

Matthew 5:31-37

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 April 2018

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Three preliminary comments. I want us to look at verses 31 to 37. First of all, just an apology. It is going to be a little bit longer this morning. I've tried to cut it down. It's! it's just too important a subject to not do the hard work that we need to do this morning.

And number two, you'll see that we're going to take two sections together. We're going to take a section on divorce and we're going to take a section on oath. And we're going to deal with them together. And the reason we're going to do that is because every divorce is the result of one person failing to uphold their vows. In every divorce, one or two people have failed to keep the promises that they've made before God. And the third comment, which is probably the most important, is this. This is not going to be an all-encompassing, cover-all basis sermon on divorce. And whenever there's a sermon like this, it will hit us in different ways. Some of you are divorced. Some of you have family getting divorced. Some for biblical reasons, some for not. And we all have friends and families and all sorts of questions. And I am not going to say everything that needs to be said. I'm working on a sermon series on relationships where I hope that I will. But that isn't going to be this morning.

But I want to give you seven points on marriage. And I plagiarise these from Doug Wilson, who plagiarised them from John Piper, who plagiarised them from John Stott, who plagiarised them from James Philip. And at that point the trail goes cold. All right?

So let me give you seven points on marriage. Number one, marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman. God's intention for that marriage of one man and one woman is to last a lifetime. Number two, divorce is not always sinful. Divorce is not always sinful.

Number three, divorce is permitted, but not required on the grounds of sexual immorality. It's permitted, but not required on the grounds of sexual immorality. Divorce is permitted, but not required on the grounds of desertion. Number five, I should say divorce is permitted, but not required on the grounds of desertion. And I think that that desertion does not necessarily mean somebody just leaving. I think that the puritans allowed for physical abuse as a form of desertion. I think that that is a wider category than sometimes we would, we let it, let it be taught. Number five, when there is an unbiblical divorce, remarriage is not permitted. When there is an unbiblical divorce, remarriage is not permitted. Number six, when there is a biblical divorce, remarriage is permitted. And number seven, and those who have been divorced and are now remarried should stay as they are. And if it has been, if they've been wrongly divorced, well they should repent and they should definitely be forgiven and they should seek to make amends where they can. You can ask me for those seven after. The thrust of what Jesus is saying in this passage is that he does not want his disciples to get divorced. God hates divorce in the same way that you and I hate divorce. Jesus confronted his years and he confronts them with two failures.

[3 : 42] That's what we'll see this morning. We'll see first of all, a failure to consider the seriousness of divorce. And number two, a failure to consider the ramifications and the implications of divorce. And then at the end I want to tie that together by why we put it together with oaths.

So look at verse 31. Verse 31 is a loose quotation of Deuteronomy 24 verse 1. It is also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

And the problem wasn't with what Moses had said in Deuteronomy 24 verse 1. The problem was how they'd come to apply it. So you're going to come with me to a few different parts of the Bible this morning. If you're unfamiliar with the Bible, the person next to you will help you. It's Deuteronomy 24. Would you come there? And the Old Testament actually says very little about divorce. There's this passage. There's a little bit in Malachi and in Ezra, but it's not in many places. And in Deuteronomy 24, let me read it to you. It says, when a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes, because he's found some indecency in her, and he writes her

a certificate of divorce, and he puts it in her hand, then he sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house. And if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 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, which could be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife after she's been defiled. For that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for inheritance. Now the first thing you notice about that is it's confusing. If a man has a wife and divorces her, and she marries another, and then he divorces her, the original man can't now go and get her back and remarry her, because it would be defiling the marriage bed. What's Moses doing here? He's trying to stop a casual attitude on the part of the man that can just say, I'll set you apart, I'll divorce you, and after a time it doesn't work out with my next wife, but I'll come back to you. Actually, it's trying to protect the wife and her interest. Notice in that part that I wrote, it doesn't say that he must gather divorce. It doesn't even talk specifically about the grounds of divorce. It doesn't say this is accepted, that is not accepted. What it gives you is a complicated instance of case law on divorce. And the Jews looked at 24 verse 1 and they had lengthy debates about what it meant. What did it mean? So the phrase that was greatly debated is there in verse 1.

It says this, when a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her. That's the phrase. He writes her a certificate, puts it in her hand and sends her away. And the word something indecent is a bit ambiguous. It seems to suggest sexual sin and nakedness, but it's not completely clear. In fact, one of the other instances, the few other instances of this phrase, what was a good thing is that when you find a phrase in the Bible, try and find another phrase that's difficult to understand.

[7:09] You try and find another instance of it. So there is another instance in chapter 23 verse 12. The boys in church might want to look at this verse. Chapter 23 verse 12. You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools. And when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. Did you know that was in the Bible? You might want to explain that to the little boy sitting next to you. Because, verse 14, the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you. Therefore, your camp must be holy so that you may not see anything. And here is the phrase indecent among you and turn away from it. Same phrase, anything indecent. Because the camp was holy, you needed to go outside and do your business outside the camp. Otherwise, the Lord would see this indecent thing. It's that phrase that the rabbis argued about. What does it mean? That a man issued a certificate of divorce for something indecent. And because of the way that it's not clear, in the way that this was interpreted, there were two schools, rabbinical teaching schools that emerged. One was the more conservative, Shammai, after the famous Rabbi Shammai. And the other was a more liberal school, Helal. Here's what it says in the Mishnah. The Mishnah was a Jewish document from the second century. And it details controversies that were happening or happened during the time of Christ. This is one of them. The Mishnah records that the school of Shammai says a man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. For it is written because he's found in her indecency in anything. So the school of Shammai, they said, 24 verse 1, that's something indecent. That is unchastity or that is adultery. It is a breaking of the covenant. Adultery was one school. Here's the other one, the school of Helal. Said you may divorce her even if she spoils a dish for him. For it is written, he hath found in her indecency in anything. So both schools went back to Deuteronomy 24 verse 1. And the conservatives were saying that indecency means adultery. It means sexual sin. The liberal school was saying it means indecent. And what that means, if there's anything you see in her, if she burns the toast, as an example, if she spoils a dish, that was considered a legitimate grounds for divorce. And that is the air that they're breathing in the first century. Jesus lands, doesn't he, conservatively in the conservative school, the Shammai school, and rightfully so. Deuteronomy 24 verse 1, that word means nakedness. You can get that from the chapter before. But it is suggesting a kind of sexual sin. And it's also a good lesson for you and I, isn't it?

Because sometimes I'm told there are so many churches, so many different interpretations, so many beliefs. How can I know? I can't say what is right. Even in the first century they had loads of different interpretations. And Jesus says, well that went about burning the toast. And that's not a right interpretation. There's something indecent in chapter 24 verse one. And this one means sexual sin. Except on the grounds of sexual immorality. That's the Greek word. It's the word pornea.

We get pornography from it. And it refers broadly to sexual sin. Why would that be a grounds for divorce? Because sex is the consummation of a marriage relationship. Not a man and a woman come together. It is meant to be an emotional oneness, a spiritual oneness. And it culminates in a physical oneness. And that physical oneness is not meant to be there without all the other onenesses being promised. So the act of sex is the covenant bringing together. It is the signing on the dotted line. It is the oath making part of the covenant. It is the part of marriage where we say we are truly bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

The two are now one. And so that means when you have sex with someone who is not your spouse, you break the covenant bond. You've formed that covenant. You've signed on the dotted line with your spouse.

And to go and do that with someone else is to serve the covenant you've made. It does not mean that divorce is required. And that's why Jesus says, to join me 23 verse 1, is suggesting this is a legitimate grounds for divorce.

Now come back with me to Matthew's gospel. And come with me to Matthew chapter 19. Matthew chapter 19.

[12:32] And in Matthew chapter 19, the Pharisees come to Jesus. And in Matthew chapter 19, verse 3, it says they come to him to test him.

And they test him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? They're asking Jesus, would you weigh in on this whole Shammai, Halal thing?

Some of the rabbis are teaching us that divorce is possible for anything. It's permissible. The man deems inappropriate. And what's fascinating to me is the way that they come is actually the way that you and I come.

Because on every question when people come to see me about divorce is they want to know what are legitimate grounds. People come to me and say, is this okay or is that okay?

Would this work? Is this sufficient grounds? And there is a time that we need to get into that. And we will get into that in the future. They want to talk about divorce.

[13:39] But do you see what Jesus wants to talk about? Jesus wants to talk about the sanctity of marriage. What is marriage? Sometimes people talk as if we have got the foggiest clue what Jesus thought about marriage.

Have you had those discussions? Jesus never said anything about sex anyway. He never said anything about homosexuality. Never really said anything about marriage. And so when there's a debate, people often say, well, Jesus, and this is totally irrelevant because he doesn't speak about it.

He had no opinion on these things. But that's not the case. Jesus radically reaffirms everything that God's people would have believed since Genesis 1. He says, you want to talk about divorce? Let me tell you what marriage is. Marriage is a man leaving his father and mother and joining together with a woman. It's a man and a wife coming together in one flesh so that the two now become one.

And what God has joined together, let no one separate. And Jesus said, yes, Moses gave a certificate of divorce for hardness of heart. It's an allowance in certain circumstances.

[14:45] But that is not God's design. It is not God's intention. It is not God's ideal of what marriage is. And so weddings.

Weddings are to be fun. They are celebrations. But they ought to be serious. They ought to be serious.

There should be a joyful seriousness at a wedding. There should be a gravity at a wedding. So the old language for conducting a wedding is, this is a service of solemnization.

That's what it is. It is solemn. It is grave. A wedding is a weighty occasion. Did you hear that, Ollie? But you've seen it happen, haven't you?

The same of vows as the exchanging of the rings. I now pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together. Let no one separate. No one. You may now kiss the bride.

[15:53] Why? Why do we have the kissing of the bride? It's a fun thing for the group. Hopefully it's a fun thing for the bride as well. But it is a symbolic representation of the covenant-making act.

We are not meant to see. We are not. We do not want to see the actual covenant-making act of marriage. So there's a kiss. There's a kiss to let us all know what is going to happen later.

There's a kiss right now because that one act of marital sacredness, that marital act of oneness is so sacred. And this marriage is so sacred.

It's a serious business. Divorce, Jesus says. You are treating it like light things. What Moses gave to allow for the brokenness and the hardness of your heart.

You're making into a trivial thing. I read this article this week. Online. Called Eight Good Reasons to Leave.

[17:01] Eight Good Reasons to Leave. Let me read it to you. There is no decision more difficult to make than deciding whether or not the person you've been with, the person you knew you once loved, is still the right person for you.

There are many bad reasons to leave someone. But there are only a few good reasons to move on. Here are eight of them. Number one. You're unhappy.

And it's clearly because of the relationship. Well, if that's a legitimate reason, none of us are married. Everyone has that. Not happy.

Why? You. Let me put it simply. You sure? Yep, you. Very sure? Yet you are making me unhappy. Number two.

The good times are outweighed by the bad. That's just Mondays, isn't it? Number three. You see yourself spending your life with your partner. You don't see yourself spending your life with your partner.

[18:08] By the way, partners. That is someone you go into business with. That is someone you hold hands with on a school trip. You have a husband or a wife. Number four.

You've lost your trust in your partner. Number five. Your partner doesn't treat you the way you deserve to be treated. Aren't you very grateful, those of us who are married, that your partner does not treat you, your husband or wife does not treat you the way you deserve to be treated?

Number six. Your partner cheated on you. Well, that's the only one that Jesus says is okay. You fell in love with someone else. It happens. You've been with a person for a while.

And then someone else comes into your life and takes your breath away. We can't always help whom we fall in love with. And when it happens, we should follow our hearts. The heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things.

That was not in the article. And then the last one is a great one. You're not capable of loving your partner the way your partner deserves to be loved.

[19:11] You're not capable of loving your partner the way your partner deserves to be loved. If you can't be the love of your partner's life, the person your partner has always dreamed of, and the person your partner deserves to be loved by, then make the difficult choice and let your partner go.

It will be hard. It will be painful. It will stick with you for most of, if not all of your life. But it's the right thing to do. There is no greater act of love than to love without any benefit to yourself.

They call it unconditional love. That is mind-boggling, isn't it? When leaving your spouse becomes an act of unconditional love.

How heroic. How sacrificial that you would walk away from a marriage relationship. You see, our world does not understand, does it, the seriousness and the solemnity and the sheer weight of holy matrimony.

Here's the second thing. They fail to consider the ramifications of divorce. They fail to consider the implications of what divorce does. So Matthew 5, let's get back there.

[20:17] It's quite difficult to grasp Jesus' logic at first. Let me read to you verse 32. But I say to you, that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes them commit adultery.

And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Why? Because if you are illegitimately divorced, then the remarriage is illegitimate.

And if you are remarried illegitimately, then you are presumably having marital intimacy with someone who ought not to be your spouse. But rather you ought to still be married to that person.

To this person who knew you divorced. So Jesus says, consider, think for a moment, think about the implications. You can't just think, I've got out of it. I've got out of it.

I'm free. Jesus presumes you got remarried. That's what nearly always happened in Jewish culture. Remember, too, that in the Old Testament, the punishment for adultery is that you were killed.

[21:16] There's not a great deal of evidence that that happened lots. But it was what the law required. So your spouse would be dead, and you would get remarried. So there's an assumption

that you divorce and get remarried.

There's an assumption that if you shouldn't have been divorced, and then you get remarried, you are now married to someone, you are now having sex with someone, that you shouldn't be married to.

Because this covenant, this covenant shouldn't have been Sabbath. And the ramifications are so serious, that you've got to think, not only of the sin that you are committing, but the sin that you're leading someone into.

You are bringing someone else into that marriage relationship. That should not be so. And Jesus wants you to see the ramifications of divorce. Because the bonds of marriage, and that intimacy, are so sacred.

People sometimes say, don't they, young people often say, that Christians are prudes about sex. Kind of anti-sex. But listen, there's a lot of kids here out there today, so we're doing okay on some level.

[22 : 34] But we Christians are the ones who actually understand how sacred sex is. That is why there are boundaries around it. Because it is so sacred.

You go to a building, an historical building in London, and you will not be able to run around in it, or kick a ball in it. You will not be able to touch certain parts. You're not able to build anything on it, because it's set apart.

It is sacred. There are boundaries. There are rules about what you can do and can't do. We do that for buildings. We do that for art. We do that in a museum.

We do it for all sorts of things. Something is precious and sacred, so we protect it, and we put boundaries around it. So who are the ones who have absolutely no idea what sex is really about? Is it the people that say, if it feels good, just do it? No, it's the ones that see it as precious and sacred, and as a gift, and we know that there must be boundaries.

[23 : 34] With a certain person, at a certain time, in a certain place, given a certain context, with a certain commitment, our culture just does not understand.

In fact, our culture is schizophrenic, isn't it? On the one hand, it says you can sleep with whoever you want. On the other hand, it says there is the one out there.

And the one out there will complete you, will meet all your needs. But we know, don't we, that if you hope in anyone, any created being, if you think that that created being will meet your deepest needs, you will find, that in the end, you will find yourself worshipping on an idol, because it is only the creator that can meet your deepest needs.

See how bizarre it is that our world thinks of marriage? We don't know what it is anymore. Let me read you from the Book of Common Prayer. What has happened in the last 50 years?

The sexual revolution, the no-fault divorce, the redefining of marriage. You might be saying, well, actually it's no big deal to my marriage. It is a big deal. How does it affect marriages?

[24 : 55] Let me read you from the Book of Common Prayer. Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honourable estate instituted of God.

Do you notice that? It is God who institutes marriage. Governments might recognise it, but we don't give to governments the right to institute marriage. They've got no right in that. God is the one who institutes marriage.

In the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt, don't use that very much, between Christ and his church. And so if marriage signifies Christ and his church, Ephesians 5 says that there must be a difference.

A man and a man, or a woman and a woman, cannot signify Christ and his church. A man and a woman, that difference, but complementary.

What signifies the uniqueness and the difference of their roles as Christ and the church? That glory, those differences, point us for the gospel. They display the glory of God.

[26 : 10] And they can only be shown in a marriage of a man and a woman. Which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee, and is commended of St. Paul to be honourable among all men, and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, likely, or wantonly.

And it goes on to say, we must consider the reasons for marriage. First, it was ordained for the procreation of children. That is one of the purposes for marriage. It's not the only reason.

And that goes a long way, doesn't it, to defining what type of marriage is marriage. For the procreation of children. So at times, maybe because of age, or illness, or medical issues, children will not come.

But the very constitution of the relationship is one that should bring forth life. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin to avoid fornication.

Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. We are confused not only about divorce, but about marriage. [27 : 21] And when we as Christians accept unbiblical divorces, or divorce as a light and trivial thing, then we are sowing the seeds of our destruction.

And of marriage, which we seem to care, we profess to care so much about. Now let's move to the kind of application. Let's think, how are these two failures connected with what goes on in verses 33 to 37?

With the making of oaths. And again, the Pharisees, they just want to make the law more manageable. Verse 33, they're not giving a direct quotation from the Old Testament, but a summary.

So passages like Exodus 27, I do not take the Lord's name in vain. Leviticus 19, 12, you shall not swear by any name falsely. Number 30, verse 2, if a man swears to the Lord or makes an oath, he shall not break his word, but fulfil all that his mouth has spoken.

There's nothing wrong with the Old Testament provisions. There's nothing really wrong with the way that it's summarised in verse 33. The problem was that they devised an elaborate system to get around a basic command of telling the truth.

[28 : 40] They developed this understanding that the closer you were to swearing to God's name, the more binding the oath was. So let me show you what I mean.

Matthew shows us exactly what is going on in Matthew 16, I think. Is it Matthew 16? No. It's Matthew 23.

So go to Matthew 23, verse 16. Here Jesus says, woe to blind guides. That's what he calls the Pharisees. Woe to blind guides. If anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing.

But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he's bound by his oath. Do you see what he's doing? If I swear on the temple, that's not a real oath. On the gold of the temple, well that counts. You blind fools, for which is greater the gold of the temple that has made the gold secret? And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it's nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift that's on the altar, he's bound by the earth.

[29 : 42] You blind men, for which is greater the gift or the altar that makes the gift secret? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. Same concern that's reflected back in chapter 5. Do not take an oath either by heaven, for it is the throne of God or by the earth, for it is the footstool or by Jerusalem, for it's the city of the great king.

I didn't make an oath on heaven. No, I just made it on earth so it doesn't count. She says the earth is the throne of God. I just made it by the temple, not by the gold so I can break it.

They're not bound by their own words. It's like children, isn't it? I dare you. I double dare you. I double dare you. No returns forever.

That's what these people are doing. Wait, wait, wait, wait. I said cross my heart and hope to die but I never said stick a needle in my eye. It's verbally saying it's the eye and my fingers crossed.

[30 : 52] Does this mean that Jesus is against all kinds of oaths? It's often cited in that way. Don't take an oath. Well, the problem with that is God makes an oath. Hebrews 6.15 to confirm his promise that Abraham, he swore it with an oath.

Paul often used the phrase as God is my witness. In Matthew 26, Jesus, before his trial, makes a statement under oath. Jesus is not saying when you're asked to do something under oath you cannot do it.

But what he is against is he's against the frivolous oath. But there's a time when we don't have to tell the truth. And there's a time when actually now I do have to tell the truth.

You shouldn't have to give I swear on my grandmother's grave. We say those phrases. We don't mean anything by it. Or more popular, I'm just going to be completely honest with you.

What have you been for the whole of our friendship? To be totally honest with you, well, what were you before? We shouldn't have to say that.

[32 : 03] Everything that comes out of our mouths should be totally honest. We shouldn't have to say honest to God. Because everything you say, whether you make an oath, whether you put your hand on a Bible or not, it all ought to be the truth.

Our word ought to be our bond. And Jesus says, let your words matter. Your words do matter. He says, let your yes be yes and your no be no. But I wonder, are we the kind of people that are yes is yes and no is no? You know how much he exaggerates.

You can't take it exactly. He always makes promises. When you say you'll do something, now we know, don't we, we all make mistakes, we forget.

But as a rule, when you say that you'll do something, can people count on it? How about when we pass on info? Are our words like a rock?

[33 : 09] And so you pass the rock to somebody else, it's still rock-like, it's still way to see, it's got the same shape, isn't it? It stays the same, that's my word. It's like a rock. Or is it like play-doh?

That when I pass it to somebody, it's still play-doh, but I mould it and I shape it to different, to fix others. We're all masters at this, aren't we? We all shade this part of the truth.

And Jesus says to his disciples, their yes must be yes and their no must be no. When I became pastor of this church nearly 15 years ago, I made vows to you and to God.

when every child is baptised, you make a vow, you promise to pray for that child and those parents and to care for that family.

And when you became a member of this church, you promised. You promised to give to the church. You promised to be faithful at the means of grace. You promised to give of your time.

[34 : 23] Some of you have made those vows and I can tell you that not one of the elders likes to have those conversations, those phone calls, those visits where they say, you know, we love you, we love you being in the church, we're really glad you're here, but we've not seen you for ages.

You're not around. Is anything wrong? Not one of the elders thinks, oh great tonight, I've got to go and see those people about that, I can tell you. But because we as elders made vows before God and before you and we do love you, we want to hold you to account on that.

The problem is the people that need to hear that aren't here, are they? And so Christians should be the most dependable when it comes to contracts and legal requirements and financial arrangements and people of our word.

marriage. And then finally we think of marriage. Wherever you are this morning, maybe you've been divorced and you had good grounds too.

Maybe you realise that you didn't and you need to repent and make amends. Maybe you and your spouse are separated. Maybe your marriage is going swimmingly well, maybe it's going badly.

[35 : 44] Maybe you long to be married and you're not. This may be for you now or it may be for you later. And you have to consider what promises you made in marriage.

That when you get married you stand before your very best friends and your family and before God himself and you promised. You promised. You promised.

To have and to hold. To love and to cherish. To be faithful to him or to her as long as you both shall live. You made that vow.

You promised to forsake all others as I promised to my wife. That you would be with him or with her for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer. In sickness and in health.

In cancer or in cruises. In experimental treatment or mountaintop experiences. You promised that before a watching world. You promised that before God.

[36 : 49] And you said until death parts us. This is my solemn vow. And we live in a world, don't we, where words are very, very cheap.

And words are everywhere and they are nothing. But they ought to be something important to the Christian. Because God invented words. And God hallowed language.

By revealing himself to us in words. And you want to know how important words are to God when he came and he took on human flesh. It was the word made flesh.

To reflect the character of God we must speak through words. and take great pains to say what we mean and mean what we say.

And especially when that comes to marriage vows to each other. And before many witnesses. And in the presence of God.

[37 : 53] Let's pray. Thank you.