

Our Lord's Views on Divorce and on the Taking of Oaths

Matthew 5:31-37

Matthew 5:31-37 - *"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.*

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

Background Notes

The Sermon on the Mount is probably the most well known of our Lord's discourses. Ask the average person if they know any sermons that Jesus gave, and most likely they will say, "The Sermon on the Mount."

After giving the Beatitudes, contained in the first section of Matthew 5, the Lord moved on to discuss the Old Testament Law. It's important to understand that the Lord was not removing the Law or changing the Law, but **correcting** Judaism's incorrect interpretation of the Law. The Jews of Jesus' day had twisted, distorted and misinterpreted many of laws in the Old Testament to suit their own purposes. In each case, the Lord not only showed how wrong this was, but He also pointed out the original intent of the laws.

We've already looked at our Lord's discussion of the law of murder and the law of adultery. Before we move on to the law of divorce and the law of oaths, I'd like to say something further on verses 29-30 of Matthew 5: *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*

In these verses, we mentioned that the Lord was dealing with the sin of sexual lust. We mentioned that the Lord used very descriptive and figurative language to emphasize that drastic action and strict discipline should be taken when one has a problem with lust. (Today He might have said, "Throw out the computers and TVs and put guards on your iPhones!") The reason why I'd like to review some of this is that occasionally we read or hear of someone who has taken these verses literally, and has literally mutilated his or her body in some way. That's sad! It's obvious that the Lord was using figurative language here for the following reasons:

1. Cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye doesn't solve the problem of lust. You can lust even if you're blind!
2. Your eternal destiny, whether heaven or hell, is not determined by whether you cut off your hand or take out an eye. You could cut off your hand and gouge out your eye, and still end up in hell if you haven't received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.
3. The rest of Scripture is certainly against mutilation of the body.

Doctrinal Points

1. Divorce is not condoned by God.

"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery" (v31-31).

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day wrongly used the passage about divorce from Deuteronomy 24 as a justification for divorce for any reason that suited their purposes! "This is wrong!" said the Lord Jesus. God never intended to condone divorce in Deuteronomy 24! That law was intended to regulate divorce, and put some limits on the practice of divorce.

Israel had picked up the practice of divorce when they were in Egypt, and it had continued ever since that time. If you look at the context of the divorce passage in Deuteronomy 24 that is quoted in Matthew 5, you will see that this law in no way condoned divorce. This law put a stop to the ungodly practice of passing a woman back and forth between men, and it put a stop to the practice of formalizing this sinful situation by issuing certificates of divorce.

God hated the fact that people didn't take marriage seriously. He intended marriage to be permanent. Malachi 2:16 says, *"For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the LORD of hosts.*" Has God changed His mind or lowered His standards? Not according to our Lord's view in Matthew 5:32!

Our Lord corrected Judaism's incorrect interpretation and wrong application of the divorce passages of Deuteronomy 24:32 by saying, *"But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery."* What did our Lord mean by the phrase, *"causes her to commit adultery"*? Here the Lord presupposed that the woman who was put out of her home by divorce in those days would end up living with another man just as a means of support or survival. So that is the presupposition when the Lord said, *"causes her to commit adultery."* The Lord wanted to emphasize how cruel it is for a man to do such a terrible thing to his wife, just because he wants a divorce! Furthermore, that man commits adultery himself if he marries another woman.

The Lord said in this verse that there was only one legitimate reason for divorce — sexual immorality. So there is only one biblical reason for divorce – not emotional stress, not incompatibility, not financial problems, not lack of romance -- only sexual immorality. The case of desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15) was -- and is -- almost always associated with adultery or fornication.

Divorce is not **demand**ed in a situation of sexual immorality. Did you notice that? God did not say that you **must** get a divorce if a spouse is unfaithful. No -- divorce is not demanded in the case of sexual immorality. Forgiveness and reconciliation is far better. Divorce is allowed for unfaithfulness, but it is not condoned.

We all know people who have been divorced and remarried for all kinds of reasons, don't we? What about all those situations? When any person becomes a believer or a believer is restored to the Lord, God graciously picks up the broken pieces of that person's life and moves on in that person's life. Having said that, however, we need to reiterate the biblical teaching that that God does not condone divorce.

2. Oaths are not condoned by God.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one” (v33-37).

The Mosaic Law specifically prohibited swearing falsely or taking an oath falsely by using the name of God. So the Jews of Jesus' day got around this regulation by swearing in the name of heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or their own heads! Furthermore they misinterpreted this law and twisted it to suit their own purposes by saying that just as long as you didn't take an oath, you didn't need to be as truthful at all, even in normal conversation! They got around the law by twisting it!

The Lord corrected the woeful and deliberate misinterpretation of this law by saying that citizens of the kingdom should not need to take an oath at all to make their statements more truthful. If we are consistently truthful, we shouldn't have to back up our “yes” and “no” statements with an oath! Our “yes” should mean “yes” and our “no” should mean “no.” There should be no “crossing fingers behind the back” when a believer makes a statement!

The true citizens of the kingdom of heaven shouldn't have to add “so help me God” or any other oaths to their statements. In fact, verse 37 teaches that it is wrong to do so! Notice, however - the Bible is not teaching that repeating marriage vows or swearing to tell the truth in court is unbiblical. The point here is that our normal communication and our normal conversations should be free of oaths, because our “yes” means “yes” and our “no” means “no.” We are not to have two levels of truth. Oaths are not condoned by God.

Practical Application

Wait for reconciliation!

Even when there's a biblical reason for divorce, the Bible doesn't command divorce. God does not condone divorce, but God does recommend reconciliation. As you know, reconciliation is not easy, but it can happen. Our problem with reconciliation is that we are usually too impatient. We want to get on with our lives – we want to get a new start (etc., etc.), and we're unwilling to wait.

The biblical pattern is to be willing to wait for reconciliation. Reconciliation may not take place, but certainly the biblical pattern is to **be willing to wait** for reconciliation.

Where do we see that biblical pattern? Look at God's dealings with His people Israel in the Old Testament. God's relationship with Israel is likened to a marriage, and Israel is likened to committing spiritual adultery by deserting the Lord and worshiping idols and foreign gods. Did God completely sever His relationship with Israel? No! He was willing to forgive, and He patiently waited for reconciliation. In fact, He's still waiting. Romans 11 assures us that God's reconciliation with Israel will come in the future. It will have been a long wait!

With the Lord's help, let's follow the biblical pattern to the best of our ability. Wait for reconciliation. To those of us who are involved in marriage counseling: let's counsel along the lines of this biblical pattern as much as possible.

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