

Divorce and Swearing

Matthew 5:31-37 "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 unchastity, 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.

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Today we will complete our study of the fifth chapter of Matthew by looking at verses 31-37. Jesus began here in verse thirty-one by reminding everyone of the teaching of the Law of Moses in the twenty-fourth chapter of Deuteronomy. "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house." (Deut. 24:1) Notice that divorce was something that could be initiated by the man. He didn't need the approval of the court or anyone else. And the grounds for divorce were that the man "found something objectionable about the woman. What constituted being "objectionable" was open for interpretation.

The woman wasn't completely without any consideration, but her rights were very limited. The certificate that she received gave her a bit of protection because it certified that she had been divorced and allowed her to remarry. Apparently over the centuries the priests and scholars had softened the regulations a little to give women a little more protection. A woman could "go before the court and compel him to divorce her if he had certain diseases, if he was engaged in certain obnoxious trades, made vows to her detriment, or forced her to make such vows."¹ Still, the woman was at great disadvantage. In the first century, divorce was similar to abandonment – someone walked out – or more likely, was thrown out.

At the time of Jesus there was a huge debate about the acceptable grounds for divorce between the students of two great rabbis, Shammai and Hillel. Both were very focused on minutiae of legal details. Jesus pulls them back to basic principles and the love commandment. Finding your wife to be objectionable can be too broad and can be abused too easily. You might object to the fact that she's grown older – just like you, or that all of your children are girls – and you want to blame her for that, or maybe she just isn't the good cook you assumed you were getting when you married her.

Jesus tightened up the conditions for divorce considerably. He only listed un-chastity as an acceptable basis. A lot of people think they know exactly what that means, but the Greek word here is not so narrow in meaning as to only refer to adultery. Marriage is intended to be a relationship of mutual fidelity that resembles and expresses the faithfulness of God. In a faithful, considerate, loving, and stable marriage we can experience a glimmer, a tiny glimpse, a minute understanding of God's relationship with us. It's the closest thing that approaches the characteristic of God that is called "steadfast love," love through thick and thin, love that forgives over and over, love that is patient and understanding. In a marriage, a lot of room needs to be left to practice and experience those qualities.

Over the centuries, the temptation has been to treat this teaching on divorce as a very narrow and simple absolute. In fact, we've historically treated this teaching on divorce as simple and absolute, while skimming over the others regarding anger, lust, oaths, revenge, and treatment of enemies. And in male dominated cultures, we've tended to besmirch the woman while Teflon coating the man. He was being manly, she was being wanton. He wanted the service and obedience due to him, she was a nag and a shrew. A divorced man bore little consequence, a divorced woman was damaged goods and morally suspect.

Another consequence of treating this teaching differently is that some see divorce as a perpetual sin. Once you divorce, you might as well wear a large red letter "D" on your chest or have it branded on your forehead. It's the sin that you can never escape, the unpardonable act that cannot ever be forgiven. Some

segments of Christianity seem more ready to forgive murder which permanently ends a life, than divorce that ends a relationship.

In more recent times, in many western societies, we've made the field more level with regard to rights and power of men and women in divorce law. And it seems that we're again back to the standard of it being sufficient if we find something objectionable about our spouse.

So, how shall we hear this teaching of Jesus? He obviously is against nilly-willy attitudes about marriage and divorce. But he certainly doesn't declare that any divorce not caused by one specific reason is an unpardonable sin, either. In fact, Jesus also teaches that we have the authority and heavy responsibility to interpret the law ourselves. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says, "¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Mat 18:18 NRS) That shouldn't go to our heads and let us decide to make whatever rules are convenient or profitable for us. But we are told that all of the law and the preaching of the prophets hang on two great commandments – to love God and our neighbor. Those ultimate principles are to be our guiding wisdom.

Marriage can become distorted and twisted from its noble and divine purposes. It can devolve into a place where people are in physical or mental danger, a relationship that is dishonest and destructive. There's no love of neighbor in telling someone that they have to remain in a marriage that is physically abusive or emotionally destructive. To force spouses or children to suffer through abuse that can result in permanent damage is sheer cruelty. A marriage can be destroyed, be so damaged that it is no longer real; it can be beyond repair.

We need to view the people with compassion, not defend the institution. "Marriage was made for humanity, not humanity for marriage."² When marriage falls apart, the great catastrophe isn't that the institution has been wounded, but that the spouses are not acting as Christians because of selfishness, greed, lust, anger, or other acts that demonstrate that there's at least one neighbor that they don't love as themselves – and that neighbor is their spouse. The great catastrophe isn't that the institution of marriage is weakened, but that people are being damaged.

The next teaching here in chapter five is about oaths. Common profanity is not the point here. This isn't about using what we used to call "dirty words." The scriptures never give us a list of acceptable or unacceptable words to use for various bodily functions. However, society does adopt conventions as to what words are offensive. That changes with time. The King James Version uses a word in eight different verses that was acceptable in the 1600s, but would be vulgar and offensive if I were to use it in the pulpit.³ So, Jesus isn't talking about profanity; he's teaching about taking oaths. He says, ". . . 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.'" The quoted rule is about taking God's name in vain. If you made a vow to God and didn't fulfill it, you had used the Name in vain. If you swore an oath with God as your witness and gave false testimony, you had used the Name in vain.

At the time of Jesus, people were casually using God's name in the common transactions of life. In this casual use of God's name, people weren't drawn up into the power of God's holy presence, but instead they were arrogantly assuming that God could be controlled and summoned to prop up some ordinary transaction. Today, too, it would behoove us to pay attention to how we toss references to God around in our everyday speech. We shouldn't try to conjure up God with pious formulas. We aren't here to practice magic – we're here to perform ministry.

Jesus makes an emphatic statement here about not swearing at all. But perhaps it isn't as absolute or as broad in meaning as we might think. On several occasions, Paul gives testimony with God as his witness. For instance, in 2nd Corinthians he writes,²³ "But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth. (2Cor. 1:23 NRS) In scripture we also find instances of an angel swearing, and even God doing so.

Jesus continues by teaching, "Do not swear 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 swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black." Christ is making the point that one doesn't avoid responsibility by splitting hairs. You're only fooling yourself if you claim, "I didn't swear by God, I said, 'by heaven'!" If you're trying to weasel out of responsibility by making minute legalistic distinctions, then

you're still in trouble with the spirit of the law. It would do us good to make note of the reasoning that Jesus uses here. All of creation belongs to God. We would do well to think about how we treat God's property as well as his name.

Finally, Jesus said, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." Many ancient manuscripts read, "anything more than this comes from evil." Oaths are a result from evil which exists in the world. An oath has meaning only in a world where falsehood is common. In one company where I worked, those of us in the engineering department had a pretty low opinion of some of the people in the marketing and sales departments. We'd ask, "Was his mouth moving? Then, he's lying!"

You see, where truthfulness exists, oaths don't enhance it. When I worked for that same company, one of our biggest customers was the Church of Latter Day Saints – the Mormons. I liked dealing with them. I could always count on them telling me the truth, plainly and clearly. They might not volunteer information, but they always meant exactly what they said. It was like a breath of fresh air to do business with them. There was no trying to read between the lines, no hidden agendas, no subtext to try to decipher. Their "yes" meant "yes" and we painfully found out that their "no" really meant "no."

These six teachings of Jesus are not about precise behavior that we must comply with to meet all of God's requirements. It doesn't do for us to say, "I didn't murder him; I only beat him to a pulp." It isn't about being able to hold your head up and proudly proclaim, "I never hit her," when you spent years telling her how worthless she was and that she'd go to hell if she ever left you. We can't get by with, "Sure, I told you I'd do it, but I never promised."

Jesus is teaching that we need to change our attitude. We need to look at the world in a different way. He calls us to move out of the dominion of this world, where a good person treats other people with the same kindness they show him, - and justice is defined as revenge equal to the injury. Jesus says follow me and live in a better place. Live in God's kingdom. As Paul put it, ^{NRS} **Romans 12:2** Do not be conformed to **this** world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

These teachings are about personal transformation, not rules. When our minds are renewed, our hearts are transformed. When we begin to think in the right way, we also begin to do the right thing. "In the realm of God human hearts and relationships are transformed so that oaths are no longer necessary."⁴ As we follow Jesus into the kingdom we learn to participate in marriage in ways that will preserve it. In the meantime, have a little patience with yourself and others around you. Transformation isn't a light switch that is either on or off. Transformation is a process. It's the journey of faith. Amen.

Philippians 1:8 NRS, For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Rev 10:5-6 NRS, Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶ and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it.

Act 2:30 NRS, Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne.

^{NRS} **Psalm 24:1-2** The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; ² for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

¹ Sherman E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 299

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 60

³ 1 Kings 14:10; 16:11; 21:21 2 Kings 9:8; 18:27 1 Samuel 25:22,34 Isaiah 36:12

⁴ Ronald J. Allen. *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) p 37