

# Jesus at the Center of the Kingdom

## Divorce and Oaths • Message 6

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#### A. Introduction

As we continue our series entitled *Jesus at the Center of the Kingdom*, I wanted to remind you of Jesus' presenting what is widely considered the greatest speech in history, the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus clarifies some mistakes and expounds on teachings that were prevalent in His day. It is also a wonderful passage to study because it is the sermon that primarily has shaped the Western view on ethics.

You might be thinking to yourself, *I am not sure how the Pharisees could get there; how could they take the law and misconstrue it in order to avoid, and in some cases, minimize its impact in their lives?*

The object of the game is simple. There is a kiddie pool with a watermelon inside. Teams were to pass a bucket from the gulf to the end of the line where the kiddie pool was and fill the pool to a point where the water would overflow. One twist, each bucket has a hole in it. The older the students, the larger the hole in the bucket.

That's the rules. So, what do these mature and Christ-honoring students do in order to participate in a Christ-honoring way? They cheat. They find loopholes in the rules, they minimize what should be a large part of the competition, the holes, and they maximize a minimum part of the competition by violently dumping their buckets in order for the judges to maybe decide that they overfilled their kiddie pool.

At one point in time, I saw the leader of a group take their foot and drain the pool of another group's pool. That group's leader was the spouse of the leader of the other group. Their cheating was now causing marital discord.

I even heard one group discussing what the word *pass* even meant as the largest and fastest children, aka the adult leaders, would sprint to the ocean and have every child touch the bucket on the way to the kiddie pool.

So, while sometimes we can read the Scriptures and think that was another time and another place. I can assure you that the spirit of the Pharisees is alive and well with us.

So, today we will be discussing Marriage and Divorce.

**B. Divorce** (Matthew 5:31-32. C/R: Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:1-12)

*“You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’ But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.”*

**Matthew 5:31-32 (NLT)**

While this snippet of the Sermon on the Mount is small, I think it is more of a summary of Jesus’ view on divorce and marriage. For a fuller snapshot of Jesus’ view on the subject, we will look at Matthew 19.

*Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Him with this question: “Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?”*

*“Haven’t you read the Scriptures?” Jesus replied. “They record that from the beginning ‘God made them male and female.’” And He said, ““This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.”*

**Matthew 19:3-6 (NLT)**

Jesus was responding to how the Pharisees were interpreting the portion of the law in Deuteronomy about divorce. So, I want to bring your attention to this, but I also want you to know what is also happening in this sermon that Jesus is delivering to the people.

There were two prominent rabbis at the time of Christ: Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel’s very lax view includes as wide a definition of the word *unseemly as spoiled a dish*.

Jesus is not responding to choosing a school, instead He is reinforcing that Marriage is the priority.

Jesus would not stoop to the argument of the Pharisees, He instead decides to:

**a. Prioritize MARRIAGE and RECONCILIATION.** (Matthew 19:3-6)

Why do you think that Jesus in responding to the Pharisees goes back to the Creation story?

Because Marriage is not a human institution. Marriage is a God ordained covenantal relationship.

Jesus would not stoop to the argument of the Pharisees, He instead decides to reinforce that God intended marriage to be a permanent bond between a man and a woman that joins them into a new, *one flesh* union.

**b. Divorce is PERMITTED not PRESCRIBED.** (Matthew 19:7-12)

But the Pharisees pushed the issue further.

*“Then why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away?” they asked.*

*Jesus replied, “Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended. And I tell you this, whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.”*

*Jesus’ disciples then said to Him, “If this is the case, it is better not to marry!”*

*“Not everyone can accept this statement,” Jesus said. “Only those whom God helps. Some are born as eunuchs, some have been made eunuchs by others, and some choose not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”*

**Matthew 19:7-12 (NLT)**

The ESV more accurately translates verse 7 into: *“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce...”* But Jesus does not fall into that trap. He corrected them. God permitted divorce but did not command divorce. Moses was offering divorce as a concession to the people who had begun seriously defiling individual marriages and, as a result, the institution of marriage itself was suffering.

I want to be clear here: this verse is not saying that only *hard-hearted* people get divorced, but that the presence of sin was defiling marriages and that this was a provision by God as a solution in those cases.

What are the grounds for divorce? Well, the Bible gives principles or boundaries, but I want to be clear: if your marriage is struggling and you are considering divorce, you must get individualized attention from a pastor and perhaps a Christian Counselor who can help you as a couple navigate the individual issues you are having.

What are the biblical grounds for divorce?

Adultery – The word utilized for adultery is *porneia*, which is a much more general term for sexual immorality.

Abandonment – This could be considered financial, emotional or even sexual.

Abuse – This could be considered physical and emotional abuse.

But again, this seems very narrow. Yes. I think that God and Jesus intended it that way. The overall perspective we should have is that marriage is a gift given by God to some, that is meant to be a picture of divine, covenantal love between one man and one woman for life.

We should not only protect the picture of marriage overall, but we should be walking alongside couples to help them improve their relationships individually, and also assisting couples to reconcile their relationship when it is in trouble.

In our passage today, Jesus also teaches on Oaths.

**C. Oaths** (Matthew 5:33-37. C/R: Deuteronomy 23:21-23, Matthew 23:16-22)

*“You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the LORD.’ But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is His footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.”*

**Matthew 5:33-37 (NLT)**

Not only were the rabbinical schools widening the interpretation of divorce, but they were also widening the Scriptural teaching on oaths.

Jesus here is not quoting one particular passage of Scripture but is instead summarizing the teachings on oaths.

Moses continued to emphasize to the Israelites that we should do the things we commit to do unto the Lord.

But the Pharisees twisted this teaching and instead, prioritized the formula for making a vow rather than the primary intent of the Law, which was to reinforce the priority of obeying the commitments that we make.

The Pharisees concluded that the real emphasis was not on taking God’s name in vain, but instead on the name of God itself.

The Pharisees also began to introduce things that you could swear by and things you shouldn’t swear by.

But Jesus addresses these specifically in Matthew 23.

*“Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! For you say that it means nothing to swear ‘by God’s Temple,’ but that it is binding to swear ‘by the gold in the Temple.’ Blind fools! Which is more important—the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? And you say that to swear ‘by the altar’ is not binding, but to swear ‘by the gifts on the altar’ is binding. How blind! For which is more important—the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? When you swear ‘by the altar,’ you are swearing by it and by everything on it. And when you swear ‘by the Temple,’ you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.*

**Matt. 23:16-22 (NLT)**

Jesus here is reminding the Pharisees that all is under God’s purview. There is nothing that you can swear by and avoid God. Jesus’ teaching on Oaths and ultimately our words, reinforces two principles.

**a. Prioritize TRUTHFULNESS.** (Proverbs 15:1; 18:21; Romans 3:14; 5:16)

Jesus here insisted that His followers should not give any oaths. Instead, their words and the truthfulness of those words and their life to live up to them is witness enough.

You might be thinking that this is just wishful thinking and that no one would really live in this way, but we have a secular Jewish scholar Josephus who gives testimony to a group of Jesus' followers that truly lived by these words:

*...the Essenes (a Jewish sect contemporary with Jesus) had high standards in this matter. Josephus wrote of them: 'They are eminent for fidelity and are the ministers of peace. Whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath. But swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury, for they say that he who cannot be believed without (swearing by) God, is already condemned.'*

Jesus here is helping those listening that they are getting the priorities backwards.

I think that it can be described in this way:

*Let your speech be seasoned with your life, not your life seasoned with your speech.*

Are our words attempting to make our life more grandiose, more truthful, more adventurous than what our lives actually are?

Some of us in this room could never live the life we describe with our words.

But Jesus is not only prioritizing the truthfulness of our speech, but I think He is also redefining for us how we use our words overall.

The Scriptures are clear that when becomes a follower of Christ, there is to be a change in speech. Our mouths go from bitterness and cursing (Romans 3:14) to praise and worship (Romans 5:16).

The Bible is deep with teaching on the power of our words.

The Bible would not align with the statement, *Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*

In fact, Proverbs 18:21 says:

*Death and Life are in the power of the tongue...*

**Proverbs 18:21 (ESV)**

*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

**Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)**

I wanted to end today with the emphasis that you can choose life with your words over death.

What type of life?

**b. Choose LIFE with your words over DEATH.**

**i. SPIRITUAL.** (Ephesians 4:29)

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

**Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)**

We have opportunities to build into other's spiritual lives with our words.

I hope that you have had the blessing of receiving a word of encouragement, challenge or criticism from a mature believer seeking to help you grow more deeply connected to Christ.

ii. **EMOTIONAL.** (Proverbs 15:4)

*Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.*

**Proverbs 15:4 (NLT)**

We often neglect our emotional life. But those who wield their words with gentleness provide life to those who receive them. But those who use their words to deceive crush the spirit of those in their path.

iii. **PHYSICAL.** (Proverbs 16:24)

*Gracious Words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

**Proverbs 16:24 (NIV)**

Our words can provide healing to one's physical body. But our words can also result in physical harm. Think of the importance of the words of a judge or jury. Think of the words of a doctor. These are not small instances, but instead great moments of the power of our words.

I can honestly say this is one of the most challenging parts of being a pastor. This is a difficult part of the call of God. My words matter, and according to the Scriptures, I am held doubly accountable for my words and teaching. I think this is why many monks took vows of silence, because they understood the power and ease with which harmful words came out of their mouths.

Some of us need to not only change the words that we utilize in our speech, but some of us in this room need to speak less.

By speaking of divorce and oaths, Jesus here is emphasizing something: Our lives should be marked by integrity and the Gospel. Jesus enters into covenant relationship with us. He promises to never leave us nor forsake us if we have been saved. His Words can also be trusted.

Jesus is instructing us to allow our lives to be a model to the world and provide life to those around us.