

## THE VALUE OF YOUR WORD

### MATTHEW 5:31-37

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

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.

“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.’

But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.

But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”

One Thanksgiving Eve a woman went to the grocery store to purchase a turkey she could serve the next day.

Being the night before Thanksgiving, the butcher was down to his last turkey. When he plopped the bird on the scales it weighed 15 pounds. The lady said, “I’ll need more meat than that. Do you have a 19 pound turkey?”

*Well, he didn’t. That was his last turkey!* So he took the bird off the scales, put back in the cooler; then pulled it out again and pretending it was a different bird.

This time, when the butcher weighed it, he pressed down on the scales with his finger until it read 19 pounds. He said, *“Look at that, just what you needed.”*

The indecisive shopper scratched her head, and said, *“Oh, I’m not sure what I need. Just wrap them both up for me...”* Wow, our lies have a way of finding us out!

Over 200 years ago the Scottish poet wrote, *“Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”* The problem with lying are the 15 succeeding lies you have to tell to cover up the original one. And even then, the truth still finds a way to wiggle out!

Here in the Sermon On The Mount, Jesus talks about the value of our word! When we make a promise, or take a vow, do we follow through? Do we have integrity?

How trustworthy are *you*? How reliable is your *word*?

There was a day in American life when your word was your bond. Business transactions were conducted on a handshake. Folks went out of their way to deliver on what they promised. *But those days are long gone!*

Today, agreements are made to be broken.

Coaches and business executives sign long term contracts knowing full well they’ll last only until a better offer comes along... Players under contract sit out until the team renegotiates a larger salary or trades them...

Politicians and journalists massage the facts not to give an accurate picture, but to advance the narrative that serves their purpose. People are concerned for the truth only as long as it helps push along their agenda.

Daniel Webster wrote, “There is nothing as powerful as truth and often nothing as strange.” Honest people are becoming extinct. They’re a vanishing breed.

Not too long ago, I found some disturbing statistics in Psychology Today magazine. The article read, “50% of people polled said that if audited by the IRS they would owe money... 33% admitted to deceiving a friend...

26% would pocket the difference if a clerk gave them too much change... 19% cut in line at grocery stores...

93% violate the speed limit... 89% said scratching the paint on the car next to yours in the parking lot, and driving away without leaving a note was dishonest; yet 52% said that's exactly what they would do... 68% said cheating on your spouse was wrong; yet 42% said they'd do it if the right opportunity presented itself...”

It reminds me of the man who'd been Christmas shopping at the mall. He was hurriedly backing out of his parking space when he hit the car behind him. A large crowd heard the crash and saw the accident.

The man got out of his car, surveyed the damage; then he stuck a note on the windshield. All the eyewitnesses were impressed. *Here's an honest man!*

A couple of hours later the owner of the car came out of the mall. He saw the damage, and the man's note. It read, “I just smashed your car. The people who saw the accident are watching me. They think I'm leaving you my name and address. I am not. Good luck.”

Welcome to our modern world! Truth has taken an hiatus. Today, *deception, half-truths, exaggeration, flattery* rule the day. “Say whatever you need to say, to get whatever you say you need,” is how most folks roll.

Yet this is NOT how a Christian should navigate life!

Jesus has a better way for us to live and relate to each other. He lays it out for us in the Sermon On The Mount.

*Trustworthy, honest, truthful, dependable, upright* are all terms that should characterize a follower of Jesus.

Once, a woman was enjoying a day at the beach. She had found a spot, and just stretched out in her beach chair, when a boy, maybe 8 years old, approached her.

He asked... "Mam, are you a Christian?" The lady said, "Yes." He asked again, "Do you go to church?" She responded, "*As a matter of fact, I do, every Sunday.*"

He asked a third time, "Do you read your Bible and pray every day?" Now she's *wondering, why these spiritual questions? Especially from an 8 year old boy?*

Finally, the boy revealed his thinking. He asked her, "Mam, will you hold my money while I go swimming?"

The little boy had the right assumption. The one trait that should characterize every Christian is honesty.

We should be known as people who value their word.

A Christian should *say what he means, and mean what he says*. He or she should have a reputation of honesty and integrity. Remember Proverbs 22:1, "*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.*"

Once, the pastor told his congregation he was assigning them homework. For the following Sunday he wanted them to all read John 22. When the next Sunday rolled around, the pastor asked for a show of hands.

*How many of the good church members had read John 22?* Three-quarters of the crowd raised a hand!

How embarrassed they were, when the pastor informed them that John's Gospel ends with Chapter 21.

They were lying in the confines of the church. And I wonder about us! *How many times have we lied and been dishonest at church?* We refuse to come clean about ourselves... Or make empty promises to God and to others... Or ignore the truth we claim to seek...

This was the issue with the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

Judaism had also put a premium on truthfulness. In Proverbs 6 King Solomon listed six things the Lord hates, and near the top of his list is "a lying tongue."

The Pharisees claimed to value honesty and integrity, yet as usual they said one thing, and did something else.

*They made great promises while looking for loopholes.*

Jesus addresses the Pharisees, verse 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.'"

Under the OT, oaths were a device that promoted honesty. When you took an oath, or swore by a third party, you were asking a higher power to hold you accountable - to judge you if you failed to keep your vow. This reinforced your commitment to the promise.

Hebrews 6:16 explains it this way, "For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute." It's like swearing on a stack of Bibles. The consequences, *whatever they are*, of mocking a stack of Bibles, holds

you to your word.

Hebrews 6 mentions that God Himself took an oath. Of course, God had *no one* or *nothing* greater than Himself that He could swear by, but God wanted Abraham to know how strongly He was committed to the promise He was making, so “**He swore by Himself.**”

Again, this system of third party oaths was intended to bolster our respect for the truth. But as usual the Pharisees twisted the intent or spirit behind God’s Law, and interpreted it in a way that God never intended.

The Pharisees made oaths not to buttress the truth, but to undermine it. They suckered another party into an agreement with an oath, knowing that later they could use a religious excuse to nullify their obligation.

It was like taking an oath with your fingers crossed.

Rather than promote honesty in God’s family, oaths were a way the Pharisees *bamboozled their brethren.*

The Pharisees invented a classification of oaths.

Certain oaths were more binding. It depended on the stature of the third party you invoked. In verse 34, Jesus describes their scale in cascading clout, “**neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black.**”

*For big promises* you’d swear by heaven - God’s throne. A person was less likely to violate heaven.

*For lessor, but still important promises, you swore by Earth - it's not God's throne, but it's still His footstool...*

*For run-of-the-mill promises just invoke Jerusalem...*

*And for flippant promises swear by your own head...*

But again the intent behind all this oath-making was the *getting out of the promise*, not the *upholding of it*. This is why Jesus **loathed their oaths!** He hated them.

Jesus says in verse 37, rather than take an oath, **“Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”**

Rather than rely on oaths to form agreements, people should trust us because we're true to our word and keep our promises. We do what we say we'll do.

People know our **‘yes’ is ‘yes’** and **‘no’ is ‘no.’** We don't welsch on a promise that becomes inconvenient.

The Jews relied on a sneakiness of speech to coax men into trusting them. How much better for men to take you at your word and rely on your character!

Once a businessman approached his lawyer wanting him to draw up an airtight contract that would protect him from a new partner that he didn't really trust.

The smart lawyer replied, **“No words in the English language will take the place of honesty between men, nothing will protect either of you if you plan to deceive each other.”** Nothing replaces integrity and character.

In verse 34 when Jesus tells us, **“But I say to you, do not swear at all...”** Realize He wasn't forbidding every formal oath that society might called on us to take.

In 2 Corinthians 1:23 the Apostle Paul took an oath. In Acts 21 Paul participated in

a vow. In Matthew 26:63 even Jesus swore under oath to be the Messiah.

I don't believe *a newly appointed President taking the oath of office... or a soldier's vow to serve his country... or a marriage vow... or the oath you take when you testify in court...* is a violation of verse 34.

Some Christians - Quakers for example - prohibit their members from swearing any kind of formal oath.

I don't believe Jesus is forbidding participation in *legalities* or *formalities*... *symbolic gestures* are important to a culture... For example, when a man and woman publicly exchange marriage vows, it isn't just a statement to each other, it's to the society at large.

If my wife hadn't been willing to walk the aisle and take an oath, I might've questioned her seriousness.

But I don't trust her today just because she mouthed some words to me in a church altar. I trust her because I know her as a woman of character and integrity.

Jesus is teaching that mere words should never be a substitute for honesty and nobility. *People should trust us to say what we mean and mean what we say.*

I've heard it put, **"It's surprising what heights a man may obtain by simply remaining on the level."**

As the old saying goes, **"Honesty IS the best policy."**

Dr. Madison Sarratt taught mathematics at Vanderbilt University. Before each test he'd say to his class...

**"Today, I am giving two exams; one in trigonometry and the other in honesty. I hope**

you will pass them both. But if you must fail one, fail trigonometry.

There are many good people in the world who can't pass trig, but there are no good people in the world who cannot pass the examination of honesty."

And here's where **we** get tested. How committed are we to honesty and integrity? How do we behave when nobody but God is watching? Are we *honest to God*?

It was years ago now, but I'll never our family's trip to Cracker Barrel. Natalie was just a tot, and when she opened the door she swung it as hard as she could.

Bam! The edge of the door dug right into the car next to us. It left a gash. It wasn't a dent. *It was a gash!*

We walked inside and ordered dinner. And for the next hour I was tormented. *Should I search for the owner? Should I leave a note? Or should I pretend it didn't happen?* It was just a dent. *No, it was a gash!*

I was so upset, not even Cracker Barrel tasted good.

Well, when it was time to leave I took a piece a paper, wrote out my contact information, and stuck it on the car's windshield. *Actually, I probably should tell you I wrote the note in Hebrew... No, not really...*

I wrote the note in English, and I wish I could report that God blessed me, and the owner of the car said, *"Thanks for your honesty. Let's just forget it happened."*

But that's not what the owner said. The lady filed a claim. My insurance went up. It cost me to be honest.

Wow, it's one thing *to say* you want to be a person of integrity - *but is that still your desire when it costs you big bucks?* Truthfulness can actually get expensive!

Do we really believe Proverbs 28:6? “Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich.” Not all of us will become great missionaries or evangelists, but we all can be a witness for Jesus by being a person of integrity.

And for a husband or a wife guess where integrity starts? In your marriage. The music of marriage should be played in *high fidelity* - with perfect purity and clarity.

Jesus says in verse 31, “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.”

As the Jewish system of oaths allowed you a way out of your obligation, so did its teaching on divorce.

The Law of Moses allowed for divorce on the grounds of *uncleanness*. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 state...

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, if the latter husband detests her... (and then divorces her), or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife.”

God’s law did three things... **First**, it turned divorce into a legal proceeding. Prior to Deuteronomy 24 all a husband had to do was send his wife packing. He didn’t even

owe bus fare. Now a certificate is involved.

**Second, it established a “cooling off period.”** The certificate slowed him down and made him think it all through. No knee-jerk reactions. The man was now forced to think through the implications of his decision.

**Third, once you divorced your wife you could never remarry her.** If it dawned on you later that the divorce was a mistake, you couldn't rectify it, you had to live with its finality. This too caused you to think it through.

**All three aspects of God's Law were intended to discourage, not encourage divorce.** God wanted to make divorce *more difficult*, not *easier*. Deuteronomy 24 wasn't meant to *condone divorce*, but to *postpone divorce*. Prevent it, not permit it. Erase it, not excuse it.

It's interesting, in Matthew 19 Jesus was asked to explain the Law in Deuteronomy 24. He said, **“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”** The Law of Moses made a concession to human hard-heartedness. Rather than face a rash of murders and domestic violence, God allowed for divorce.

It reminds me of the man who was asked, **“When did you discover a certain chemistry in your marriage?”** He answered, **“When I found arsenic in my cornflakes!”**

Or did you hear of the man driving along a deserted freeway? A cop stopped him, informed the driver his wife had fallen out of the car a mile back up the road.

The driver answered, **“Officer, thanks for letting me know, I thought for a moment that I had gone deaf.”**

In 34 years I've done enough marriage counseling to know both husbands and

wives can suffer from acute *hardening of the heart*. It's amazing how we can get stone cold toward a person we loved so passionately.

And once again, the Pharisees failed to interpret correctly the intent behind God's Law. They focused on *the letter of the Law*, and ignored *the spirit of the Law*.

Deuteronomy 24 was God's attempt to keep people married, instead they interpreted it as a excuse to get divorced. They focused on the term, "**uncleanness.**"

It reads, "**Because he has found some uncleanness in her... he writes her a certificate of divorce.**"

There was a Pharisee named "**Hillel.**" Rabbi Hillel interpreted an "**uncleanness**" as just about anything. I'll quote him, "**If a wife spoiled her husband's dinner by putting too much salt on his food... if she was seen in public with her head uncovered... if she talked with other men on the street... if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents... if she became plain-looking compared to another woman and her husband found someone he considered to be more attractive...**"

Again, it's amazing how times have changed, yet people remain the same! The excuses offered by Rabbi Hillel are no better than some I've heard today.

Like the wife who gave birth to three sets of twins. Her husband complained about her being *overbearing*.

It's amazing how a girl or a guy who was so *incomparable* can suddenly become so *incompatible*.

I like what British pundit, GK Chesterton, said about marital compatibility... "**If Americans can be divorced for '*incompatibility*' then I cannot conceive why they're not all divorced. I've known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The**

whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive the... incompatibility. For a man and woman, as such, are incompatible."

The differences between you and your spouse are designed to *complement*, not *bring conflict*.

The problem comes when hearts get hard! We stop understanding, showing mercy, forgiving. We stop adapting. We get stuck in our ways. Rooted in a rut. It's time to interact in a fresh way. Regain some creativity.

For fruit to grow you've got to weed and water the garden. *And this is what produces a fruitful marriage.*

What weeds have you plucked from your part of the marriage? What water will you pour into your spouse?

It's been said, "A wedding is an event. A marriage is an achievement." Don't be naive. No matter how much you start out loving your spouse, a good marriage is hard work. "You learn that love is more than an emotion. Love is a policy." Feelings come and go, but love is a commitment. You've got to stick with it!

Once, a wife fell into a deep depression. Her husband took her to a psychiatrist. After speaking to them both, the psychiatrist told the husband, "The cure for your wife is very simple." He walked over to her, gently put his arms around her, gave her a warm embrace; then planted a passionate kiss on her lips.

Immediately a smile rolled across the woman's face.

*She seemed better.* The psychiatrist told the husband, "Now that's all your wife needs to put her life back together." The man was stunned. Finally he says, "Ok Doc,

I'll bring her in on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

*Guys and gals, when you stop working at it, that's when **wedlock** becomes **deadlock**. Hearts get hard.*

Sylvester Stallone starred in five boxing movies. His character, Rocky Balboa, fought some classic fights.

He once made a comment on boxing, that applies to modern notions of marriage. Stallone said, “**Boxing is great exercise as long as you can yell “cut” whenever you want.**” This is how people today treat marriage.

Rather than roll up their shirtsleeves and do the dirty work every successful marriage requires, they yell “**cut**” and take the easy way out. The Law of Moses countered this attitude. It slowed folks down and made them think, rather than yell “**cut**” and just walk away.

Moses allowed divorce because of the hardness of our hearts, **but Jesus is able to change our hearts!**

This His specialty. Ezekiel 36 promises that Jesus will take out our heart of stone, and replace it with a heart of flesh. Jesus is able to soften hard hearts.

Jesus can take a stone-hard heart, soak it with grace, knead it with mercy, soften it with sensitivity, inject it with love - *make it as soft as a baby's behind!*

**And this gives Jesus the right to raise the bar on marriage.** Moses couldn't do anything about heart hardness, so he had to let his followers get a divorce or they'd kill each other. Whereas, Jesus is able to change a hard-heart. *This is why He prohibits divorce.*

We no longer have to suffer from stoney hearts!

Jesus tells us in verse 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.”

Jesus, and the rest of the NT, takes divorce off the table for His followers... **with two exceptions...**

In verse 32 the one exception is “*sexual immorality.*”

The Greek word is “*porneia*” from which we get our term, “**pornography.**” It’s a broad term. It included all types of *sexual promiscuity* - *adultery, incest, pedophilia, homosexuality, prostitution, etc., etc.*

Here Jesus is saying if your spouse engages in any type of sexual behavior outside the marriage covenant; then you are free to divorce him or her and remarry.

*Take note, divorce is not commanded.* God has and can repair the damage caused by marital infidelity. But reconciliation can be painful, thus divorce is permitted.

In the OT, if a person was guilty of adultery they were taken to the town square, put knee-deep in a pit of mud, and the townspeople stoned them to death.

The adulterer was punished. And now the offended spouse was a widow or widower, and free to remarry.

In contrast, Jesus shows mercy to the guilty, and at the same time He avoids punishing the innocent. He gives the innocent spouse the prerogative to exit the marriage if he or she so desires. It’s mercy all around.

There is one other biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul talks about a spouse being abandoned because of their Christianity.

Say your spouse is an unbeliever, and he or she no longer wants to remain married to a believer in Jesus.

You don't party like you use to... you don't smoke pot, and watch porn, and whatever else you once did.

So in the eyes of your unbelieving spouse you're no fun anymore. *And they decide to leave the marriage.*

In such a case, Paul has compassion on the believer. He or she has been persecuted, abandoned.

It would be cruel to force the believer to remain bound to a spouse who no longer wants to be married.

Thus Paul writes, "If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases." They can move on and start over.

So here are the two biblical exceptions for divorce and remarriage - **sexual immorality** and **abandonment**.

So if *he gets fat, or she grows crabby, or somebody loses a job, or the kids go nuts, or she runs up the credit cards, or he plays too much golf, or he hurts her feelings, or she neglects his needs...* these are all problems to be solved, but the answer is not divorce!

**Jesus can change a person's heart!** Pray about it, talk it over, work it through, stick it out - even get some help, and show some patience, and love and love a lot.

But you have no biblical basis to pursue a divorce.

It's the book of Malachi that give us a crystal clear glimpse into God's attitude on divorce. In Malachi 2:15 the prophet writes, "Take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth."

For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence."

Divorce on unbiblical grounds is evil for two reasons.

**First, it breaks the heart of God.** It damages the picture that God wants to paint in every marriage.

You and your spouse are a spiritual snapshot of Jesus and His Church - and divorce blurs the picture.

How would you feel if someone broke into your house and ripped apart your wedding album? Spoiled all your pictures. This is how God feels about divorce.

The **second** reason God hates divorce is **it breaks the hearts of those who are forced to endure it.**

It damages the feuding adults and the kids they drag through it with them. Judith Wallerstein, a California psychologist, studied 60 divorced families over a ten year period. She concluded "Divorce has been a wrenching experience for every family I've ever seen."

I talk to kids who's parents waited until they were adults before they divorced. They thought as adults their kids wouldn't be as traumatized. *Wow, were they wrong.* Whenever *parents* split, it splits a kid's heart.

You think divorce is a sniper's rifle and the only person you'll effect is the spouse in your sites, *but not true...* Divorce is more like a pipe bomb blast. The ramifications

are *wide spread* and *far reaching*. Stuff you never intended to damage ends up destroyed.

Malachi considers divorce a violent crime. He writes, “it covers one’s garment with violence.” Think of a blood-splattered shirt. Think brutal... vicious... messy.

The Bible teaches that marriage makes us one flesh. When children are born they become part of that union. Emotions, dreams, identities, destinies all intertwine.

You can’t now separate the appendages of *that One*, without a lot of bleeding, and tearing, and hurting...

Billy Graham wrote, "Divorce is an easy escape, many think. But in counseling divorcees, I have discovered the guilt and loneliness they experience can be even more tragic than living with the problem."

Think it through before you sign those papers.

It might be worth another try...

Remember, *you took a vow.*

*You made a promise.*

*You gave your word.*

There’s a spouse who remembers the promise you made... There’s a little boy, a little girl, who’s still counting on you to keep your word to them... *You said you’d never leave. You’d always be there for them.*

Now you’re being tested. Pray and let Jesus soften your heart and strengthen your resolve. *Christians are people who value their word.* Be a person of integrity.

Most importantly, God's reputation, His glory, hangs in the balance. Jesus takes seriously the words we speak, and the promises we make. *We should too.*

And if you've made a promise you didn't keep, and you think it's too late to do anything about it, *you're wrong!* **You can be forgiven and forgiveness matters.**

It allows us to start over. It gives us God's power to avoid the same mistakes. Jesus makes all things new.

If you need to be forgiven today, come to Jesus. He'll blot out your sin and failure. He'll help you begin again.

He'll make you the person *who keeps his word!*