

KEEP YOUR WORD Matthew 5:31 - 37

INTRODUCTION:

Perhaps you have been listening to the radio and have heard the commercials for an instructional audio program called "Verbal Advantage. The commercial intones: *"Every day, people judge you by the words you use. Rightly or wrongly, they make assumptions about your intelligence, your education and your capabilities."*

That may seem harsh but it is true. People judge us by our words – and not just how we use them but especially by whether or not we keep them.

We admire people who keep their word. And we do not appreciate people who do not keep their word. We have trouble trusting them. We have trouble relating to them. We simply have trouble with people who do not keep their word.

Jesus knew that it was important for us to be people of our word. And he addressed that in his Kingdom Manifesto, The Sermon on the Mount.

Listen to what he said:

³¹ "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

I. Honor Your Vows (5:31-32)

One aspect of being a person of your word is to keep your vows. A vow is defined as *"a solemn promise, pledge, or personal commitment"*.

- When a witness takes the stand in a trial, he makes a vow *"to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"* and, typically, even invokes the name of God, as a witness, to seal that vow. The court expects witnesses to keep their vows and the court takes it very seriously when people break their vows. It is called "perjury" and it can result in jail time.

- When a person takes out a loan, he makes a vow to repay it, with interest, on a certain specified schedule. Again, it is considered a serious lapse if a person goes back on his word regarding a loan. Our entire economy is reeling because some people have not kept their word on their mortgages.
- Politicians take an oath of office when they are sworn in and that is a type of vow. Unfortunately, as we all know, not every office-holder takes his or her vows very seriously. But aren't we all offended when someone we voted for fails to keep his word?
- In the same way...in exactly the same way, marriage vows are promises, oaths, pledges and a matter of two people giving their word. As in the oath of a witness in a court of law, these two typically invoke the name of God, as a witness, to seal their vow.

But too often, just like the politician's oath of office, people regard wedding vows as ideals to be espoused rather than as their word to be kept. God regards wedding vows as promises to be kept. And we should, too.

In helping us to understand this, Jesus went all the way back to what God said when He instituted marriage.

A. What God Said (Genesis 2:18)

What God first said about marriage is found in Genesis 2:18. *"God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"*

Note that God did not say that singleness is not good. Jesus was single and God was well-pleased with him. What God was not pleased with was aloneness or loneliness. There are lonely people who are married, lonely people who are divorced, lonely people who are widowed and lonely people who have never married. God said that it is not good for a person to be alone, to be lonely.

It was to correct that deficit, to complete that lack, that God created a partner for the first man. Genesis 2:18 specifically says that God created "a helper suitable for him"...to complement his deficiencies. Thus, God created marriage.

Now, since society did not invent marriage, society cannot change marriage. Popular opinion about marriage is of little consequence on the subject.

Not only that but I did not invent marriage so my opinion on the subject is also of little consequence.

And you did not invent marriage, either.

God created a relationship in which husbands and wives are to become “helpmeets” to one another. “Helpmeet” is kind of an old fashioned word. It really means a “help-to-meet”. Husbands and wives are to help each other to meet their goals, their ideals, their ambitions, their full potentials, their full maturities.

They are helpers, literally “like to each other” and their sense of completing one another and their sense of bonding and identifying with one another is to be so complete that they become, as it were, “one flesh.” Literally, she does become “my other half”: sometimes my “better half” and sometimes my “bitter half” but always my complimenting, completing part.

As a result, when a marriage dies, it is not just “dissolved” (a fairly recent term of human origin), it is broken. It is as if one flesh were literally torn in two and the one flesh dies an agonizing death.

B. What Others Said (Mt. 5:31)

You may be surprised to hear that the Old Testament is largely silent on the subject of divorce. The one major exception is Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

The issue in Deuteronomy 24 is marriage, divorce and remarriage followed by death or divorce of the second spouse. God forbids people who have divorced and then married other partners, from getting remarried to one another after they’ve been married to someone else. The specific issue that is being addressed is not divorce or marriage after divorce, the specific issue is that God forbids people from taking a spouse, divorcing, taking a different spouse and then going back to the first one.

But this text does give us some insight into the custom of divorce among the ancients.

The oldest custom appears to have been that if a man was displeased with his wife, he could just “put her away”. That is, he could just abandon her, with no legal ceremony and with no legal protection. In fact, all he had to do was to say “I divorce you” three times and that was it: he was rid of her.

Because of this hard-hearted attitude, Moses introduced a kinder, gentler custom. He required that a man give his wife a “bill of divorcement”. This was a legal document that provided her a release from her bonds of marriage so she could at least marry another if she so chose.

Under this Law of Moses, a man could divorce his wife if he found in her “some uncleanness”. That meant, if he found that she had committed adultery.

But as the years went by, people began to interpret “some uncleanness” to mean any dissatisfaction with the woman. Rabbinic law went so far as to say that if she consistently burnt the food, she could be given a bill of divorcement and put out of the house.

Now the point is that Jewish leaders thought they were being charitable to require the bill of divorcement. After all, a man was not required to grant a legal bill when he got rid of an ox or a ram or any other property he owned. These Jewish leaders thought they were really valuing women when they granted them the legal right to remarry.

C. What Jesus Said (Mt. 5:32)

But when Jesus spoke on the subject of marriage, he taught that marriages are not disposable. Homes are not disposable. Because people are not disposable. Jesus said that the citizens of his Kingdom are not to cast-off their wives, discard their husbands or reject their children.

Some have misunderstood Jesus’ intention in his prohibition of divorce. Some have thought his restrictions to be unkind or unrealistic. I’m here to say that his teaching is both very kind and very realistic.

The kindest advice I can give to couples in a troubled marriage is, “don’t divorce”. In spite of the way it may appear, divorce is not an easy solution. It is not easy and it is not a solution. Typically, divorce is a decision that creates more problems than it solves.

And, it is imminently realistic to say, “don’t divorce.” Any two committed Christians can learn to have a rewarding and fulfilling marriage. But they’ve “gotta-wanna”. If the same effort and investment were made to resolve the problems that are made in running from them, most marriages could be saved. If the money that will be spent on legal fees and child support were spent on Christian counseling, most troubled marriages could be healed. But it takes time, effort and investment. And people become impatient and fearful so they divorce before they invest any more of themselves in what they fear will be a lost cause.

I said earlier that any two committed Christians can learn to have a rewarding and fulfilling marriage. With Christ as the lord of their lives and the head of their home, they have a common lifetime commitment that is larger than themselves and bigger than their individual lives, their individual desires, their personal wants and their personal preferences. They can make it. It may not be easy...in fact, it probably won’t be easy. But they can make it and can find fulfillment in their marriage.

So can you see why Paul cautioned us not to be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever? It stacks the deck against you and it makes the lifetime one-flesh commitment harder and less likely to happen.

II. **Honor Your Word (5:33-37)**

Jesus spoke of keeping our word in our marriages. He also spoke of honoring our word in a broader context.

A. Tell The Truth

Jesus said that in his Kingdom, people are expected to tell the truth. To swear, "By God" ought not to be necessary because his disciples ought to be known as people who always tell the truth.

I once knew a man who began all of his stories with the phrase, "I want to tell you something and this is the truth." Jesus' followers should be known for being so honest that this is never necessary.

I will also say that I've heard so many tall-tales from some people that even if they swore they were telling me the truth, I probably wouldn't believe them. That is a reputation that is inappropriate for a Christian.

B. Keep Your Word

Jesus wants his followers to tell the truth and he wants them to keep their word. On the job, in the classroom, at your home, among your friends, within the church...anywhere and everywhere, if a disciple of Jesus says he will do something, he ought to be counted on to do it. Jesus expects us to take our commitments seriously...because he takes our commitments seriously. And if we cannot be relied upon to do what we've said we will do, that not only reflects badly on us, it reflects badly on the one we claim we are following.

C. Watch Your Tongue

Swearing is using the Lord's name flippantly or carelessly and it is unworthy behavior of a child of the King. The Jews were so careful not to use God's name carelessly that they left out the vowels when they wrote His name so it could not be pronounced. That meant that they not only could not use God's name carelessly, they could not use it reverently, either. And it did not really solve the problem. They did not pronounce the actual name of God but they used His title carelessly.

When a person wears the name of God's son by calling himself "Christian" but he does not live up to the image of Christ, that is also using the name of the Lord in vain. Jesus expects the citizens of his Kingdom to watch their tongue and only use the name of their God and the name of their King in the most appropriate of ways.

CONCLUSION:

Justin Martyr once said, "*By examining the tongue of a patient, physicians find diseases of the body and [everyone else finds the] philosophies of the mind.*" What can people tell about you by your tongue?

- Do you honor your vows?
- Do you tell the truth?
- Do you keep your commitments?
- Do you use and wear the Lord's name in a way that honors him?

Remember: "*Every day, people judge you by the words you use.*"

INVITATION: # 186 – "*Lord, Be Glorified*" (and add a verse, "In my words, Lord, be glorified.")