, but that oaths sworn by less sacred things were less binding. Hence, oaths sworn “by heaven,” or “by earth,” or “by Jerusalem,” or “by one’s head,” were of lesser significance and the individual did not need to be so conscientious about the fulfillment.

Through the centuries, the use of oaths in ordinary conversations increased greatly. Whenever a person wanted to make a good impression on another, he would utter an oath to back up his boastful words, and when he wanted to defend himself in some dispute, he would utter an oath.

Americans have been known to say “cross my heart and hope to die.” Sometimes they are guilty of saying, “That’s the gospel truth.” When I lived in Iran, I discovered that oaths entered into almost every conversation. No matter how preposterous a statement might be, the person would tack on “Khoda miduneh dorost basheh” (“God knows it is correct”) or “dorugh nemigam” (“I am not lying”), or some such statement. Even the thief I caught trying to enter my house in the middle of the night swore on his life and that of his parents and on God in heaven that he didn’t intend to steal anything.

Jesus found fault with this behavior. The Israelites sought to insulate themselves from accountability to their neighbors and to God through the use of oaths. Oaths were a way to conceal their deliberate deceptions, a way of avoiding responsibility to others. Oaths destroyed trust between people. The “hair-splitting” distinctions by which the religious leaders had classified and encouraged the swearing of oaths was incredibly hypocritical. As Jesus pointed out, these kinds of oaths were under the influence of the evil one.

In His critique of their behavior, Jesus highlighted the intention of the law. He did not condemn oaths as evil or inappropriate, but He was certainly against the motivation of the people for engaging in them. According to Jesus, all oath-making implicated God, and all oaths had to be treated as an absolute quality. To Jesus, there were no greater and lesser degrees. Jesus said that “heaven” was associated with God because it was His “throne.” “Earth” was associated with God because it was His “footstool.” These were familiar Old Testaments metaphors. “Jerusalem” was the “city of the great King,” so described in many places in the Old Testament.

Finally, there was to be no swearing by one’s own head, because an individual had no control over what grows on it. The point of these four references is that everything a person swears by is related in some way to God, and therefore every oath is implicitly in God’s name.

Jesus went to the core of the law's intent regarding oaths when He said that kingdom people were "not to swear at all." God's people were to have such integrity of heart that whatever they might say would be completely believable and reliable. A simple sincere "yes" or "no" was to be adequate. (*Compare James 5:12.*)

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared that kingdom people were to have an impeccable character. Because they are members of God's family, they were expected to be as trustworthy and honest as God Himself. That was the character of the God/man Jesus.

Kingdom people are required to be "people of their word." I hope you are learning from these messages how unique kingdom people are to be. They live on earth as heavenly people. Fortunately we have the Holy Spirit who enables us to live godly lives. I trust that we will be known as people "of our word?"