

## Promises are Made to be Kept

### Matt. 5:31-37

**Intro.** Built into every human being is a sense of ought...*"I ought to do what is right and I ought not do what is wrong."* This universal sense of conscience exists because the God who created us is personal and moral. The trouble is, none of us have done all we ought to have done and all of us have done things we ought not to have done. We are sinners who routinely fall short of the glory of God! The Bible declares this to be so in no uncertain terms. Yet because this sense of ought is so strong, we don't like to hear we are sinners by nature...sinful through and through. We prefer to think we are good people who slip up and make mistakes once in a while. We want to feel "OK," at ease, and good about ourselves. So human nature defaults to a variety of defense mechanisms to pacify this nagging sense of "ought." Some of the main defense mechanisms are:

- to flatly deny wrong-doing while insisting my actions were justifiable (rationalization)
- to transfer responsibility to others saying, "they" or the devil made me do it"
- to compare myself to criminals who in my estimation have done far worse
- to re-define standards to soften the edge and accommodate the lifestyle I prefer
- to soothe my conscience by attempting to compensate for wrong-doing

Examples are legion. How about this one... *"I didn't have sex with that woman!"* or *"Yes, I smoked marijuana...but I didn't inhale."* Children resort to these mechanisms all the time, especially those raised in an environment where grace is unknown. With a thin veneer of sophistication, the same tactics show up in adults who are caught or accused of wrong-doing. Ever watch TV court?...Judge Judy / Judge Joe Brown / Judge Mathis. The excuses and self-justification are incredible!

Into a world where defense mechanisms prevail, came the Holy One...the Lord Jesus Christ. John wrote this about Jesus, He is, **...full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:14)** What a remarkable combination! **Truth** tells it like it is and **grace** treats us like it isn't! Yet this **grace** of God that cancels sin debts and makes us righteous can only be received by those who acknowledge and admit the **truth**. What I mean is this...defense mechanisms shield us from the truth. They provide a false sense of security. We think we're OK when the fact is, we are not. As long as we feel good about ourselves, we won't sense our need of God's grace. We won't sense our need of Jesus in whom that grace is found. It's like having a deadly cancer and being unwilling to face it and get help.

We've been studying the Sermon on the Mount...the first sermon Jesus gave. If this sermon was summarized in a single word, it would have to be **truth**...a heavy dose of **truth...truth** that exposes sin and disarms defense mechanisms. The sermon that begins with blessing...proceeds with truth that convicts us...truth that drives us to the One who is the source of grace and blessing.

And the context of this sermon is important. Jesus was speaking to His disciples. Around them a large crowd had gathered. In that crowd was a delegation of Israel's religious leaders, Pharisees and teachers of the Law. For centuries, Israel had been influenced by these religious men and their false ideas about righteousness. They felt righteousness / acceptance by God / and the right to enter the kingdom of heaven, was earned by scrupulous law-keeping. In their self-righteousness, they were proud / arrogant / blind / and ignorant of the truth. Paul characterized the Jews in **Rom. 10:2, 3 - For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.** So Jesus, who said He came to open blind eyes, began His first sermon with a heavy dose of **truth...truth** that exposed sin and unmasked hypocrisy.

For centuries, the collective defense mechanisms of Israel's legal experts had expanded / distorted / and watered down God's commands. As we encounter the Pharisees and law teachers...we say, "Boo...bad Pharisees...bad law teachers!" How could anyone be so misguided while claiming to know God? How could people given the Holy Scriptures be so far off the rails? So go gett'em Jesus! Shine your light on their ignorance and set them straight!

Yet we need to be careful. As the old adage goes, *"When you point **one** finger, there are three fingers pointing back at you."* The Sermon on the Mount proves every disciple is a sinner. The Bible says, **"there is none righteous, no not one...for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."** Every member of every evangelical, fundamental church needs God's **grace** as much as the most hypocritical Pharisee! We've all done what we ought not to have done and failed to do what we ought to have done. We've monkeyed around with God's law just as they did. We've expanded, distorted, watered down, and not taken God's commands seriously. Our defense mechanisms have turned a deaf ear to some commands and re-defined others. So what do we need? We need exactly what they needed...we need truth and perhaps a heavy dose of it. We dare not think we are better than they were! Paul declared the universal condition in **Rom. 3:9, 10 - What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;**

So Jesus came as God's final prophet...God's final spokesman. When Jesus was transfigured the voice from heaven said, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"** As we found last Sunday, at **Matt. 5:21**, Jesus began to correct the false ideas and interpretations taught by Israel's teachers with regard to 6 of God's commands. We discovered a formula that appears 6x's in **vs. 21-48**. Jesus began by saying **"You have heard that it was said..."** He then said, **"But I tell you..."** Jesus didn't alter God's commands. Instead, He sought to clarify the commands according to God's original intention. He sought to correct what was false and misleading.

### 1. The pattern of correction in Matt. 5:21-37

Last time, we considered the first 2 of the 6 commands Jesus addressed. The pattern we found in these teachings has a direct bearing on the two we'll zero in on this AM. In the first two "saying groups" Jesus addressed unjust anger and lust. The impact of what He taught goes like this...

- **vs. 21-26** Jesus said, *"You think you're innocent of murder, but I tell you, you're not. You're guilty of anger and hatred which is worthy of the same judgment."*
- **vs. 27-30** - *"You think you're innocent of adultery, but I tell you, you're not! Who of you hasn't looked lustfully at someone you're not married to? Like anger, in God's sight the lustful look is as evil as the adulterous act. You see, evil begins in the heart...and God knows what's there."*

I rode along with a funeral director last Friday. On the drive from the cemetery to the Funeral Home, he sped through a red light on Saginaw Street. He never even touched the brakes. I think he forgot he wasn't leading a procession. I turned to him with a look of concern and said, *"I sincerely hope you're not trying to drum up business for the Funeral Home!"* I was reminded that human law doesn't always catch us. People get away with many things...including murder. It's not that way with God, He holds us accountable for every word / deed / thought / and motive. The Pharisees thought they were OK until Jesus dialed up the light they had dialed down.

Let's do a quick flyover of **vs. 31-37** before we consider the details. The same pattern we found in **vs. 21-30** appears in **vs. 31, 32. "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."**

The impact of **vs.31, 32** is this... *"You think you are innocent in divorce when the letter of the law has been followed, but you aren't! The man who divorces his wife causes her to become an adulteress and anyone who marries her is also guilty of adultery.*

The same pattern appears in **vs. 33-37**. **"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.** The impact of these verses is a little more challenging to discern, but it goes like this...*"You think you're innocent of promises you've broken because you didn't swear by God's name, but you're not. You're cleverness is interesting, but your unfaithfulness and deceitfulness originates with the devil himself.*

With regard to God's commands, many in the crowd felt they were OK. They'd not broken the letter of God's law. They hadn't murdered anybody. They hadn't been caught in the act of adultery. They practiced divorce according to the Mosaic regulations given in **Deut. 24**. And when ratifying a promise or contract they were careful to swear by anything and everything except God's name. Since they hadn't over-stepped the letter of God's law, they felt they were OK.

I'll never forget the Sunday afternoon when a state trooper shattered my sense of "OK-ness." Peggy and I had gone to church and out for lunch. We then took a drive out to Annapolis. It was late in the afternoon as we traveled Rte. 50 back to the college campus. I was feeling groggy and asked Peg if she'd like to drive while I napped a few minutes. She said, "OK" so I pulled over. As I was about to exit the driver's side, I noticed a Md. State Trooper had pulled over behind me with his lights flashing. I guessed he thought my vehicle was having mechanical trouble and stopped to help. So when he approached our vehicle, I said, *"Everything's OK officer!"* To which the big trooper replied, "No it ain't boy!" He then asked, *"What was all that weaving I saw back there?"* I said, *"Truthfully, I was falling asleep. I pulled over to let my finance' drive us back to the Bible College we attend."* (You know how it is...when pulled over you attach anything you can to help your cause.) He agreed that having Peggy drive was a good idea and let us go without a ticket. But I remember those anxious moments. I said, **"Everything's OK"** and the man in authority with the 10 gallon hat said, **"No it ain't!"**

That's the impact Christ's teaching had on this crowd. When the sermon ended, the people were amazed because Jesus spoke **"as one having authority."** (**Matt. 7:28, 29**) He had no flashing lights / uniform / badge / or 10 gallon hat, but He spoke the Word of God with authority. The people thought they were OK...but Jesus said, *"not necessarily!"* Remember **Prov. 16:2? All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.** The Lord was in their midst and speaking to them just as He stood among the churches in **Rev. 2, 3**. Regarding God's commands prohibiting murder and adultery, what was commonly believed focused on the sin of the act while overlooking the sin of the heart. Now in the case of divorce and oath breaking, common practice upheld a legal technicality while disregarding the deeper issues that matter to God. I've combined the two matters because they both relate to the integrity of keeping promises.

But let me say this...In the church today there seems to be as much debate and confusion about divorce as there was when Jesus was here. In those days the debate swirled around what Moses meant when he said a man could divorce his wife if he found something indecent about her. Some felt divorce was mandated only in the case where a wife was guilty of immorality. Others believed divorce was OK for any reason, like if she burned his toast or crashed the family car. Today we will hear a variety of views concerning divorce and remarriage. But at the end of the day, here's what matters... we each need to be convinced of what Jesus said and meant.

Why?...because the view of this pastor or that scholar isn't what makes something OK or not OK. What matters is what the One in authority has said...Christ is the One to whom we must give account ...His OK is the only one that matters.

So as I tiptoe through this sensitive passage, remember the pattern and the point of clarification Jesus wanted his audience to hear and understand. Time won't allow us to answer every question or consider every Scripture that speaks to the matter of divorce and remarriage. I simply want to present what I believe Jesus said according to the pattern of these 6 teachings. So let's read **vs. 31, 32** again.

**2. The plain truth about the Mosaic divorce regulation - vs. 31, 32. 'It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.**

In **v.31** Jesus again showed He knew what the people had been taught and what was commonly practiced. **'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'** The presentation of a certificate of divorce was based on **Deut. 24:1** which says, **If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...**

Three things are important to remember. **First**, God designed marriage to be lifelong and permanent ...the union of one man and one woman. And there's nothing debatable about God's disposition toward divorce. **Mal. 2:16 - "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.** So marriage by divine design is one man joined by Him to one woman in a oneness that lasts for life. **Matt. 19:6 - So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.**

**Second**, the divorce regulation in **Deut. 24** was not a mandate but a concession or allowance. Even in the case of unfaithfulness by a wife, (like Gomer who was unfaithful to Hosea) mercy and forgiveness are the preferred option. In **Matt.19:8 - Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.** So God's original design was a lifelong union and divorce was an allowance because the hearts of men and women are often hard and unrepentant.

**Third**, the regulation given in **Deut. 24** was given to protect the wife who was divorced and sent away. Widows and women cast off by their husbands were often destitute. They were unemployable and unable to provide for themselves. The assumption was that they would have to remarry.

So **Deut. 24:1-4** specified, **If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.** This legal writ or certificate said she was free of her marriage bond. In other words, her husband had waived his rights to her. The regulation also provided that if she married, she could never return to her first husband. The finality of the divorce regulation was a deterrent which prevented a man from being hasty and capricious. After he divorced her and she remarried, she could never return to him.

This regulation eliminated a revolving door scenario that was equivalent to legalized adultery in the sight of God. The Lord said this would bring defilement on the land. These 3 points should be remembered as we try to understand **Matt. 5:31, 32**.

When Jesus spoke these words, the Jews, like their Gentile neighbors, practiced easy, “*no-fault divorce*.” They viewed the command of Moses as a license to end unpleasant marriages. Just make sure you give your ex a bill of divorcement, and you’re OK. You stayed within the boundaries of the law and are innocent of wrong-doing, or so they thought. Jesus said, **But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.** Let’s dodge the assortment of views that try to answer what Jesus meant by **marital unfaithfulness** or the so-called, “*exceptive clause*.” The main point in the context here is that men who frivolously divorced their wives and thought they were OK, were not. The Greek text is challenging, but most scholars agree Jesus assigned culpability for adultery to the man. The verb tense and voice of **divorces his wife** is the same tense and voice as **causes her**. In the act of divorcing her, he at the same time causes her to become an adulteress.

Having no way to support herself, (especially in that era) the divorced woman was forced to pursue remarriage which resulted in adultery on her part and on the part of the man she married. You see, divorce sets in motion a chain reaction where the first sin often leads to more sin. This chain reaction is echoed in **Mk.10:11, 12** and **Lk.16:18**. So the guy who thought he was OK because he followed legal guidelines wasn’t OK after all...not as God views the situation.

I have no intention of hammering those who have suffered the pain of divorce. Yet in the present climate and regardless of how close to home the text hits, the church needs to be reminded that God hates divorce. I hate it too, and I’m an idiot! This sermon was given to correct self-righteousness and to unmask hypocrisy in all of us, not just the divorced. The fact is, we all have sinned and we all need a savior. There isn’t one of us who is OK apart from God’s saving grace! Let’s hasten to the next command Jesus addressed.

**3. The plain truth about vows and promises made - vs. 33-37 - "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.**

In **v.33** Jesus alluded to a matter the OT has much to say about. The command of **Lev. 19:12** says, **Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.** To that command, **Num. 30:2** adds, **When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.** Like those who place their hand on a Bible and swear to tell the truth, the Jews often swore by the name of Jehovah. The oaths or vows they made were guaranteed by attaching God’s name. It was commonly understood that a promise made in God’s name was not only made to a secondary party, but it was a promise made to God Himself. So to default on a promise or contract guaranteed by God’s name, was **to profane the name of God**. To **profane** means to make ordinary or common. The opposite of **profane** is **holy** which means extraordinary, distinct and set apart. So in this point of law, as in the others named in **vs. 21, 27, and 31**, the Jews had been taught correctly. In each of these verses, Jesus cited the letter of the law. Once again, He said He hadn’t come **to abolish God’s laws but to fulfill them**.

Do you remember this childish trick?

Remember how we used to think it was OK to swear to some-thing or make a promise we didn't intend to keep as long as we crossed our fingers behind our back. Wikipedia describes crossed fingers as *a means of nullifying the binding nature of a promise or oath*, as in: *"You promised!"... "I had my fingers crossed so it doesn't count!"*. It also is means of allowing or lessening the negative connotations of a lie, as in: *"You said your name was Steve, you lied, your name is Paul!"*, The liar then responds, *"It wasn't a lie, I had my fingers crossed!"*.

The Jews were doing something equally childish and disingenuous as crossing fingers behind your back. Instead of running the risk of profaning God's name, they swore by things not so intimately associated with God as His name. They swore by **heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem**, and when they were really hard pressed...**by their own head**. Because they didn't implicate Jehovah, they didn't feel they were obligated to fulfill the promise or oath they made. The effect was that people were deceived and the one making the vow felt no obligation to live by his word. Sound rather familiar doesn't it? Truth telling has fallen on hard times in America! And just like the bill of divorcement, this tricky thing they did amounted to a technical or procedural form righteousness God detests.

Jesus had an answer for those who did this and felt they were OK. He said **heaven is God's throne; the earth is his footstool; Jerusalem is the city of the Great King**. And because God owns and controls everything He said, **you can't even make one hair of your head black or white**. (...*apart from Grecian Formula*) His point was this...**Psa. 24:1 - The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it...**! That being the case, to swear by anything implicates God because everything belongs to Him. He is implicated in everything you might swear by, because He owns it all. So nice try, but no cigar!

Instead of these procedural tricks Jesus said, **Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one**. In short...keep your word and tell the truth because this is true righteousness. This has always been the holy intention behind the law you circumvented by your cleverness! You think you are OK, but you're not!

Let me say three things in closing. **First**, the divorce regulation of **Deut. 24** was provided to protect women from selfish, hard-hearted men...women abandoned to provide for themselves. Are there unfaithful women who leave their husbands? Yes! But more frequently, the dissatisfied partner is the man and God holds him accountable. But from the start, God had a better plan to protect women. His plan is one faithful man loving and living with the woman of his choice for life. That's God's plan. Men, we are to be her partner, her provider, her protector. Remember the vows we made in the presence of God. **God is faithful. His love endures**. He wants men to step up and be like Him in this regard.

**Second**, Jesus didn't prohibit the making of vows or oaths. But He said there's something special about kingdom people...something that causes them to be salt and light in this world. Kingdom people honor their vows and keep their word. They don't need to pad commitments or strengthen promises. Their "yes" means "yes" and their "no" means "no". It's as simple as that. They tell the truth and keep their promises. This is righteousness and godliness because God is faithful and as Pastor Jerry read earlier, **"no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ**.

**Third**, remember the purpose of this sermon. People without Christ who think they are OK need to hear this. Until we realize we're not OK, we won't sense our need of a savior. But the fact is, we all need Jesus. We need His mercy, His grace, His love, and His salvation. His word at times may seem harsh and hard to hear, but here's what I know...His intentions are pure and loving. He wants to ease the discomfort of our sinful diagnosis with the wonder of His healing. We'll see that as Matthew's Gospel unfolds. Listen to the words of the patriarch Job - **"Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal. - Job 5:17, 18**