

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5:27-37

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 5:27-37 - RADICAL LOVE (part 2)

Adultery

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Pursue sexual purity in thought and in deed.

- The law of Moses forbade adultery with married Israelite women (v27). Incidentally it did not forbid having a concubine or sleeping with a single woman, which goes to show how limited the law of Moses was in helping people become more godly.
- Jesus calls us to so much more than avoiding adultery. He calls us to sexual purity in our hearts and in our way of relating. When Jesus speaks of looking at a woman lustfully he doesn't mean that we can't observe and appreciate the beauty or appeal of an attractive person. He is referring to looking at someone in such a way that it feeds sexual desire for the person. Note however that he's not condemning the temptation to be sexually attracted to someone, but rather the act of indulging in the temptation until it becomes a sin. In the words of Luther, "We can't stop a bird from flying over our heads, but we can stop it from nesting in our hair." We may not be able to avoid temptations (such as noticing a sexually attractive person) but we can avoid sin (which in this case would be staring at the person).

- But many commentators (such as Eaton and Carson) say that the better translation here is that we shouldn't look at someone in a way that evokes lust. If this translation is correct, then Jesus is speaking about a man's attempt to seduce a woman. Long before the actual sin of physical adultery there is the sin of intended and hoped-for adultery. This applies to our general way of relating to people that we find sexually attractive. We need to relate to them purely.
- Jesus tells us to cut out our eyes or chop off our hands if they cause us to sin. He is not being literal here. Origen, one of the early church fathers, as a young man mutilated himself because he took Jesus literally. Jesus is in effect saying, "Given your sexual vulnerabilities, take whatever radical action is needed to proactively avoid sexual sin in your life." This may include such things as avoiding certain places, certain websites, certain literature, certain people or certain thoughts. It may include setting up accountability relationships or ending a relationship. Jesus doesn't give the details but leaves it to us to work out. But whatever the cost of avoiding sexual sin, it's worth it!
- What does Jesus mean by our whole bodies being thrown into hell (v29)? In this passage, being thrown into hell refers to the compromised believer experiencing "salvation through fire" (as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 3:15). This is where the punishing, purifying fire of God seriously deprives us of our reward. God has rewards for us in this life and in the next – and one way to lose these rewards, and to experience judgment instead, is to refuse to take the necessary pro-active action to avoid sexual sin. Rather experience the cost of avoiding sin than the fire of judgment.

Divorce

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 sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Protect the covenant of marriage, understanding that divorce and remarriage are not God's ideal and are very destructive.

- What did Jesus mean when he said: "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce"? He is summarizing the teaching of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, wherein Moses permitted men to divorce their wives provided that they gave them a certificate that would free them to remarry.
- To make sense of Jesus teaching in these two verses, let me offer four thoughts:
- 1) *This teaching of Jesus on the subject of marriage and divorce is a summary of his lengthier teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:3-9.* As we look at the longer teaching we learn that Jesus had an extremely high view of marriage, and the covenant that bound two people together in marriage. We learn in Matthew 19 that: a) Divorce is nothing less than an amputation of two people who joined themselves together in the most

profound way, and who have been joined by God in the most profound way (v4-6). b) The law of Moses on this matter is much lower than God's ideal (v7-8). The law of Moses dealt with hearts that did not yet have access to the kingdom of God, and were therefore unable to cope with those things that challenged the marriage relationship. c) Divorce and remarriage may be legal in human courts of law, but they are still a violation of the original marriage covenant (v9). To leave your wife in order to marry another is to betray the marriage covenant, and to be adulterous. Essentially Jesus responds to the concepts of divorce and remarriage not by dealing with them directly, but rather by revisiting God's ideal for marriage. In other words, life in the new order of God's empowering grace seeks to radically nurture and protect the marriage bond, as well as the wellbeing of the people in the marriage. Divorce is, according to Christ's teaching, the consequence of a low view of marriage.

- 2) *In the main, Jesus is confronting the sin in the one initiating the divorce (in this case the man).* It's interesting that Jesus says so much about the divorced wife committing adultery and the man who remarries a divorced woman committing adultery. From our current cultural perspective, it seems that Jesus is in these verses mainly warning women who had been disposed of by their husbands to not remarry. But, we need to understand the cultural context to make sense of this verse. In that culture a woman didn't have the right to divorce her husband. But the law of Moses seemed to permit men to divorce their wives for any reason. So it was common for a man who found a more attractive woman to merely divorce his wife. He would then, in accordance with the law of Moses, give his wife a certificate freeing her to remarry. Such a man would think that since he had followed the law, his actions were acceptable. But what he would neglect to consider is the great damage he was doing to his marriage bond and to his wife. The marriage bond is deeper than even the bond between parents and children (see Matthew 19:5). To dispose of a spouse is likened to amputation. But the damage was experienced mainly by the woman. In that culture, the woman faced a devastating setback: she could go back to her family in shame, become a prostitute, or remarry. But when a woman remarried she would be most commonly perceived by her new husband, and all his family, as "used goods". All this to say that very likely Jesus was not *mainly* warning the divorced woman to not remarry, but was rather alerting the husband who sought to divorce her about the profound damage he would do to the woman. Note that there is neither a command nor a warning given to the woman – only a description of how a man who disposes of his wife "causes" her to become adulterous. Although he spoke of the person being divorced (in this case the wife), he was speaking to the one initiating the divorce (in this case the husband). He was in effect saying to the husband, "Don't think that just because you gave her a certificate all is fine. You are damaging her – and potentially her future marriage – in ways you cannot imagine." In other words, Jesus is confronting the loveless-ness and sin in the husband who wants to divorce her.

- 3) *In these verses, Jesus teaches that divorce and remarriage are generally wrong, but space is made for exceptions.* Christ inserts an exception: sexual immorality. In other words, a valid basis for divorce and remarriage is sexual unfaithfulness. (Note, however, that he is not saying that sexual unfaithfulness makes divorce necessary, but rather that it is permissible.) Is sexual unfaithfulness the only valid basis for divorce? In 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 Paul offers another reason that makes divorce acceptable in God's sight: an unbeliever spouse wants to leave a believing spouse because they're Christian. So these are the two biblical grounds for divorce. This surfaces another question: is it acceptable before God to get divorced for any other reasons? Though that question is beyond the scope of this commentary, let me briefly offer Eaton's view on the matter. Eaton says that divorce is clearly not God's ideal, but that in some very rare cases are in fact the lesser of two evils. And since Jesus and Paul, in his view, are not giving thorough legislation on the matter we need to navigate the issue with every specific pastoral situation in mind.
- 4) *We must remember that Jesus' entire teaching in the Sermon on the Mount provides a new way of living, and speaks of the resources available to disciples in God's kingdom.* Chrysostom, the early church father, commented on this passage: "He that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife?" In other words, a person who takes Christ's leadership seriously, and drinks of Christ's transforming grace and wisdom, is far less likely to get divorced. In the old order, people got divorced because their hearts were hard (Matthew 19:8), but in the new order we can remain tender-hearted toward each other. As we eliminate anger, contempt and insult from our lives (v21-22), and as we cherish, guard and restore relationships (v23-26), and as we pursue sexual purity (v27-30), we also set up our marriages to succeed! Furthermore, sexual betrayal need not necessarily result in divorce, since Christ's grace can enable us to forgive an unfaithful partner and restore a damaged relationship. Stott, a pastor, reveals that because of Christ's teaching, if ever anyone comes to him saying, "I want to speak to you about the possibility of getting divorced," he responds by saying, "We can talk about divorce, but first we must talk about Christ's view of marriage and reconciliation" (pg 99).

Oaths

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath 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 All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Let your speech be honest, non-manipulative and non-defensive.

- The law of Moses encouraged people to keep the oaths and vows they made to God (v33). People would eagerly take an oath to prove that they were telling the truth. But in Jesus' day oath-taking had become almost ridiculous, with people swearing in varying degrees. For example, for the most serious claim, you would swear by God. But usually this was avoided. Mostly people would swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or even their own heads. People believed such oaths were of lesser significance than swearing by God. But Jesus condemns the entire sentiment behind lesser and greater oaths. He argues that everything (heaven, earth, Jerusalem, your head) is connected to God's authority and sovereignty anyway (v34-36). To swear by anything in creation is to indirectly swear by the Creator too.
- The point Jesus makes is that we should generally avoid taking oaths and swearing by anything (v34). Does this mean that we can never swear by anything? The answer is no, since we must remember that Jesus is not giving us new legislation to live by. After all, even Jesus took an oath in a court of law (Matthew 26:63, 64). And Paul called on God as his witness (Galatians 1:20), which is a form of swearing.
- But why should we avoid it? There are two reasons. The first is that oath-taking can sometimes be very manipulative. It is manipulative because it attempts to add undue weight to our fallible perspective by calling in far greater powers to endorse it. It attempts to overwhelm a person to agree with or believe us. Is it not possible that what we are saying is not entirely true? The second reason that Christ discourages oath-taking is that it reveals a double standard of truthfulness. Eaton writes, "It is in effect saying, 'I am not always bothered about telling the truth but at this point I really am!' But if we insist that we are telling the truth now, then what is happening at other times? Jesus wants us to adopt a standard of truthfulness which is our style of talk all the time." (pg 91).
- Jesus then tells us, "All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'." (v37). James paraphrases this teaching of Christ by writing, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'." Jesus calls us to simple, straightforward, honest speech. He calls us to give thought to our words before speaking. Also implied in Jesus' teaching is that we must be careful not to be defensive in our speech. By this I mean that the time that we'd most likely be tempted to swear by oath is when we're being falsely accused. We might defensively respond by saying, "I swear to God" (or 'on my mother's life' or 'on the Bible') that I didn't do that." But we must be non-defensive in how we answer. We simply say, "Yes, I did that" or "No, I didn't do that" and, if we're telling the truth, God will confirm it in his own time and manner. "Those who guard their lips guard their lives, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin." (Proverbs 13:3)
- What does Jesus mean by "anything beyond this comes from the evil one"? It means, firstly, that it is Satan-like to try manipulate with words, and to have double standards of truthfulness. Satan is "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan never says what he means, and means what he says. But, as disciples of Jesus what we say should be what we mean, and what we mean should be what we say. Secondly, it suggests that the devil works destructively into lives and situations when we speak in a

way that manipulates, exaggerates, deceives and is careless. (James 3:6-8 expands on this.)

Sources used - Much reference will be made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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