

WEEK 5: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

PART 2: DIVORCE AND OATHS

Matthew 5:31–37



The Place of the Passage

Jesus has launched his kingdom and with it has brought the law and the prophets to fulfillment. He now calls his disciples to live as the light of the world, which will entail living out his kingdom's ethical standards. In particular, his people must have a heart-rooted and whole-life righteousness, which is entirely different than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus offers six examples of what this greater righteousness looks like. Having instructed his disciples regarding the first two, anger and lust, Jesus now turns to divorce and oaths.

The Big Picture

Jesus contrasts what people have heard about divorce and oaths with the new standards of his kingdom.

Reflection and Discussion

Carefully and thoughtfully read this section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew 5:31-37. Then use the provided questions to help you think more deeply about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 1829-1830; online at www.esv.org.)

Instruction about Divorce (Matt. 5:31-32)

Read Moses' instructions about divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Summarize what Jesus now teaches in response to this.

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Read Jesus' expanded teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:1-12. Notice that Jesus appeals to God's original intention for marriage from Genesis 1-2 before explaining his view of divorce. How does Jesus summarize God's original design for marriage? Why is it important to understand God's design for marriage before we consider any potential allowance for divorce?

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Jesus says he does not permit divorce except in the case of "sexual immorality" (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). What constitutes "sexual immorality"? Why does Jesus single out such sin as potentially covenant-breaking?

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While Jesus mentions only the exception of sexual immorality for divorce, the apostle Paul notes one more scenario as a potential ground for divorce. Summarize in your own words what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 7:13-15. Do you think, based on those two exceptions, that there are any other acceptable reasons for divorce?

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How would you summarize your culture's general view on marriage and divorce? What are a few ways in which Jesus' vision differs?

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What can currently married men and women do to cultivate faithfulness in marriage? What might repentance to God and a spouse look like for someone who has failed to uphold Jesus' standard at this point? Is there a particular step you need to take in light of these reflections?

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Instruction about Oaths (Matt. 5:33-37)

Jesus summarizes what the disciples knew about oaths from the Old Testament: "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn"

(Matt. 5:33). Summarize what each of these Old Testament texts teaches about oaths: Leviticus 19:11–12; Numbers 30:2; and Deuteronomy 23:21–23.

God’s original, noble design for human speech is that it be marked by straightforward truth-telling. God’s law for Israel allowed and gave instructions for oaths. However, in the first century AD it was common to swear by any number of holy objects (see Matt. 23:16–21). It was also common to attempt to get out of following through on one’s oaths. How does Jesus’ teaching on truth-telling in Matthew 5:34–37 get to the heart of the matter?

How does Jesus’ heart-level and holistic instruction on speech make numerous and elaborate oaths unnecessary?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

FAITHFUL TO HIS WORD. Jesus calls his people to forgo elaborate or numerous oaths and instead to say simply “yes” or “no” (Matt. 5:37). This calls us to honesty, candor, and faithfulness in our words. This is important to Jesus because this is what he is like, and what his Father is like (see v. 48). We do not need to wonder if God will try to get out of his commitments; he makes promises and keeps them. As 2 Corinthians 1:20 exults, “All the promises of God find their Yes in [Jesus].” God will keep his promise to save all who come to him through Jesus in faith. And God will keep his promise to work everything together for good for those who love him (Rom. 8:28). His “yes” is “yes.” He is faithful to his word (see 2 Tim. 2:13).

MARRIAGE AND THE GOSPEL. One reason Jesus urges faithfulness to marriage covenants is because of the ultimate significance of marriage. Marriage itself pictures the union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:22–33; see 1 Cor. 6:13–19; Rev. 21:1–5). Paul teaches that God designed marriage to point to Christ and the church all along. Speaking of God’s original institution of marriage in Eden, Paul writes, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). At the heart of the gospel¹ is Christ’s love for his church, which is his bride. Yet Christ’s love runs deeper than the love of anyone else, for he sacrificed his life for us, taking our eternal judgment upon himself so that we might enjoy his kindness forever: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (vv. 25b–26). Marriage matters, and faithfulness in marriage matters, because it pictures this strong and beautiful gospel reality.

Whole-Bible Connections

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE. Jesus quotes Moses’ instruction from Deuteronomy 24:1–4, which requires a man who divorces his wife to give her a certificate of divorce. Jesus, however, now says that no one is permitted to divorce a spouse except for sexual immorality. As he expands on this teaching in Matthew 19:1–12, Jesus shows how the ethics of marriage and divorce make sense only in light of the whole story of the Bible. God set the standard in Genesis 1–2 as he established marriage as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. After sin entered the world and divorce became prevalent, Moses merely regulated and allowed for it due to the hardness of human hearts (Matt. 19:8). Now that Jesus is bringing his kingdom and the new covenant, however, he reestablishes God’s creational design for marriage as a lifelong union not to be severed by casual divorce.

Theological Soundings

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPEECH. Jesus selects the topic of oath-making as a primary example of his kingdom’s ethics (Matt. 5:33–37). This assumes that our speech matters, perhaps more than we realize (see 12:37). The theological reason why words matter is that we are image-bearers² of a communicative God. Humans have unique linguistic capabilities, and our speech is itself a certain kind of action, a speech-action. Words do not just convey information; they affect things. As Proverbs says, “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). In Jesus’ example, our word is our bond. We commit ourselves to future actions with our promises. To say simply “yes” or “no,” as Jesus commands, is to embrace the theological, practical, and ethical significance of speech.

Personal Implications

Reflect on how to apply what you have learned in this text to your everyday life. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole. Also write down what you have learned that can lead you to praise God, repent of sin, trust his gracious promises, and live in obedience to him.

1. Gospel Glimpses

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2. Whole-Bible Connections

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3. Theological Soundings

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4. Matthew 5:31–37

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As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to pray and ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Matthew 5:31–37. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Gospel** – A common translation for a Greek word meaning “good news,” that is, the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation he made possible by his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

² **Image-bearer** – The Bible’s opening pages ring with the truth that God created humans “in his image” to know and reflect him on earth (Gen. 1:26–27). Just as kings in ancient times would set up statues or “images” on the highest peaks to display their fame and rule, we too are designed to draw attention to our Maker. Though God’s image in man was fractured at the fall (Genesis 3), it has not been eradicated. Jesus is the full image of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), and in Christians this image is being restored (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10).