

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 9 July 2023. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## Vows and Oaths

### Matthew 5:31-37

Back in 2005, after my wife and I became engaged, her pastor began to do counselling sessions with us in preparation for our wedding. I don't remember much about the specific questions that he asked us during those sessions; but there is one question which I still remember to this day. In fact, it was one of the very first questions that he asked us. He asked, "What do you believe about divorce? Do you believe that it could ever be an option for you?" Some Christians probably would have hesitated at that question, or have given a complicated answer; but we did not hesitate. Both of us were able to say, with absolute conviction, that we did *not* consider divorce to be an option, under any circumstance. After eighteen years of marriage, I can still say, without hesitation, that divorce is not an option. Marriage is a solemn, binding commitment before God, to be broken only by death; and as citizens of Christ's coming Kingdom, we need to be persuaded of this truth from the innermost core of our being.

As you will remember, we began, a few weeks ago, to examine the specific examples of righteous living that Jesus gave His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. We first examined Christ's teaching on **anger**—namely, that God sees anger as *murder* in the heart. We then examined Christ's teaching on **reconciliation** with our brethren. Christ commands you to seek reconciliation with an offended brother *before* you bring any offerings to God (even if you feel that you were not the offending party). We then examined the matter of **lust**. Christ says that looking on a woman in lust is "adultery in the heart"; and we must do whatever it takes to cut off this sin from our lives. These are exceedingly high standards of righteousness; but by God's grace, Kingdom citizens *can* live this way, if they will submit themselves to God daily, and let Him work His righteousness in them.

Having just spoken on the matter of adultery in the heart, Christ now addresses the matter of divorce. It was vitally important that Jesus address this matter, because there was a great amount of debate among the religious leaders as to if, and under what circumstances, divorce was acceptable. **Rabbi Shammei** taught his disciples that divorce was permitted only if one were the victim of a grave offence, such as adultery. On the other hand, **Rabbi Hillel** was extremely lax in his view of divorce. He said that a man could divorce his wife "for no more serious misdemeanour than 'letting his food burn.'"<sup>1</sup> This is what *men* taught on the matter; but what did *Jesus*, the Author of the Law, say? Once again, Jesus spoke with divine authority on the matter, as He declared, "**But I say unto you.**"

This morning, we will examine two more areas of righteousness in a Christian's life: **marital vows** and **swearing of oaths**. As Christians, our desire should be to glorify the Lord in every way—whether it be in our marriage vows, or in any other oath or promise that we make. The title of this message is *Vows and Oaths*.

**Read Matthew 5:31-37.**

#### I. The vow of marriage

**Read Genesis 2:18, 21-25.**

During the first wedding ceremony in history, our father, Adam said, "**Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.**"

Now, though *Adam* spoke these words, Jesus said, in **Matthew 19**, that *God* was the one who spoke these words. These words are *God's* words, which He spoke through Adam. This statement, then, is a *law* about what marriage is. God didn't have to make a thousand specific statements about what He *does not* accept as marriage; He simply made one concise definition of what He *does* accept. Any behaviour which falls outside the perimeters of the marriage union (which He defined as one man and one woman, for life) falls under His judgment. For example, *fornication* falls outside the marriage model: thus, it is forbidden. We also know that homosexuality is a sin. Why? Because it falls outside of God's definition of marriage, which is one *iysh* ("man") and one *ishah* ("woman"). No man-made law can make "gay marriage" valid or holy, because *God* defined marriage as one "man" and one "woman." It's the same way with adultery. We know that adultery is a sin, because it falls outside of God's definition of marriage. God said that a man should "**cleave**" unto his wife. The word "**cleave**" comes from the word *davaq*, which means "to cling to," or "to be tightly joined together." The marriage model forbids a husband or wife to be "tightly joined together" to anyone besides one's spouse. God said that the man shall cling to his *wife*, and the wife to her husband.

Where does this leave divorce and re-marriage, then? Modern society says that it is no problem. But does God approve it? No, He does not. It falls outside His marriage model, which is one man and one woman for life. The fact that God does not approve it makes it a serious matter. We need to know exactly what God has to say about divorce and remarriage, so that we can follow His precise instructions, instead of the dictates of our own hearts.

**Read Malachi 2:13-16.**

There are many passages of Scripture concerning divorce; however, I wish to begin our examination of divorce with **Malachi 2**, because this passage really shows us God's *heart* concerning divorce. God *does* have emotions; and in this passage, God is expressing some very strong emotion. God is practically crying out as He says that He "hates" putting away (divorce). He doesn't say that He hates *people* who have divorced; but He does hate *divorce*. That should make us stop and prick up our ears. That should affect our hearts. If God hate something, then we should hate it, too. If God hate something, then we should resolve not to *practice* that thing which God hates. Instead of looking for a "loophole" out of God's will, we should seek to *do* God's will.

We will talk more about God's heart attitude toward divorce later in this message. However, before we go any farther, let's look at Jesus' other statement on divorce in **Matthew**.

**Read Matthew 19:3-11.**

In this passage, we find the Pharisees trying, once again, to trip Jesus up in His words. You see, in the first century, the rabbis had three schools of thought on divorce (three "parties," if you will). The **Shammai** school said that a man could divorce his wife only on the ground of scandalous behaviour. The **Hillel** school said that practically any offence would suffice for a man to divorce his wife. The **Akivah** school didn't even require a fault. They said that if a man found another woman to be prettier than his wife, he could divorce his wife and marry the prettier one. (Nice guys, huh?) The Pharisees were trying to press Jesus into one of these three parties, so that they could get the followers of the *other* two parties to turn against Jesus. (They were playing "divide and conquer.") They asked, "**Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?**" In other words, "Are you in the Hillel party?"

However, Jesus could never be pushed into "parties"! As God, Jesus spoke the uncorrupted truth: and the truth defies man's corrupt thinking. *Jesus'* declaration about divorce was so "narrow," that even His disciples were shocked by it. They were so troubled at Jesus' answer, that they concluded that it might be best for a man not to marry at all, so as not to come into a situation where he might be tempted to divorce and re-marry, and thus commit adultery!

With this in mind, let's look at Jesus' answer again. **(Read verse 9 again.)** Jesus said that divorce and remarriage is forbidden—except if the divorce be for the cause of “fornication.” *However*, even then, Jesus said that it was only because of the “hardness of their hearts” that Moses had permitted divorce. Yes, divorce *was* permitted in the case of fornication; but God's frown was still upon it. It did *not* have God's real approval.

The fact that God frowned upon divorce even in the one narrow case in which He did permit it should make us pause to consider. The gravity of this matter should compel us to find out *precisely* what Jesus means by the phrase **“except it be for fornication.”** Do we really understand what this means? We need to compare Scripture with Scripture to find the answer.

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, you must understand the Jewish custom of marriage. In Jewish culture, there was the “betrothal” period, which was later followed by “marriage.” Now, “betrothal” was not equivalent to anything in our Gentile culture. Our “engagement” period is *not* the same thing as betrothal. Betrothal was a period when the man and woman were legally regarded as “married”; but no vows had been made, and the two had no physical intimacy. During betrothal, the couple were still virgins. They were “married” on paper; yet, in a sense, they were *not fully* married. They didn't live in the same house.

Now, what if a betrothed person were unfaithful to his (or her) spouse during the period of betrothal? Was it called adultery, or fornication? Jesus called it **“fornication.”** The Greek word for “fornication” is  *pornos*; but the word for “adultery” is  *moichao*. Illicit relations *after* the vows and the physical union had taken place were called “adultery”; but if it happened *before* the vows, during the period of betrothal, the Lord called it **“fornication.”** (Remember, “fornication” means “physical relations *before* marriage.”)

So, what was to be done if someone committed fornication during betrothal? Well, there were three options. First, the innocent spouse *could* lay charges against the guilty spouse; and the guilty spouse (along with the person with whom she or he committed fornication) was put to death by stoning. (You can read about this in **Deuteronomy 22:13-24.**) What was the second option? Divorce. Let's look at the passage where God spoke of this.

**Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4.** [Note that re-marriage is not permitted *after* “defilement” (physical relations) with the second husband. The physical relationship is the key issue.]

So, there you have it. *This* is what Jesus was talking about in **Matthew 19:9.** This is what the “exception clause” is all about. Divorce *was* permitted if a betrothed person committed fornication during the time of betrothal; however, divorce and re-marriage were allowed *only* during betrothal. You could not divorce *after* the vows were said; and even during betrothal, you couldn't divorce on the grounds that “we have irreconcilable differences.” It was *only* for **“uncleanness”** (fornication). This is why Joseph was considering divorcing Mary. When he found out that Mary was pregnant, he thought that she had been unfaithful to him. Now, Joseph was a merciful man, and he didn't want to make Mary a **“public example”** (to have her stoned to death); so he decided **“put her away privily”** (to divorce her instead). Because they were betrothed, and not fully married, Joseph had that option at that point.

This brings us, then, to the question: Are divorce and re-marriage options for *us*, as Gentiles? Does God permit this “exception clause” for us? No. It is understandable that spouses who have been cheated on would feel that they have the right to re-marry; and on the surface, **Matthew 19:9** seems to support that idea. But remember, when was divorce permitted? During betrothal. *We* do not have betrothal in our Gentile world. In our system of marriage, you are fully married straightaway. You say your vows, and then you enter into physical union together. This means that divorce (and especially divorce and re-marriage) are not options for us. To get the full perspective, let's compare **Matthew 19** to **Mark 10.**

**Read Mark 10:1-12.**

Did you notice the one big difference between **Matthew 19** and **Mark 10**? Here in **Mark 10**, we do not find the words *“except it be for fornication.”* That little clause is left out. It’s the same way in **Luke 16:18**. **Luke 16:18** says, *“Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.”* In **Romans 7:2-3** Paul wrote to the Roman churches, *“For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.”* Clearly, the Lord leaves no “loophole” for divorce and re-marriage in these verses. Unlike the book of **Matthew**, which was written to a Jewish audience, the books of **Mark**, **Luke**, and **Romans** were written to Gentiles. We Gentiles have no “betrothal”; thus, for us, divorce and re-marriage are not an option. That is why the Holy Spirit led Mark, Luke, and Paul to *leave out* the words *“except it be for fornication.”*

Now, there are all kinds of difficulties that can arise in marriages. There’s no doubt about that. Our old sin nature complicates things. Sometimes, differences between a husband and wife are so great, that the only solution short of divorce is *physical separation* of the husband and wife. God doesn’t want this to happen; but it is sometimes inevitable—especially when one of the spouses is unsaved, and doesn’t want to live together with his (or her) saved spouse, because of that spouse’s faith in Christ. Let’s see what Paul had to say about this.

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.**

Many people read this passage carelessly, and assume that Paul is giving the “green light” for divorce and re-marriage *if* a person’s spouse be unsaved. However, this is not the case. Look closely at **verses 10 and 11** again. **(Read verses 10-11.)**

Let’s look carefully at this. First, in **verse 11**, Paul says that it may sometimes be necessary for a saved wife to *“depart”* from her unsaved husband because of the state of their relationship. But then, Paul says that *if* the saved wife depart, she should remain *“unmarried,”* or be *“reconciled to her husband.”* Now, wait a minute. How could the man still be her “husband” if they have been divorced? Clearly, Paul isn’t *talking* about divorce! He’s talking about *physical separation* of the husband and wife. That is why Paul instructs the wife who “departs” from her husband to *“remain unmarried”* (in other words, “not married to *someone else*”). Paul is saying, “If your spouse be unsaved, and unwilling to get on with you, separation may be necessary for a time; but do not divorce and re-marry. Pray that your spouse will one day reconcile with you; and work toward that end.”

Basically, you have two different terms being used in this passage. The term “put away” means “divorce.” The term “leave” or “depart” means “become physically separated (though still married).” Let’s look again at **verses 12 and 13**. **(Read verses 12-13.)** In **verse 12**, Paul says that if an unbelieving wife have no problem with living with you, do not *“put her away.”* (In other words, “don’t divorce her.”) In **verse 13**, Paul says that if an unbelieving husband have no problem living with you, then do not *“leave”* him. To put it simply, “If your spouse have no problem with your being a Christian, don’t even *think* about divorcing *or* separating.”

So far, this is all pretty straight-forward. However, let’s move on to **verse 15**. **(Read verse 15 again.)** Here is where many people get confused. Paul says that if the unbelieving spouse “depart,” then let him or her “depart”: that brother or sister is not in “bondage.” Does this mean that if your spouse divorce you, you are free to re-marry? No! Remember, Paul did not use the term “put away.” *That* would have meant “divorce.” The term he used was “depart.” That is the same term that Paul used back in **verses 10 and 11** when he was talking about *physical separation* of a husband and wife. Basically, Paul is saying, “Should your

unbelieving spouse decide to separate from you, you are not bound to follow after him (or her), and keep pleading for him (or her) to stay. Let him depart.” *Separation* is permitted, if necessary (such as in cases of physical abuse or danger); however, divorce and re-marriage should not be sought after. Paul is simply saying, “You don’t have to run after your unbelieving spouse. You are not in that kind of bondage.”

You see, God’s will, even for the most rotten of relationships, is that there be *repentance*, *forgiveness*, and *restoration*. Even in the Old Testament economy, God was often merciful to adulterers, and forgave them, when they truly repented. Yes, death and divorce *were* options if a person committed fornication during betrothal; but **forgiveness** was the third option.

**Forgiveness and restoration** was an option even for *fully married* people, such as David and Bathsheba! *This* is God’s heart desire, even for even the most broken of marriages. God is just; but He is also merciful, and delights in restoring those who repent.

That is what the whole book of **Hosea** was about. Hosea’s wife, Gomer, played the harlot on him; yet, God instructed Hosea to continue to love his wife, even though she had been unfaithful to him. Eventually, Hosea bought her back from the slave market, into which she had been sold. (Apparently, the man with whom Gomer had committed adultery had sold her into slavery after he had gotten all the pleasure out of her that he wanted!) Men, would *you* be willing to forgive a wife who had done what Gomer did to him? Hosea did!

Now, after Hosea bought her back, there *was* a period when she was in his house, but was not intimate with him. The relationship was still strained. During that time, Hosea wooed her and won her heart back; and in time, the marriage was restored. But here’s the clincher: *God Himself* purposely commanded Hosea to marry Gomer in the first place! Why? Because God *knew* that Gomer would play the harlot on Hosea, and that it would force Hosea to love her anyway, and to seek after her. God allowed His servant to go through all that agony so that through Hosea’s situation He could illustrate how *He* still loves Israel—and how, even though Israel is separated from Him now, He will one day restore her to Himself, after she repents!

Folks, we live in a day when there is a famine in the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. Most people have not been fed the truths about marriage that you have heard this morning. However, this morning, we have heard the truth. The question, then, is: How should we respond to this truth?

Well, first of all, if you are married, and have never divorced, **do not think of divorcing, for any reason!** Storms and trials will come; but God’s grace is all-powerful. Love and cherish your spouse all your days, and *never* leave him (or her)!

What if you already have a divorce and remarriage in your past? There is only one thing to do (if you haven’t done so already): Confess the past wrong, and ask for God’s forgiveness and cleansing; and stay faithful to your new spouse, and *never* divorce again. Divorcing yet again would be wrong, because it would be to break a vow!

### **Read Numbers 30:2-9.**

In this passage, the LORD told Israel that a father or a husband had the authority to *negate* a vow that his single daughter or his wife had made in his house. However, if a *divorced* woman made a vow, her vow could not be negated. It had to stand. What does this mean in regard to marriage, then? It means that a vow that a woman makes in a second marriage cannot be negated or reversed: it must be upheld. The *vow must be kept*, even though it was made in ignorance. Remember when the **Israelites** made a covenant with the **Gibeonites**, and promised to be their allies, even though they hadn’t sought the Lord about it? If they had prayed about it, they would have found out that the Gibeonites were actually *Canaanites*: and God had commanded Israel not to make covenants with *any* Canaanite nation. Yet, they did make a covenant; and their vow had to stand. **Jephthae** vowed to sacrifice the first thing that

came out of his house after he returned home from the battle with the Ammonites; however, the first thing that walked out of his house was not a sheep or a calf, but his own daughter. He had to keep that vow. Of course, he couldn't slay his daughter; but she did remain a virgin for the rest of her life, as a living sacrifice to the LORD. In each of these cases, a vow was made hastily, or in ignorance; but the vow had to stand. Similarly, divorce and remarriage are often done in ignorance, outside of God's will; but, thank God, His grace is greater than our sin! The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin.

What about those who are divorced, but have not re-married? The proper response is clear: **do not re-marry (unless your spouse should die)!** Those who have been divorced, but not re-married, should seek reconciliation with their spouse. It may seem impossible that reconciliation could ever happen; but with God *all things* are possible.

How should a single person respond to these truths? The response is clear: **Resolve in your heart that you will never divorce your future spouse!** Regard it as a non-option under any circumstance. Be very careful and prayerful about who your future spouse will be. Be absolutely sure that the person whom you marry not only is saved, but loves the Lord with all his heart; and be sure that he (or she) has purposed in his (or her) heart *never* to divorce.

## II. The swearing of oaths (vv. 33-37)

**(Read verses 33-37 again.)** If you belong to *Christ's* Kingdom, then your speech should be characterised by *truthfulness* at all times. It should be unthinkable to break a promise to God or to man. In **Zechariah 8:16** the LORD says, "***Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.***" In **Ephesians 4:25** Paul says, "***Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.***" These commands are straight-forward and clear. Yet, there was a practice in Jesus' day (and in *our* day, as well) that blurred the lines of truthfulness; and that practice was *swearing of oaths*. Swearing of oaths was a big issue for the Jewish people; and Jesus' disciples needed to know what their Master had to say about it. Years later, Jesus' half-brother, James, addressed this matter, as well, as he wrote to his Jewish brethren; and he repeated exactly what Jesus had said.

### Read James 5:12.

In order to understand what the Lord Jesus and James said about oaths, we must look at the cultural context. Both Jesus and James were speaking to *Jews*; and for Jews, swearing oaths was a common thing. They swore **civil oaths** (which were, basically, verbal contracts); and both sides were legally bound to keep the oath. They also frequently swore **spiritual oaths** before God. Now, there is nothing wrong with oaths, in and of themselves. The Lord Himself often swore by oaths; and since He had no higher authority than Himself by which to swear, He swore by His own name! In **Hebrews 6**, Paul points out that "***when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.***" God didn't swear by His name because He *needed* to do so: He did it for *our* sake, to show us "***the immutability of his counsel.***" Oftentimes in the Old Testament times, godly believers swore by oaths, as well.

What, then, is the problem with oaths? The problem is that the Pharisees had developed "word games," which allowed them to "squeeze out" of a promise (especially in their promises to God). They had misinterpreted **Leviticus 19:12** to mean that as long as *you don't actually bring Jehovah's name* into a contract, it isn't actually binding. Let's take a look at that verse.

### Read Leviticus 19:12.

Are you beginning to see why the Pharisees had developed the practice of swearing by holy objects (such as the altar, or the Temple)? They did this in order to show off their self-

righteousness, and to look serious about their commitment to God, *without actually being bound to their promises*. Swearing by the Temple or by the altar sounded serious; but remember—*God's name was not in the oath!* Therefore (according to their teaching) the oath was not really binding. If they wanted to back out of it quietly, they could do so.

However, that wasn't all. There was yet another reason why swearing by some "holy object" was not binding. You see, the Temple and the altar were objects that *could not be taken away* from the person swearing the oath. In a civil contract, the object by which a person swore (a donkey, for example) was to be *taken away* from the person if he didn't keep his end of the contract. Essentially, they placed a "lien" upon the object by which they swore. However, if you swore by something that *can't* be taken away from you, because it is something that belongs to *God* (the Temple, for example), there was no way to enforce that oath. The Temple can't be taken away from you: thus, your oath is essentially meaningless. It has no "teeth."

By these word games, the Pharisees craftily excused themselves from keeping the oaths that they made to God; and the people had followed their example. However, Jesus had something very different to say! Jesus condemned the "word game" of swearing by objects of "greater" or "lesser" value! A Christian's word should be steadfast. Your "yes" should mean "yes," and your "no" should mean "no." Anytime you give your word, you are giving it in the presence of God, whether His name is mentioned or not; and God is witness to it. God takes *all* vows very seriously—whether you attach a formal oath or contract to it, or not. All promises are of equal value. Therefore, we should not use oaths to give veracity to our word, because this practice leaves the "door ajar" (in our *mind*) so that we can back out of a promise.

For the Jewish believers to whom James was writing, this teaching would have been relevant in regard to the persecution that they were undergoing for their faith in Christ. Under the duress of persecution, it might be easy for a believer to "back away" from spiritual promises to God (such as the promise that "I will always attend church"). Under the threat of persecution, it might be easy to say, "Well, we don't need to go to church. Times are hard. God understands our circumstances. I know I said that I would be in church; but I didn't actually swear by God's name: therefore, I'm not obligated." Or, they might excuse themselves from being baptised. "I know I committed myself to be baptised after I received Christ as my Saviour; but I didn't swear by *God's* name! So, given how dangerous it is to make such a public profession for Christ right now, I'm going to take a 'rain cheque' on that promise. My promise isn't really binding, anyway." If they crafted their oath just right, they might be able to "back away" from virtually any commitment to God, with minimal consequences. (Or so they thought!) However, the Lord condemns this thinking as evil.

Now, how does this teaching apply to *us*? Formal oaths may not be a huge part of our culture; yet, even we do this sort of thing. Saying "I swear on the Bible," for example, is a light thing that people sometimes say; but this is a very serious thing to God. Saying "I swear to God" is a dangerous thing, as well. If you detract one iota from your word, then you are in trouble with God. A Christian businessman who backs out on his word because there was no written legal contract, or signatures, is just as guilty before God as he would be *with* a contract. A dad who gives his word to take his child to the park, but doesn't keep his promise, is in trouble with God. The bottom line is that Christians should not use oaths at all, but simply tell the truth all the time! We are citizens of the Kingdom; and those who interact with citizens of the Kingdom should know that "when these people speak, their word is as good as gold!"

**Conclusion:** Christ demands a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Christian, we must be men and women of our word. If you are married, there was a day when you said, "I do." *Keep that vow*, no matter what the cost! If you are still single, determine in your heart that when you say "I do," you will stay true to that person for the rest of your life. If you have made a promise of some kind (whether with or without an "oath"), keep your word! Be a man or woman of integrity! In

closing, I would ask one more serious question: **Are you saved?** Do you have a personal relationship with God? The subject of marriage, or of keeping promises, pales in comparison to the matter of your soul's salvation. You may have a happy marriage, yet be lost and on your way to hell. You may be an honest person, yet be on your way to hell. You don't have to do anything to be on the road to hell: all you have to do is not repent of your sin and believe on Christ. Won't you believe on Him? The Bible says, ***"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out."***

<sup>1</sup> Stanley D. Troussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1980), p. 103.