

Sermon on the Mount

Message 7

Keeping Your Word

Matthew 5:27-37

Introduction

What would you give your right arm for? A's in all your courses? Your dream job? A sharp car? A gorgeous, sexy wife or hunky, sexy husband? A million dollars? Or are you so fond of your right arm there is nothing that would entice you to part with it? How about chastity? Yes, that's right – pure thoughts and behavior toward the opposite sex? Would you give your right arm for the ability to live a chaste life? All right, I know this sounds totally ridiculous – especially in the 21st century. Perhaps the Puritans or the Victorians might have thought this way, but no one does anymore. Sex is everywhere these days. Fifty years ago you had to sneak out to a sleazy part of town to find pictures of naked women, and if anyone caught you, it was hugely embarrassing. Dirty jokes were confined to the men's locker room – except for disreputable people. Now we are swimming in a sea of sex – in magazines, on TV, in movies, music, and even some of your classes. And the idea of chastity is considered laughable or cruel. Even among Christians behavior once considered sinful is now accepted. Studies consistently show that sexual ethics are no better among professing Christians than among unbelievers. It seems in this area we are hardly living up to the vision of God's Kingdom that Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount.

We are in the midst of this sermon, where Jesus is explaining the true meaning and application of God's law. Last week we looked at Jesus' treatment of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not murder," and saw that this command was supposed to include a prohibition against self-centered anger. This week we will look at Jesus' teaching on the seventh and ninth commandments – "Thou shalt not commit adultery", and "Thou shalt not bear false witness." People often say this passage is Jesus expanding the scope of the law to suit the New Covenant he is initiating. There is some truth in that, but it is more accurate to say that Jesus is restoring the law to its original intent. Jesus said that the people in His Kingdom must be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. These people were famous for keeping the law. The trouble was, they only kept the *visible* aspects of the law. Their religion was one of external obedience. They scrupulously kept the laws that people could see, but did not care what was in their hearts. Jesus is teaching that obedience includes the heart, too. But that is also an Old Testament concept. In Deuteronomy 6:4-6 Moses said,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

That is an Old Testament teaching. The idea that the Old Testament was a religion of externals and the New Testament is a religion of the heart is false. From the beginning God called people to love and obey Him from the heart. Jesus is just returning to the original intent of God's law.

Sexual Sin

I suppose you have heard it said before, and it is true – the Bible is against sex outside of marriage. If you are going to be a follower of Jesus, you have to accept that He affirmed this prohibition and explained it to include your thoughts and desires. Adultery, strictly speaking, is sex by a married person with someone not his or her spouse. But this command was designed to include all sorts of sexual immorality, which is clear by the numerous subsidiary laws. Sometime look at Leviticus chapters 18 and 20. In these and other passages there are laws concerning sex between relatives, sex with the same sex, sex with animals, sex with a slave, sex between unmarried people, sex in the country, and sex in the city. But adultery is specially important because it involves breaking a covenant. Marriage is a symbol of God's relationship to His

people. It shows the longing, the tenderness, the intimacy, and the commitment of God toward us. When we are faithless in marriage, we symbolize an unfaithful God – and God will not tolerate such slander. Obedience is always both heart and behavior. Jesus reminds us that sexual purity must include faithfulness in our thoughts as well as in our behavior. We must avoid heart adultery as well as body adultery.

Integrity in marriage is so important, Jesus says you should gouge out your eye if it causes you to sin. If seeing sexually attractive Lehigh men or women causes you to desire them, cut out the eye that sees them. There are two mistakes we can make with this passage. Some people have taken a knife and cut off the body parts that cause them to sin. The problem with this approach is that the Bible forbids us to mutilate our bodies. Leviticus 19:28 says, “You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead...” I think this verse applies to any sort of bodily mutilation. Furthermore, our bodies were created by God. We should care for them, not damage them. In the New Testament we learn that God lives in our bodies. We should take care of them because He lives in them. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” God is not glorified by a mutilated body.

The other mistake is to pass by this teaching as irrelevant. What Jesus is doing is engaging in hyperbole. It is like when I say to my children, “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate.” We all know I am consciously exaggerating to make a point. In this passage we all know from other scriptures that Jesus does not mean literally to cut off body parts. He is exaggerating to make a point. Jesus often used hyperbole to communicate vividly. Jesus is saying sexual purity is really important – really *really* important. It is so important, you should give your right arm for it – if that would help. The man who castrated himself to escape lustful thoughts had the right heart, although not the right solution.

If cutting off your eyes and hands is not the solution, what is? How do we get our hearts right? Part of the solution is to avoid temptation. Remove your eyes and hands from things which will lead you astray. There is much that we could say, but four examples are magazines, movies, television, and the internet. Are you reading and watching things which encourage godly thoughts? Or are you reading and watching things which stimulate lustful thoughts? And by the way, this is not directed just to men. Women also lust for illicit sexual gratification. Our culture presents an image of romance, love, and sex which is radically unbiblical. Men lust for stunningly beautiful women, and women lust for exciting, romantic men. God has given us a healthy desire for sex and romance. The Bible is all in favor of these. It is the insatiable desire that is wrong. Those in Jesus Kingdom have an insatiable desire for righteousness. Remember? We pursue mercy and peacemaking, not sex and romance. In Jesus’ Kingdom, sex and romance are gifts of God which we receive with gratitude in His time as we go about the work of His Kingdom.

I do need to produce a list of prohibited movies and such. You know what makes you lust. It is not always the same for everyone. If your friends are going to see the latest James Bond movie and you know it will tempt you, then you stay home. God is the judge of each man’s conscience. You do what you know to be right.

Without dwelling on this point, we must also say that the means of grace help us to overcome temptation and develop godly desires. You cannot fight lust if you do not have a life of prayer, Bible reading, and worship. If do not pray and read your Bible every day, and go to church every week, begin tomorrow.

Divorce

Divorce was easy to obtain in Jesus’ day. The Jewish leaders twisted the law to make divorce easy. Let’s read the actual passage upon which this distortion is based.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. Deuteronomy 24:1-4

You see, the point of this passage is not how to get a divorce, but that you may not remarry a woman after she has become the wife of another man. The first three verses are an extended “if” clause. They set up the situation. The command is in verse four, “then her former husband...may not take her again.” Later in Matthew’s gospel Jesus taught that this whole situation was a concession to man’s sinfulness. Let’s read Matthew 19:3-8.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” Matthew 19:3-8

We can summarize Jesus’ teaching this way: there is no such thing as no-fault divorce. That is a cruel hoax that has been foisted on us. Marriage is a life-long covenant. A covenant is a permanent bond. You cannot make and break a covenant the way you might a business contract. This is not to say a marriage covenant cannot be broken. Jesus teaches that adultery breaks a marriage covenant. In such a case divorce may follow, but not necessarily. But obviously, the adulterer is at fault. His or her sin broke the covenant.

I know this can be a hard lesson for us. We live in a culture of easy and frequent divorce. Some of you here come from homes which have been broken by divorce. I do not stand here to judge your parents or to inflame deep wounds. The same Jesus who said divorce is wrong also spoke tenderly to the adulterous woman. Then He told her to cease sinning. It is false mercy to condone divorce for any and all causes. It may seem compassionate to sympathize with a friend who is struggling through a difficult marriage and moving toward divorce. No matter how difficult our circumstances, God gives us the grace to persevere. We may not *feel* like we can endure, but we can. One sin does not repair another, and divorce often is sin. However, for those who have divorced we say, turn to Jesus and be forgiven. Then go and sin no more.

Oaths

Jesus next takes up the subject of oaths. His quote seems to be a combination of two Old Testament verses. Leviticus 19:12 says “You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.” And in Deuteronomy 23:21 we read, “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.”

You can see by these passages that God takes our words seriously – more seriously than we take ourselves. God honors what we say, and He expects us to say only honorable things. If this is true of us, then our word will be reliable. If we always mean what we say and keep our word, people will be able to trust anything we say.

Jesus was speaking to a society where this was not always the case. Like people today, those in Jesus' time often equivocated. Then whenever they wanted someone to believe them, they would have to find some special method of convincing him that this time they were really telling the truth. Now the Pharisees were diligent to tell the truth – at least technically. But to escape from unfortunate promises, they constructed loopholes. They made rules like the one which said that if you swore by the temple you were free from your oath, but if you swore by the gold in the temple you had to pay up. Let's read Matthew 23:16-22 where Jesus returns to this theme.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

In their hypocrisy the Pharisees focused on the formula rather than the promise. The result was that you could never trust them.

Now some people look at this passage and conclude that any and all oaths are wrong for believers. Under this view a Christian should refuse to take an oath of office. But that is to miss the whole point here. This passage is about people who, in their ordinary lives, are not entirely trustworthy. Such people resort to oaths to try to make you believe that *this* time they are really telling the truth. They use oaths as a crutch to support their generally untrustworthy character. This is not about submitting to an oath required by a civil magistrate. It is the difference between resorting to oaths and submitting to oaths, between personal speech and civil affairs.

Godly men wrote some wise counsel about this years ago.

“...as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.” WCF 22.2

So they decided that a lawful government has the right to require a oath for serious matters. They went further and concluded that it is even wrong to refuse such a requirement.

“...it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.” WCF 22.3

For us, the application is to be utterly truthful in all we say. We should be so reliable that people will take a simple “yes” or “no” as an absolute certainty.

Conclusion

There is a central idea in all we have discussed tonight. We must be people of integrity. In marriage and in everyday affairs, your word must be your bond. God takes these things very seriously. You may think that you can escape a difficult marriage and live happily ever after with someone better suited to you, but God says, “...the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” (Malachi 2:14) You may enjoy embellishing the truth or spinning it a little bit, but God requires a wholehearted “yes” or “no”.

There are three reasons why the integrity of your word is so important. First, we are the image of God. In this universe we represent God. And as believers, we are representatives of Christ. We are unfaithful to our nature if we twist the truth. Second, if we are unfaithful in our words, we imply that God is likewise unfaithful. We are witnesses of Christ. We must not show that Jesus cannot be trusted. And third, if God does not keep His word, the gospel is a cruel joke. If God tells us after we die that He has changed His mind, that believing in Jesus is not enough after all to be saved, we are doomed.

- 1 O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
- 2 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
- 3 who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
- 4 in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honors those who fear the LORD;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change... Psalm 15:1-4

- Maintain your integrity at any cost.
- Rely on Christ to help us.

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