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Matthew 5:31 - 5:32



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this lesson on Matthew 5:31-32, Steve Gregg discusses the importance of honesty and fulfilling promises to God. He emphasizes the seriousness of the marriage commitment as stated in Matthew 19:9 and advises against using adultery as a justification for divorce and remarriage. While acknowledging the difficulties of marriage, he encourages people to stay committed to their vows and seek to fulfill their promises to God.

Transcript

We'll continue now in our studies of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. And we come now to the third example that Jesus gives to illustrate his teaching on the law. The law, of course, was that law given by Moses to the Jews some 1400 years before Christ, which in the meantime, since the time of Moses, had been elaborated upon by the Jewish teachers and rabbis so that by the time Jesus came, much of the original intention of the law had been submerged, hidden under traditions of men, under-emphasized. Some had been over-emphasized in disproportionate degree to where it stands in relation to other parts of the law and so forth.

In other words, over 1400 years since Moses had given the law, the handling and teaching of the law by the religious leaders of Israel had caused a lopsided and truncated understanding of what God really wanted. So Jesus comes to clarify what the law really is about. Now, I said several sessions ago that Jesus once said in Matthew 23, 23, that the weightier matters of the law are justice and mercy and faithfulness.

I also said that those are not three unrelated things, but those are simply the components of what love is. Jesus indicated that love is the fulfillment of the law, or the way he put it, whatever you want others to do to you, do that to them, and that is the whole law and the prophets. If you love your neighbors, you love yourself, that means you do to them what you want done to you.

And that being so, it's quite clear you want people to treat you justly, you want people to treat you mercifully and faithfully. These are the components of what it means to deal lovingly with your neighbor. To love your neighbor is to be just toward him, to be

merciful toward him, and to be faithful toward him.

Now, this is really what the whole law was about. And Jesus is giving in this section of Matthew 5, six examples from the law to illustrate what the spirit of the law was. Now, these ideas are not new.

Jesus is not making something up new. He's just bringing out things that were already taught in the law. When he taught about murder, that you should not be angry at your brother, you can find the same teaching against anger in Proverbs or in other parts of the Old Testament.

When he taught that you should not look at a woman to lust after her, you'll find the same teaching in the book of Job and in the book of Proverbs. It's there. Even in the law itself said you should not covet your neighbor's wife.

So Jesus isn't really coming up with brand new stuff here. What he's saying is you have been taught the law a certain way, and the most important part of the law has been left out. It's not as if it wasn't already there in the law.

It's that the teachers of the law had not really taught it in such a way as to illuminate the people as to what God's priorities are, what God's real concerns are. Instead, they had turned the law into simply an outward shell of religious behavior and left out the insides, left out the guts. The spirit of it was missing.

And so Jesus came to expound on the spiritual nature of God's concerns for our behavior. In order to illustrate God's concern for justice, he gave a couple of examples. You should not murder, you should not commit adultery are good examples of God being concerned about justice.

He doesn't want us cheating our neighbor out of his right to life or out of his right to his wife. But there's other issues of justice that are important to God too, and Jesus elaborates some of them. Now we come to a section in Matthew 5, verses 31 through 37, where he gives two illustrations of God's concern about faithfulness, another one of the weightier matters of the law.

Faithfulness. What is faithfulness? Well, faithfulness means that you are a person of integrity, that when you say something, when you make any kind of commitment, you can be counted on to do it. You don't need a legal document to keep you honest.

You don't even need an oath to keep you honest. You just are honest. And when you say you'll do something, you do it.

And even if it's hard to do it, you do it anyway because you are faithful. You want to be a person who, like God, will remain faithful even when it's difficult to do so. There is a scripture back in Psalm chapter 15, where the psalmist asks the question, who may

ascend to God's holy mountain and dwell in his presence? And just not everybody qualifies, you know.

And the psalm tells you who you have to be or what kind of person you need to be if you're going to abide in God's tabernacle and dwell in his holy hill. Now, this is Psalm 15. It's only five verses long, and it's mainly a list of qualities that are necessary to qualify.

But in one of those lists, which is in verse 4, Psalm 15, 4, the man who qualifies, it says of him, he swears to his own hurt and does not change. What that means is he makes a commitment. He swears to do something, and then he finds that he is sworn to his own hurt.

That means he has promised something that he did not realize would hurt him so much to keep it. He made a promise, but he had not fully understood how costly it would be to him to keep that promise. But what does he do? He doesn't change.

Once he discovers that keeping his promise is going to be much more difficult and costly than he first realized, that doesn't change him. He still keeps his promise, no matter how painful. That's how faithful God is, and that's how faithful God calls us to be.

Now, Jesus gives two examples from the Old Testament of how God is concerned about us being faithful. We can only talk about one of them today, and that will be in Matthew 5, verses 31 and 32. He says, Furthermore, it has been said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.

The quotation comes from Deuteronomy chapter 24. And he says, But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. Now, this verse dispenses in only a few words with a very complex ethical and moral question, and that is, What are the ethics of divorce and remarriage? Now, Christians, of course, have to deal with this question all the time these days because divorce is a rampant problem in our society.

And, of course, in most cases, people who divorce end up getting married again. And some people go through several marriages and divorces serially, and it's become more or less an accepted phenomenon in our culture. But I would remind you that no matter how accepted a thing becomes in an earthly culture, it doesn't necessarily make it more acceptable before God.

This is very important because we become numbed to things. God does not. In my parents' generation, it was very shameful for people to get divorced.

Divorces did happen from time to time, but people who were divorced were somewhat ashamed. They were admitting that they had failed in their marriage, and it was something that society frowned upon it. Now, 30 or 40 years later, it's just not the same

way.

Our culture is used to it. We've gotten used to divorce. It's not even considered that bad.

People in the church get divorced all the time and stay in the church. And the church very seldom says anything against it. It doesn't want to offend them.

It doesn't want to burden them about this matter. We live in a culture where we have become numbed to moral realities. But when we read the scriptures, we remember that God is not numbed to them.

There were periods in Israel's history where the people began to worship idols. Now, the scripture is very clear that God forbids the worshiping of idols. But just slowly and gradually, idolatry began to creep in along with the worship of God.

And eventually, idolatry is just a part of Jewish culture. And it remained a part for hundreds of years in the Old Testament period. In the books of Kings, idolatry was a given in Jewish culture.

But the fact that it was given in Jewish culture and they didn't feel any conviction about it doesn't mean that God had any lighter view of it than before. In fact, he destroyed the nation of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and sent the Jews of Judah down into Babylon for 70 years for this very reason. God was angry at them for their idolatry, though they had lost any conviction about it.

Our own society has become similar on the subject of divorce. God hates divorce, it says in Malachi chapter 2, and we don't hate it anymore. Now, it's very important that we learn to think the way God does about things because on the Day of Judgment, he's going to judge according to his standards, not those of our culture.

I don't care if you go to a church where everybody accepts things that God rejects. On the Day of Judgment, it won't be your church's standards. It'll be God's standards that you will be judged by.

So let's go back to the Bible and see what it says. Jesus said, furthermore, it has been said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery.

And whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. Now, in case you think that committing adultery isn't that big a deal and therefore to divorce or remarry casually isn't that big a problem, let me remind you what the Bible says about adultery. Let me just show you a few scriptures that will be relevant to inform you.

In 1 Corinthians 6, verse 9 and following, Paul said, Do you not know that the

unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, that's people who commit adultery, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, will inherit the kingdom of God. That easy. Adulterers, among others, will not inherit the kingdom of God, said the apostle Paul.

And we who are Christians agree with him because he was God's apostle telling us this. He said it again, too, in Galatians chapter 5. And in that place, in verse 19, he says, Now the works of the flesh are evident which are adultery, then he gives a long list, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, etc., etc. And after he gives the list, he says, Of which things I told you in time past that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So he says it twice, in 1 Corinthians 6 and in Galatians 5, Adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God. You know what? You're not going to go to heaven if you live in unrepentant adultery. It's that simple.

I don't care if your church has made it a light matter. God does not consider light matter. In Hebrews chapter 13, it says this, Hebrews 13, verse 4, Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed is undefiled.

But fornicators and adulterers God will judge. Yeah, you want to take lightly sexual purity? You want to take lightly your marriage vows? You want to take lightly someone else's marriage vows and commit adultery? You do that, and you are simply choosing to opt out of salvation. You will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Is that important or unimportant to you? Well, I'll let you decide. And I'll continue talking for the sake of those for whom it is important. Jesus said, There is a time when a man divorces his wife, and he causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries her is made to commit adultery also.

By the way, what about the man himself? Well, there's another place where Jesus spoke on this, and he did not leave the man out of this picture. In Matthew chapter 19, he was talking on the same subject. Matthew 19, verse 9, he says, I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality, and marries another, he commits adultery, and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

So, what does Jesus say if you put those two statements together? If a man divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, that is, for any reason other than that she has been unfaithful sexually, if he divorces her, and marries someone else, he commits adultery. If she marries someone else, he has made her commit adultery. And the person who marries her commits adultery.

In other words, everyone ends up committing adultery if a man divorces his wife, except

for the cause of fornication, and any of those parties remarry, they're all involved in adultery. Now, you know there's a difference between adultery and a marriage? There are many cases in our culture where the state has said, you are married, and given a license to them. Where Jesus looks at the same relationship and says, you are in adultery, that is not marriage.

It is not the state's place to define marriage. God created marriage, God defines marriage, and God authorizes marriage. The state may, in rebellion against God, call something marriage that God calls adultery, but on the day of judgment it won't be what the state said that matters, it'll be what God said.

Now, some who have remarried are living in adultery. The state and all their friends and even the church may say, well, you've got a legitimate second marriage. And maybe you do, if the first divorce was on the basis of sexual immorality.

That's the point Jesus makes. Second marriages are adultery unless the first marriage ended because of sexual immorality. Now, what I mean by that, and what it says, is that if you, mister, have divorced your wife, and she was not sexually unfaithful when you did, you are a violator of an oath you made.

Do you remember? You got married once, remember that? When you got married, what did you do? You stood in front of people, and you swore to God and to people, and you deceived everyone. You lied to God, you lied to people, you even lied to the state and got a license by fraudulent testimony. You said that you would forsake all others, and you would stay with this woman for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, as long as you both shall live.

Did you say that? You did if you got married. And if you said that and later divorced her, what did you do? You perjured yourself. You lied under oath, not only to man, but to God.

The state laws should put you in jail for perjury. Now, our state laws, of course, don't do that in this country. But if they did, they would give you what you deserve.

You have perjured yourself. You have violated a woman. You have violated the spectators.

You have violated her family. You have violated God. Is that a small matter? If it is to you, then you don't have any sense of conviction of right and wrong, and you're in big trouble with God.

Lady, if you did that to your husband, if you made such promises as that at an altar to God and to man and to your husband, and then you went off, divorced him, married somebody else, you're in adultery. Unless you have repented, of course. There is such a thing as repenting of adultery.

But if you are an adulterer, unrepentant, then Jesus and Paul and Hebrews, everything in the Scriptures, says you will not inherit the kingdom of God. Do you want to? Then if you're an adulteress, you need to repent. Now, all of this is said with an exception, and that is except for the cause of fornication.

That means this. If, sir, you divorced your wife because she had an affair, or you, madam, divorced your husband because he had an affair, well, then all that's different. According to Jesus, none of this that I've just said is true of you.

If your husband had an affair and you divorced him, then that's okay. That's legitimate. Because even though you made a vow, so did he, and he violated that vow.

He violated the covenant. And even God was in a covenant relationship with Israel, and they violated the covenant, so God divorced Israel, according to Jeremiah 3 and Jeremiah 2, and also Isaiah says the same. There is such a thing as being released from a covenant vow.

If you married and made a covenant vow of faithfulness, and your spouse went out and violated that vow by committing adultery, then that vow is broken, that covenant is broken, and you have every right to a divorce and, I believe, to remarriage. Now, some people read these words of Jesus and say, No, Jesus doesn't allow remarriage. No, he doesn't, except where the divorce was caused by fornication.

The idea here is that you simply can't leave your spouse because you don't love that person anymore, or because someone is more attractive to you than your spouse, or because you've had a lot of arguments lately, or because the money is sparse, or because sex isn't exciting anymore, or because whatever, you're just bored. You can't just go off and leave that marriage. You promised, and if you didn't mean it, you shouldn't have promised, but you did promise, and God holds you to your word.

Now, if your spouse has broken their promise by committing adultery, that's another story. You have been released, according to Jesus, I believe. And once you're released, I believe you can remarry.

Now, in saying that, I am not so naive as to be unaware that many of the Christians listening to this program today disagree with me on one point or another on this. And that's okay. Christians are free to disagree with each other, as long as they have good reason from the Bible.

I will say this. I know there are some people who are more strict than I am, and there are some that are less strict than I am. Namely, there are some who think you can never divorce, even if your spouse has committed adultery, and you can never remarry.

These people have a very uphill battle trying to explain what Jesus meant when he said, except for the cause of fornication. They work on it, and sometimes they write books,

and they try to explain that away. And as far as I'm concerned, I've read their books, I've read their arguments, I am very unconvinced that they have a case.

Jesus did say, except for the case of fornication. That made an exception. That means everything he said is true, except in this case.

Now, there are also some who are much more lenient than I am. They say, well, listen, you know, Jesus, he made it a little hard. Don't you realize some women have it really hard in a marriage? I mean, do you expect people who aren't happy together and don't love each other to stay together for life? Well, not for eternal life, no, because Jesus said there won't be any marriage in heaven.

But yes, I expect you to keep your promises, and so does God. You promised to do it for life. You didn't say, if I'm still happy.

You said, for better or for worse. If you didn't say that, you probably didn't get married at all. But if you did say it, you said it, and you should keep it.

If you don't, God will hold you accountable for it. That's what Jesus is saying. Now, rather than get into all the pros and cons and arguments this way and that way about divorce and remarriage, and there are many of them, I will say this, if you are interested in a much more detailed treatment of all the scriptures related to this subject, I have it.

I wrote three articles for our magazine, The Narrow Path, some time ago, and those three articles are available. I think I cover every biblical scripture on the passage. I will not go into it now.

You can request that by writing to us at the address given at the end of the program, and that will free me from having to go into every little detail right here, right now. I do want to point this out, though, that the whole reason that Jesus brought it up is to illustrate one of the most important things, and that is that when God gives law, he expects it to be followed in the spirit, and the spirit of the law is to love, and love involves justice and mercy and faithfulness. To keep your wedding vows is a matter of faithfulness.

If you break your wedding vows, you are unfaithful, and therefore unloving, and therefore sinning, because you were told to love your neighbors, you love yourself. Now, if you marry someone, do you want them to stay faithful to you? Do you want them to promise you something, and then walk out on their promise and not keep it? Of course not. Well, then, you need to keep your vows.

You need to do to them as you would have them do to you. That's what the whole law of the prophets is. You don't want people to lie to you.

You don't want people to make false promises to you. You don't want people to promise

you all kinds of rosy things, and say, I really, really mean it, and then as soon as it gets hard, they bail out. Now, I'm not saying people won't do that to you, but you don't want them to, do you? And if you don't want them to, then Jesus said, you don't do it either.

When you stand before God, He's not going to ask, were you happy in your marriage? He's going to ask, did you keep your vows? Did you obey? Did you swear and lie to me, saying you would stay faithful and you didn't? Now, some of you out there, I'm sure, are beginning to realize that you're in trouble with God over this very matter. If you are, you can get right with God. You can repent.

You can ask for forgiveness. And that may be all that you need to do in some cases. But there are cases where that's not all you need to do, because you still have a spouse out there, your first one, who has remained faithful to you, and you left them.

And you are leaving them hanging. Maybe you even have children from that marriage. You cannot get right with God without getting right with them.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5? If you come to the altar with your gift, and you remember someone has something against you, go and make it right with them, be reconciled to them, and then bring your gift? He meant something by that. If you have a husband or a wife that you've left, and they've been faithful, they've waited for you, and you're out playing the field, or maybe you've even remarried illegitimately, you're in an adulterous relationship that someone calls a marriage. Let's not care who calls it a marriage.

If Jesus calls it adultery, let's call it that. That's what it is. You need to leave that adultery and go back and fulfill your vows.

Now, on the other hand, if your spouse that you left has gone on and married someone else, then that's another story. But if they're waiting for you, then you have vows to keep to them. Well, ask for my report if you want more details.

I'm sorry we've run out of time, and this is a very deep subject, but we have a very short format for it. I hope you'll be able to join us day by day as we study through the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of the book of Matthew. And if you can't, then write to us.

We'll be glad to send you any of the tapes that you miss. Thanks for joining us.