

OpenTheo

Divorce and Oaths (Part 2)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this continuation of his lecture series on divorce and oaths, Steve Gregg cites examples from the Bible and modern-day scenarios to discuss the complexity of divorce. While divorce is generally discouraged in the Bible, there are exceptions for cases of infidelity and abandonment. However, oaths should be taken seriously, as they involve invoking God's integrity. The use of loopholes in oath-taking is deceptive and goes against principles of justice, faithfulness, and mercy. Overall, Gregg emphasizes the importance of understanding the sacredness of marriage and one's obligations to it.

Transcript

...into the situation of being divorced or widowed in the future, then enough has gone under the bridge that they can't ever get back together rightfully before God again. That's a confusing law. But I will say this much, that it was not even an absolute law.

Michael, the wife of David, was given to another man. After David came to be king, he took her back. And we read of no disapproval on God's part of David doing this.

Now, it could be argued that David didn't divorce her in the first place. If you're not familiar with the story, David had to flee for his life, actually from his wife's bedroom. And he escaped out a window, and he never saw Michael again until he was king, and that was some years later.

He had to flee out in the wilderness, and he was separated sort of against his will from his wife, and she was taken by her father Saul and given to another man in marriage. So she had a second marriage. Whether David divorced her or not, however, her second marriage certainly would seem to be a defilement of her.

And that's the very grounds that Deuteronomy says should prevent her from going back to her first husband, or him taking her back again. She certainly was defiled by a marriage to a man who, though it was lawful, it was against the laws of God for her to marry this second man. Yet David took her back, and we read nothing of God's disapproval of it.

In fact, at a later time, when she mocks David for dancing before the ark, God shows his disapproval for her, lack of respect, but still defends David. And it's interesting. Of course, David does a lot of things that seem to go against the ceremonial law.

And he seems to get away with it, eating the showbread and doing stuff like that. But he doesn't get away with breaking the moral law. Now here's an important point.

David's remarriage to Michael was in principle a violation of this law about divorce and remarriage. Because he shouldn't have been able to take his wife back after she'd been married to someone else. She was defiled according to this.

But he did, and he was not held accountable for it. Now, that is, in my opinion, because the laws of divorce and remarriage, they are essentially ceremonial. But there is a moral element to it, and the moral element is faithfulness.

David was not unfaithful to her. Now, she was ceremonially defiled by a second marriage, but David ignored that. He had not been unfaithful to her, therefore he was not in the wrong to take her back, I believe.

And this is the only Old Testament teaching about divorce, except for that which has to do with God Himself. And in Jeremiah, chapter 2, I believe it is, we have an allusion to this law, and God's own thoughts about it. Actually, it's chapter 3 of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 3, verse 1. God says, They say, If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man's, may he return to her again? Now, you know he's alluding to Deuteronomy 24 here. The answer is no. If a man divorces his wife, and she goes and becomes another man's, can he return to her again? No.

The answer is no. But God says, Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers, yet return to me, says the Lord. Now, this either is saying, it is either saying that God is willing to make an exception in this case.

The law would forbid her to come back to him. But he says, But, hang the law. Come back.

I want you back. That's a possibility. The other possibility is that it's saying she hasn't remarried yet.

She's played the harlot, but she hasn't exactly remarried anyone yet. And therefore, there's hope for her to come back. But if she doesn't, he'll divorce her, and there's no coming back then.

That's a possible interpretation of this, too. But one thing is clear. If it's the first, if God is saying, I will take you back, even though the law says this shouldn't be done, then God is saying that that law of Deuteronomy is not absolute.

If, on the other hand, he's saying, You haven't yet married another, and if you do, I won't take you back, then we'd have to say that his taking of the church was a second marriage for him. He divorced Israel on the grounds of adultery and took a second wife. In either case, we can see that there's a bit of flexibility, not in terms of faithfulness, but in terms of the way that marriage and divorce and problems that arise in them are handled.

It is wrong to divorce your spouse without grounds. In fact, it's best not to divorce your spouse at all, even if you have grounds, because faithfulness is a commitment to keeping your word. And even if the other party doesn't keep their word, there's glory in, there's Christ-likeness in forgiveness and in saying, Well, you may be unfaithful, but I'll be faithful still.

But the point is that Jesus, both times he taught about it, he taught about, like, there's some exceptions, and there's, like he said, he obviously didn't want people to divorce. He said, Except for the cause of sexual immorality. Obviously saying, There's an exception there.

In the other place, he said, God permitted you to divorce your wife because of the hardness of your hearts. Well, that's magnanimous of God to do. Because as I pointed out, he didn't permit them to kill their neighbor because of the hardness of their hearts.

He didn't permit them to commit adultery with their neighbor's wife because of the hardness of their hearts. He didn't permit them to steal or dishonor their parents for the hardness of their hearts. But he did allow them to divorce because of the hardness of their hearts, suggesting that there's an awful lot of grace in God.

And he understands the great problem with marriage ending and divorce is that, of course, it constitutes faithlessness on one party. But people are faithless in a lot of areas of life. Even if they're faithful marriage partners, they may not pay their bills as promised.

They may not keep all their promises to their kids. They might tell their kid they're going fishing that Saturday and not go that Saturday. That's unfaithfulness too.

There's a sense in which marital unfaithfulness is more tragic than other unfaithfulness because of its ceremonial value. Because marriage is a symbol of Christ and the Church. I mean, faithfulness is important at every level from the least to the greatest.

Divorce is the greatest unfaithfulness. But the reason it's greater than others, well, there's two. One is it really inconveniences the other party more than most kinds of unfaithfulness.

You commit yourself to be faithful for life to someone and you go out and violate them. That's going to create greater injury to them than if you just don't pay your bills or

something. But it's still the same in principle.

It's still an unfaithfulness. But the thing that makes it worst of all, I think, is because marriage is supposed to be a picture of Christ and the Church. And when a man divorces his wife, he's not being like Christ.

When a woman divorces her husband, she's not being like the Church. At least not like the Church is supposed to be. And that is what makes it tragic.

However, marriages fall short all the time of that ideal of exhibiting Christ and the Church. And while that's not good and we can't give marriages permission to fall short, God lives in the real world too. And he knows that things, you know, we're playing with a bunch of sinners here.

The game is played by a bunch of cripples. And things go wrong, tragic as that is. The thing that the Christian has to be concerned about is not whether he's towing the line in judging another person who's divorced harshly enough and being faithful to the Scripture by keeping out somebody who's been divorced who didn't have grounds.

What Jesus wants us to do is examine ourselves and say, Listen, are you divorced from your wife? You've got no right to. Even if you have grounds to, it's not faithful. God wants you to keep your promises.

And while, you know, I think to have the heart of God and to have the heart that God wants you to have means you've got to be strict on yourself and gracious toward others. And that's because you're strict on yourself because you don't want to allow sin in your life. Just like Jesus didn't allow any sin in his life.

But you're gracious toward fallen sinners who have failed to meet the standard, just like Jesus was gracious to fallen sinners who failed to meet the standard. The Church often fails to reflect this, the mind of Christ. Suppose a person comes to the Church who did the wrong thing, who did commit adultery and got divorced out of the deal, or who divorced their spouse without grounds.

And now, you know, they're remarried or their spouse is remarried or both remarried. And, you know, it seems like there's just so much going on you can't untangle the web. What are you supposed to do about that? Well, what did... we'll call that adultery.

Jesus called it adultery. But what do you do with an adulteress? What did Jesus do with an adulteress? He said, go and sin no more. I don't condemn you.

The Church, however, isn't as gracious as Jesus in many cases. In fact, they're not even gracious to the victims of adultery in such cases. They're not even gracious to the victims of a divorce.

And that's really sad. And the trouble is they use these words of Jesus as their justification for being strict. They say, I'm sorry, your remarriage is not permitted because you didn't have grounds for divorce.

Or they may take the position that no remarriage is permitted, no matter what the grounds for your divorce was. There are a lot of different positions that are taken. But the issue has got to be for the individual disciple.

Am I doing right by my spouse? Am I doing right by my wife, by my husband? I am not doing right by them if I divorce them without grounds. And I need to because I need to be a faithful person. Now, there's a lot of technical, legalistic loopholes and details about marriage and divorce that no doubt could be profitably sorted out.

But there's many that cannot be. Having been an elder in a couple of different churches where we had to deal with people who were divorced, remarried, adulterers and adulteresses but who had allegedly repented and wanted to come back and their sins were such a tangled mess, there was no way to go back and untangle them. And the question was, what do you do now? I may have told you this story.

This lady was in one church, was not our church, but she was in another church. She and her husband, she ran off with another guy in the church. And they lived together.

She divorced her husband. I think she divorced him, maybe he divorced her, I forget. But anyway, they were divorced, I believe.

And she ran, no, I think she ran off and got a divorce. Out of state, I think, if I'm not mistaken somehow. And then she came back to the church.

Not to the same church. She came to our church and wanted to join us. She said she was repentant.

And we didn't know anything about her past, so we just let her come. And then her boyfriend, who she had run off with, came back to the church. And they were allegedly not in a relationship anymore.

And they were both repentant of their relationship. And it came to our attention what had happened and so forth. So we thought, well, this is a scandalous situation.

We've got this lady and her boyfriend, both have committed adultery with each other and broke up their marriage in another church across town. And now they're both repentant, they both want to be in our church. What should we do? We decided, well, I guess, what can we do? If they behave themselves, we'll let them stay.

Well, they didn't behave themselves. They got together again and she got pregnant. And then she wanted the church to marry them.

We said, we can't do that. I mean, the fact you're pregnant isn't grounds for marriage. And what about your former husband? Where is he anyway? He was out of town somewhere.

And she said, well, no one knows how to find him. Therefore, I've got to get married. And we can't wait around for my ex-husband to release me or whatever.

And it was a real tangled thing. Finally, they ran off against our counsel and got married. And then came back and wanted to join the church as a couple.

And we had people in the church saying, no, these people are living in adultery. This marriage is adultery. The only way they can be right with God is by getting a divorce now.

And her trying to get back with her first husband and so forth. And here she's pregnant with this other guy's baby and just all kinds of horrendous stuff. And it's a really tangled web.

But you know what I think? I think that where restitution is possible, restitution should be made. With that kind of situation as well as any other sin. There's a lot of sins that if you commit them, there's not much you can do to make restitution.

But if there's a sin that you can't make restitution for, that doesn't mean you have to bear the guilt of it the rest of your life. If you do, what is grace about? What is the gospel about? The gospel is not just for people who can sort out their problems and make everything right. It's for people who are hopeless wrecks and whose lives are totally ruined and destroyed.

I think, as I said, that if a person has a sinful divorce in their past, that they need to repent before they can be restored to fellowship in the church. And if there is something they can do to make restitution, like get back with their spouse or whatever, if that's a possibility, they should do it. That demonstrates true repentance.

If they want to make restitution, they're sorry for what they did to their spouse. They're offering themselves back to their spouse and so forth. And if they won't do that, then I think there's evidence that repentance is not there.

But what if they can't do that? Things have changed so much, there's new marriage on both sides or whatever. Are they supposed to now get divorces again? Frankly, I just think, Jesus says, go and sin no more. Now, see, one party says, but their continuing marriage is sin.

Therefore, they have to quit it. I don't think so. If God allowed for the hardness of hearts, people to divorce and remarry, even though He didn't like it, even though that was substandard behavior, even though that's not really what He had in mind when He first

made man and woman, if He allowed it for the hardness of their hearts, then it can't be that continuation of that second marriage is necessarily adultery, even after repentance has taken place.

In my opinion, God's not the God who says, listen, go untangle your life and then come back to me, and I'll talk to you then. He's the one who came to undo the works of the devil himself. So, it seems to me that the Spirit of Jesus is here not to put some kind of bondage.

He is definitely trying to tell these people that their light view of divorce is definitely not in accord at all with what God has in mind, that these people would divorce their wives for every cause, and He said, don't you understand what you're doing? If you divorce your wife to marry someone else, you're committing adultery because you made a vow to her. And you cause her to commit adultery because she ends up going off and marrying someone else, which she shouldn't have because she's supposed to be married to you. And whoever marries her commits adultery too.

Don't you understand how much defilement is being spread around by your one act of unfaithfulness, your act of divorcing your wife? You get everyone, you make everyone guilty in this situation, make everyone get in trouble. Now, it doesn't mean, in my opinion, that if a wife gets divorced by, if a husband divorces his wife, that she's automatically an adulteress because he did that to her. I think it's implying that she goes off and marries again.

And yet there was not grounds for divorce, so their marriage is still intact. It's more complicated when you add the data from 1 Corinthians 7. I'll leave that to Phil to do later on. It's problematic too.

But the fact of the matter is, I said it's one of the most tangled, most difficult things to counsel from Scripture, divorce. And I think that in a case like this, we have to take into consideration several things. That God has a high standard for marriage and for faithfulness.

People routinely, unfortunately, fall short of that standard in many areas of life, including in marriage and including by getting divorces. That is bad. It is wrong.

We should never consider it an option open to us, any more than we consider any other sin an option open to us. At the same time, God knows man. And He knew the hardness of hearts.

By the way, the hardness of hearts still exists in people. And while God never loved or approved of divorce, in fact, there's a certain kind of divorce He absolutely hates. He says so in Malachi.

He hates putting away. And He's talking about a case where men just leave their older

wives who've been faithful and marry some younger girl because she's cuter. He says God hates that kind of divorce.

That's treachery. That's just treachery against your older wives. But not all divorces... Even treachery, which God hates, it's not an unforgivable thing.

And if a person is repentant, they'll try to make it right. But if their life is so mangled and tangled up that there's no way, there's just no way back, the path back is invisible, then I think Jesus would just say go and sin no more. Now, I got off on this thing about divorce because this is one of the few places in the Gospels or in the Bible itself where one can get off on a tirade about divorce.

And yet the issue in the passage is not so much what are grounds for divorce, in my opinion. It's a matter of what does God expect of you when you make a vow of marriage. He expects you to keep it.

That's what He's saying. He says don't you realize if you don't keep your vows, it's no small matter. A whole bunch of people get implicated in the thing.

A whole bunch of people's lives get tangled up and defiled. A whole lot of people become adulterers and adulteresses as a result of this. Don't you understand this is no light matter? This is something that's disastrous.

And therefore, while we can talk about all these other issues related to divorce and it's tempting to do so on the few occasions where we come to passages that talk about it, nonetheless, it is still not His main point, as I understand it, to forbid divorce or even in this place to talk about how binding and sacred marriage is. See, the subtitle here in my Bible that I'm looking at says Marriage is Sacred and Binding. That's the subtitle over verses 31 and 32.

Well, that certainly is true. But I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at. It's true that marriage is binding and marriage is sacred.

But I think what He's getting at here, along with the next illustration, is that keeping your promise is a matter of being faithful. And that's important for you to be faithful. Whether it's this promise or any other promise.

And that's why He goes on to the next subject of oaths in general. Now, the subtitle in the Bible I'm reading says Jesus Forbids Oaths. Well, that certainly sounds like it's right because He says in verse 34, I say to you, do not swear at all.

That sounds like He's forbidding oaths. But I think it misses the point altogether. Jesus did not speak these four verses, verses 33 through 37, in order to get across how opposed He is to people swearing oaths.

Again, oaths are not in themselves something that's a bad thing to take. If there is something immoral about taking an oath, then the Old Testament sanctions immoral behavior because it sanctions taking oaths on many occasions. Many people made oaths.

In fact, we make oaths when we marry. That's taking a vow. That's an oath.

And you don't have a marriage if you don't take a vow. Therefore, to say that Jesus forbids oaths is perhaps reading this a little bit wrongly. It sounds like He forbids oaths, but let's find out what He's really talking about here.

Again, you have heard that it was said by those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord. But I say to you, do not swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is His footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King, nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black, but let your yes be yes, and your no, no, for whatever is more than these is from the evil one. Now, let your yes be yes, and your no, no, anything beyond that is from the evil one? In other words, if you swear an oath, that's from the evil one.

So, it sounds like an oath is a very awful thing. And yet, do you know that in the Old Testament, well, you've even encountered it in Exodus already, God said, you shall take your oaths in the name of Jehovah your God. You shall swear by His name and by no other.

It's talking about the very same oaths Jesus is talking about, the very same kind of oaths. You see, in Jewish society, an oath was in the place of a contract, of a signed contract. If you say, listen, I'll buy your car from you, and I'll pay you \$100 a month for a year.

And so I say, okay, take my car, give me \$100 for this month, and then I'll expect some more every month. So you take my car, and I get the \$100. I never hear from you again.

So I sold my car for \$100. Well, I just got cheated. I'm not going to do that next time.

Next time I sell my car, I say, I want a contract. You can pay me \$100 a month for a year, but I want it in writing, because writing means you're bound to it. You can't get out of it.

I can take you to court over it, or something like that. Well, they didn't have written contracts anywhere near as often in biblical times. They didn't depend on them so much.

They had oaths instead. If a person swore an oath, it bound him as much as if he'd signed a contract. In fact, in some ways, more.

Because a man would swear by the integrity of someone better than himself. The idea of an oath was this. Oh, you don't trust me? You don't think I have enough integrity? Okay,

I'll tell you what.

I'll swear by God's integrity. Whoa, okay. If you'll swear by God's integrity, I guess I can't question your sincerity here.

Because if you swear by God's integrity and you're lying, you've got God to reckon with, and you're in big trouble. Because that's actually what the law, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, is principally about. It's not about cussing.

Although I do believe it's wrong to use the name of God irreverently, as many people do. And I think that that is a violation of God's sanctity. But the command, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, actually is referring to taking oaths in the name of the Lord, which was permitted.

In fact, God wanted them to take their oaths in His name, rather than in the names of Baal or some other god. Every people swears by their own gods. And He said, you shall swear by Jehovah and none other.

Because Jehovah has integrity, and if you're going to take an oath, you can invoke mine. My name and my integrity and no one else's. But don't take my name in vain or emptily.

Which means, don't swear by my name and then don't keep it. Because God will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. When you take the name of God as an oath to guarantee your integrity and you don't keep it, you are dragging God's name through the mud.

Likewise, when people, sometimes people didn't just swear by God, they'd swear by something else, by Jerusalem, or by something else. Something usually greater than themselves. It says that over, where, is it Hebrews chapter 6? Let's take a look at a few other passages to get a grasp of what oath-taking is all about.

In Hebrews chapter 6, verse 13. For when God made a promise to Abraham, Hebrews 6, verse 13. When God made a promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself.

Now, swearing must not be immoral if God swore. Just like God got a divorce. Not all divorce is apparently immoral if the party seeking the divorce is one whose spouse has committed adultery.

Because if it's immoral, God did something immoral. And morality is defined in terms of what God does and what God is like. Therefore, we cannot say that all divorce is immoral or else God has done an immoral thing.

We can't say that all swearing is immoral or else God has done something wrong. For God, he swore by himself, it says, saying, Surely blessing I will bless you and multiplying

I will multiply you. So, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.

For men indeed swear by the greater. Verse 16 says, this reflects what the Jewish culture that Jesus was addressing. Men indeed swear by the greater and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

Just like signing a contract, you don't have to dispute it. If you say, I'll pay you, and I say, I don't believe you will. I will.

No, you won't. I will. No, you won't.

I swear I will, by the name of God. Oh, well, I believe you. Okay, that ends the dispute.

If you swear, that's the end of it. That's fine. You wouldn't swear like that if you didn't mean it.

I mean, that's what's implied. People swear by something greater than themselves, and that oath that they take is an end of disputes. It settles the matter.

It is considered that when you make an oath, you are invoking the wrath of God upon yourself, if you are not being honest or if you don't keep it. Sometimes the Jews would say it like this, The Lord do so to me and more, if I do not do such and such. Do you ever run across scripture where someone said that? I think, I can't remember all the places it happened, but I know Ruth said that to Naomi.

She said, don't ask me to leave you. Wherever you go, I'll go. Wherever you lodge, I'll lodge.

My God will be your God. Your God will be my God. Your people, my people.

And God do so to me and more, if anything but death separate me from you. This expression is thought to have been accompanied by a gesture, which doesn't come out in reading the scripture, but in typical Jewish way, it is thought that they drew their finger across their throat and said, The Lord do so to me and more, if I do not keep my promise here. That's like swearing to one's veracity.

And once one said, The Lord judge me, that's swearing in the name of the Lord. That's saying God's integrity is in on this, not just mine. And the reason you'd swear an oath is because people didn't trust you.

People don't trust you just to mean yes when you say yes, and just to mean no when you say no. And therefore, to get their trust, you had to invoke some higher virtue. God's or someone else's is bigger than you.

Or the sacred city or something. Now, what the Jews had done, and we have to understand this to understand what Jesus is saying about oaths. What the Jews had

done, as with so many other things, the rabbis had decided that some oaths are binding, and some oaths are not binding.

If you look at Matthew 23, Jesus rebukes the scribes and the Pharisees for this very policy. Matthew 23, beginning with verse 16. Matthew 23, 16, down through verse 22.

16 through 22. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.

In other words, one oath is binding, the other is not binding. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And they also say, Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.

Fools and blind, for which is greater the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore, he who swears by the altar, swears by it and all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits on it.

Okay, now that's the teaching there. This tells us a great deal about what Jesus objected to in oaths. Like so many things he opposes in the Sermon on the Mount, he is against the way the Pharisees do things.

In Matthew chapter 6, he talks about the way the Pharisees say their prayers and the way they fast and the way they give alms and so forth. And he says, Don't be like them. Well, another thing the Pharisees did was they had taken the whole system of oath-taking which was clean and legitimate.

There was nothing immoral about taking an oath. The Old Testament encouraged it. And regulated it.

And said, When you take oaths, do it this way, but make sure you keep your oaths. There was nothing intrinsically immoral about taking an oath. But what had happened and what oath-taking meant in the days of Jesus, there had been a lot of water going under the bridge from Moses' time to the days of Jesus.

The Pharisees and their rabbis had decided that, Hey, when you make an oath, people trust you. Maybe we can deceive them by defining certain oaths as binding and certain oaths as non-binding. So, when you say, Sell me your car and I'll pay you \$100 a month.

I say, Swear. And you say, I swear by the temple that I'll pay you \$100 a month. I say, Okay, fair enough.

Take it. You never pay me. I say, What's going on here? You swore by the temple.

You, a good Pharisee, says, Ah, you didn't know. If you'd read the fine print in the

teachings of the rabbis, oaths in the name of the temple aren't binding. I didn't swear by the gold of the temple.

That would have been binding. And only the legal experts know which oaths are binding and which oaths are not binding. And so that the whole system of taking oaths, which was originally something to guarantee the veracity of the statement, becomes just another thing to be manipulated for deception.

And this is what oath-taking had come to. And Jesus is saying, Listen, you shouldn't need oaths to guarantee that you're going to do what you say. If you say yes, it should be understood you're going to do it.

You should just be honest. If you say no, it should be understood that you mean no. There's no loopholes and no hidden agendas.

Just let your yes be yes and your no, no. If you've got other agendas, if you've got other things you're trying to do to twist things around, that comes from the evil one. Anything beyond that comes from the wicked one.

Don't even use oaths. Now, when Jesus says, Don't swear at all, you can take them as literally as you want to and never make an oath. Of course, you'll never get married then in that case, but that's okay.

You don't have to get married. But some Christians take it literally to the point of not being willing to swear oaths in court. I think many, I don't know if all Mennonites do that, but I've encountered Mennonites who feel that they shouldn't take an oath in court.

I've met other people who do it. Jehovah's Witnesses don't either, for the same reason. I've also heard Christians criticize Masons on the basis of their oaths and vows that they take and so forth.

Actually, Masons have a lot to be criticized for. They're an occultic organization and Christians have no business being in them. But I thought it was a weak point that I heard on a television program where a Christian was debating a Mason and the Christian kept harping on this one thing about all these vows that they take and these secret vows they take.

And he kept saying, But Jesus said, Don't swear at all. Jesus said, Don't swear at all. And he kept trying to nail him on that one point.

I think, Hey, there's a lot of other atrocities in the Masons that you can nail him on. But I think you're maybe misapplying Jesus' words because if you try to say that the Masons are wrong to take an oath, what did you do when you took a wedding vow? Who did you swear before? Oath-taking is not itself immoral, as I've been saying. The reason Jesus says, Don't swear at all, is because the whole system of oath-taking had become a legal

nightmare, a legal tangle, where there were some oaths regarded as binding and other oaths regarded as not binding.

And he says, Hey, let's just scrap that whole thing and just tell the truth. Instead of trying to prove that you're telling the truth by giving some kind of an oath, which then the person has to wonder, Is this a binding oath this person is using? Or is this an unbinding oath? Just don't even subject people to that questioning. Just be honest.

Just say, I'm telling the truth. I'm an honest person. You can count on me.

Now, by the way, Mennonites who won't swear in court, you know how in court you usually put your hand on the Bible and say, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I think Mennonites who have qualms about taking oaths, they'll do that, but they won't say, I swear. They'll say, I affirm.

I affirm that I'll tell the truth. Actually, they do avoid using the word swear, but I don't know that that really bypasses the offense here. I mean, I don't think there's anything wrong with swearing to tell the truth and then telling the truth.

I don't think there's anything wrong with swearing to be faithful to your wife and then being faithful to your wife. I don't think there's... And I don't think Jesus is trying to say that oaths are a wicked thing and don't have anything to do with them. Because if they were wicked, why did God take oaths? And why did God allow people to use his name for taking oaths? Again, morality does not change.

Whatever is immoral now was immoral in the Old Testament. Whatever is moral now was moral in the Old Testament. Morals don't change because God doesn't change.

Therefore, we cannot affix some absolute immorality to the act of taking oaths. And Jesus must not be trying to do that. He clarifies, I showed you in Matthew 23, He's saying, you think that you can take certain oaths and not be binding.

Well, Jesus said, don't swear by heaven, don't swear by earth, don't swear by the temple, don't even swear by Jerusalem, don't swear by your head. Now, why would people swear by any of those? Because probably those were not binding oaths. To swear by heaven, well, I didn't swear by God.

To swear by earth, well, I didn't swear by Israel or something, some other point. I swore by Jerusalem, but I didn't swear by the gold of Jerusalem or something like that. Jesus says, don't use those oaths because don't you know, if you swear by heaven, though you may think you're not swearing by God and you think you can get away with lying because you didn't swear by God, don't you know heaven is God's throne? So, you take a less lofty oath.

I swear by earth. Well, you're still swearing by God because earth is His footstool. Well, I

swear by Jerusalem, but that's His city.

Well, I swear by my own head. It's not your head, it's His head. You can't even make one hair white or black.

He's got control over that, not you. Nothing is yours. He is involved in everything.

There is no way that you can swear to anything without involving God's integrity because the name of God resides upon you. And if you're taking an oath which you don't intend to keep, which is, I think, what's implied here by these particular oaths he names, then you're just being a dishonest person. Just say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no and keep your word and be honest.

If you go beyond that, beginning to use deceitful oaths, that comes from the wicked one. Now, maybe I'm reading between the lines. In fact, I admit it, I am reading between the lines of things.

I don't know whether you'll feel totally comfortable with what I'm reading between the lines there and that's up to you to decide. But I'm reading it there based on what Jesus said elsewhere and based on the whole teaching of Scripture on the subject of oaths. I'm certainly not saying this because I have any desire to take oaths.

I couldn't care less. We don't do business that way in our society. And I've never met anyone who opposed a marriage oath and that's the only oath I've ever taken or ever will take.

So I'm not trying to soften this so that I can release myself to take oaths with impunity. I couldn't care less. I'm trying to get at what Jesus is getting at, though.

What he's getting at is not that there's some kind of horrendous evil in taking an honest oath, but rather that oath-taking took the place of truth-telling for the Jews. And as long as they could use an oath that they secretly knew was not binding, they could still lie and use oaths, in which case oaths would become meaningless, useless. Unless you have to know all the fine points of the law and knew which oaths were binding and not.

And that's asking a little much. Why not just scrap the whole system and why not just tell the truth all the time? The bottom line of what Jesus is saying in this is just tell the truth. Likewise, the bottom line of what he says about divorce is just keep your promises.

You promised your wife you'd stay with her for life, keep your promise. If you don't do that, you're a jerk and a sinner and got no excuse. Now, both of these together are just another way of saying be faithful.

Be a faithful person. Be a person who lives with such integrity that when you say something, people won't have to wonder whether you're telling the truth or not, whether

they can trust you or not, that people will be glad to do business with you on the basis of a handshake rather than a signed contract because you've got such a reputation for honesty. Well, that is certainly desirable and it's necessary because you can't be loving and unfaithful at the same time.

Deception and violation of commitments that you make is unloving. And what I'm trying to say in this whole section of the Sermon on the Mount about what Jesus is saying is that I think he's just trying to unpack for us what it means to be a loving person. Your righteousness has to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

They kept the law outwardly, but they had no love. They didn't keep it inwardly. And your righteousness has to be of a better quality than theirs.

Yours has to be love. You have to be loving. And if you love, you'll keep the whole law.

You'll keep it from the heart. And so what he's saying is you're mistaken. If you think that God just doesn't want you to commit adultery or kill, there's some heart issues there that have to do with love, being a just person in your dealings.

You're wrong if you think that you can divorce your wife for any cause just so long as you give her a writing of divorcement. Or that you can lie as long as the oaths you take to the Lord, you don't break those oaths. Say, he says, you shall not swear falsely, but you shall perform your oaths to the Lord.

But what about what you swear by heaven or by earth or Jerusalem or by your head? That's a lesser vow, not so binding. Well, you think that as long as you didn't swear by the Lord or didn't break an oath that you took to the Lord, that you're okay. But it comes from the evil one just as much if you deceive people by using some kind of a loophole in the oath-taking law.

So the whole idea here is that a loving person is a faithful person and an honest person, because faithful is honest. The last two points, which we'll get to in our next lecture on it, which is non-retaliation to those who would come against you and do injury to you, and loving your enemies, very closely related points, two of them, though, verses 38 through 48. We'll take that next time.

That, of course, is talking about mercy in action. And love is justice and faithfulness and mercy. These are the weightier matters of the law, and those are the things that Jesus is saying here about the law.

What does God want you to do about the law? He wants you to just love. He just wants you to be a loving person. That means be just, be faithful, be merciful, and then you don't have to worry about the law.

You'll do no harm to your neighbor, and therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Well,

we're out of time on this, so we'll stop there.