

*Kingdom Calling -  
Keeping Covenant*

Matthew 5:27-37

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Well, we're in the the Sermon on the Mount – teaching dealing with how the New Community, that Jesus is founding, is called to live in the middle of a broken world.

This teaching is prefaced by verses 17-20, where, among other things Jesus calls his followers to new levels of living the call to holiness and wholeness. Jesus says – v.20 - *For I tell you, unless your righteousness **exceeds** that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*

Jesus is calling his followers to a standard FAR deeper than had been taught by the religious professionals of their day.

Their teachers were reading Scripture about this or that area of life, and immediately running to the edges. Asking about possible exceptions to the rule. What are the limits? When it something over the edge?

Jesus begins to teach in a completely different way. Instead of going to the **edges**, he drives to the **heart** of God's call for living.

The scribes and pharisees can talk all they want about **exceptions**. The Kingdom of Heaven is concerned with the **core** of what God's holy plan for humanity is.

The heart, not the edges.

That's where Jesus is calling us to live.

Make sense?

So.... Last week we learned that God holds us accountable for how we speak about others, connect with others, and how we handle the reputation of others – v.21-26.

This week we hear about our respect for and value of other human beings, for their dignity and honor, for their person, and for the promises and connections that we make with them.

What is the **heart** of God's call for His People is this?

How ought we, as his counter-cultural New Covenant Community, model that in the midst of a broken world?

### **Read with me – Matthew 5:27-37, p.5**

So, three teachings from the lips of Jesus:

1. adultery.
2. divorce.
3. oath-taking.

For reasons that I hope will become clear, I want to switch up the order in which we take them..... adultery, then oath-taking, then divorce.

People in Jesus' day went to the margins.

Asking questions about what to do when they hit a speed bump in their relationships with people close to them. People they found attractive. Or their spouse. Or those to whom they were called to make commitments of one sort or another.

Often the questions revolved around how they could get out of those commitments: marriage, business, or otherwise.

What obligations did they have to their spouse? When could they break their marriage covenants? When did an oath made in court or business no longer apply?

They were looking for the exception clauses, the loop holes.

And Jesus turns 180 degrees and goes straight for the heart of it all.

As we are called to do.

Get the vision of what God's Desire for life is about.

Live that in daring ways.

*"You shall not commit adultery..."*

That male-dominated culture understood what the legal boundaries were. No sex outside of marriage. OK. But that didn't make it safe or comfortable for any woman to walk through the village square without being leered or whistled at. And it didn't quell any locker-room type jokes. And who knows what pretty face a man would visualize while in bed with his wife? And just what **do** you think such behaviour does to the intimacy and trust levels between two people who are supposed to be bonded together till death do them part?

Two things here.

One – forget the popular myth that being Christian means becoming a prude. If that's what you've heard, I invite you to read the Old Testament book called *The Song Of Solomon*. It's a celebration of the wholesome love – body and soul – shared between a bride and groom, including their sexuality. The natural attraction between man and woman is created by God. And the human sex drive, and innate sexuality, are created gifts of God.

We **celebrate** them.

And we **honour them**.

Which is the second point.

It is good. But, like fire, sexuality needs to be treated with respect. It needs to be lit in the correct places only. And handled appropriately – else it can damage and destroy as quickly as it can warm and beautify.

V.28: *Anyone who looks at a woman with lust  
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

That text speaks mostly to men and how they view women.

And that's because it happens to be the case that generally men's sexuality tends to be driven by looks. Oh, women, too. But not near to the degree of men. Generally speaking, women tend to be driven by relationship – the whole flowers and chocolates thing. And I know, there's all sorts of overlap and exceptions. But, generally, that's what happens.

Men's sex drives are like little sports cars – doesn't take long to get up to a high speed, and one look can do it. Add some uncontrolled imagination, and a bit of jocular talk, and the mix can be locker-room explosive.

Men – we are challenged by Jesus to discipline our looking. And our thinking. Imagination is a gift from God. It enriches so much of life. But when we begin to imagine intimate connections with people that are NOT our spouse, it is destructive to them. And to us. It is offensive to God. It is deeply unhealthy.

And our talk. The God who holds us accountable for how we gossip or relate to others to the point of making us leave worship in order to set things right (v.21-26), holds us no less accountable for how we honor the intimate reputation and well-being of other people (v.28).

Do whatever you need to do to make that happen. Even if it is hard. Or costly – that's verses 29-30. Which it will be, as you no doubt appreciate, in our sex-saturated society.

Do you understand why Jesus uses the exaggerated picture of plucking out the **right** eye or cutting off the **right** hand – v.29/30?

**Right** meant strong, dominant. Right hand was most peoples' strong hand. And the right eye the best eye.

Something may be strong and seem best – but if you cannot discipline it, better to get rid of it and live a lesser life, but one that is respectful of others and safe for others and that honors and protects others.

Just because something is strong or feels good or seems to work, doesn't mean it should be a part of our lives.

Unfiltered access to the internet is one obvious example. Letting yourself get into private settings and conversations with someone of the opposite gender is another. The movies you watch. The books you read.

And women – your version of locker-room talk, about other men. Sounds different than what the men say. But can be just as destructive to the covenant trust and intimacy of your marriages or the marriages of someone else; just as demeaning for the honor and integrity of other people.

Men – how you conduct your conversations with women in the office; what signals are you sending; that so-called "innocent flirting" --- what's really going on?

Women – do you ever stop to ask yourself about how you dress? When are you moving beyond flattering to seductive; where; and why?

I'm challenging us to ask ourselves, and each other, hard, disciplined questions. For the honour and well-being not only of ourselves, or our sons and daughters, but our neighbours, coworkers, the marriages and families of our nation.

And our God – who created us all, body and soul, declared that to be good and holy, and wants our humanity to be treated as the precious, dignified creature that it is.

Not an object to be used for personal pleasure or gratification.

That's point one.

On to point three of the sermon..... *"But I say to you, do not swear at all....."*

As I read through some of the teachings of religious leaders in Jesus' day it sent my head spinning. They had all sorts of rules and exceptions to the rules for how you would make promises and agreements with others.

Swearing by the temple.... or the gold in the temple.... or invoking God's name... or not. It was a real tangle. It led to all sorts of innovative ways that a person could say, **"yes.... but."**

Make a commitment to someone that appears to be dependable. And then renegeing. Saying one thing and doing another.

In that context, then, let's ask:

What is God calling his covenant people to practice?

What example is he calling his New Kingdom Community to set for the watching world?

What flavour of promise-making is he telling us to inject into our culture?"

Tom Wright puts it well when he challenges all who carry the name of Jesus into society to

*"think before you speak,*

*mean what you say,*

*and learn the lesson that, in speaking, less is often more."*

[*Matthew For Everyone* p.49]

If you, as a follower of Jesus, make a commitment, keep it.

Period.

When you make a promise – follow through.

Every bit as much as God made a promise back in Genesis 3 to send a Saviour and redeem Creation and never once wavered – but is following through to this day.

And every bit as much as the Saviour never wavered, but followed through on his commitment to live the perfect life, and die the total and cursed death to win the full salvation of humanity.....

.....including you and me.....

As we now carry his name forward, let us live the promises we make.

Simply.

And fully.

It is a way of living that he pioneered.

And he invites us to follow. [Wright]

That's point three.

Finally, point two.

The covenant of marriage.

In Jesus' day there was a big ongoing public debate between two prestigious schools about what was allowable and what was not as a grounds for divorce. One was a little more restrictive than the other. But both looking for the "out" which would allow a man to drop one and pick up another woman.

Neither did much for the safety, well-being or dignity of women in that day.

Never mind the children. They were just the collateral damage.

It was debate by men for the well-being of men; men who often had a roving eye and a lewd mouth, and who knew how to get out of a commitment if there was any possible way to do so (point one and point three – remember?).

Jesus doesn't want anything to do with the hunt for some escape clause from marriage. He drives straight to the heart of God's plan.

And – as we read this – understand his heart.

Never read anything about marriage without remembering that it is the Bible's biggest picture, the most used metaphor for the relationship between God and His people.

God commits himself to them as a bridegroom.

He calls his people his "bride."

Their unfaithfulness is called "adultery."

Yet he remains ever faithful.

Faithful all the way to the cross.

Many husbands in Jesus' day were looking for the way out.

Not so for followers of Christ.

In Ephesians 5, St. Paul follows through on the teachings of Jesus and challenges husbands to look not for a way **out** of their marriage, but to the cross as a model for how to strengthen and stay **in** their marriage (v.25).

I'm disappointed by the number of church people who fall into Pharisee thinking, read Jesus' words here, and begin a big debate about what meaning of the Greek word for "*unchastity*" really is.

"What does a spouse have to do to make it possible for the other to get a divorce that the Church can honour?" becomes too-often the question.... the **wrong** question.

Follow that line of thinking, head towards the edges, and we can end up binding people into a legalistic prison with no forgiveness or new beginnings and terrible lifelong loneliness in a way that we don't do for the gossip, or the power hungry, or the polluter, or any other sinner.

That's not what Jesus is about. Not here. Not ever. We'll talk more about marriage and re-marriage when we get to Matthew 19. But it is my prayer that the Church can be a community that models grace, forgiveness, and new beginnings also in the sphere of marriage. In the meantime, if you're wrestling with that, and want to discuss it further, drop me a line and we'll get together. OK?

And so, maybe as the New Covenant people of God, called to model a new way of purity and commitment also in our marriages, the question ought to be "What do we as a

community have to do to make it possible, in a world filled with lust and lies, for people to be able to stay committed and connected to each other?"

As well as, "When there is brokenness, how can we help people find forgiveness and new beginnings through the Saviour, who comes to make all things new?"

Ultimately, the heart of God's plan is simple – one man, one woman, one lifetime. Jesus draws a line around the marriage commitment and names it as sacred.

And calls us to honour it.

Quick marriage and divorce is not part of God's plan.

Any more than living together arrangements, pretending to be married, wanting to see if it'll work out and being ready to break up if it doesn't before bothering to make the covenant promises.

Jesus is also calling the church to recognize that when a marriage breaks down, it is not just a matter of two people and that's the end of it. No. All sorts of others get dragged into the pain and the mess and the confusion that so often results. Like dominoes. The stigma, the pain, the labels, travel down the line.

Friends, our Faithful God – who has to put up with all sorts of trials and unfaithfulness on the part of us, his covenant people – is calling us to new commitments of faithfulness in

1. purity
3. and simplicity
2. and devotion to each other.

It is what He lived among us through Jesus.

It is what he will perfect on the day of Christ's return.

And it is what he calls us to demonstrate in our dealings with each other, and in the world.

In Jesus' name.