

“The Heart of the Matter: People of Our Word”

Introduction: Almost twenty years ago, a little booklet came out entitled “Did Jesus Use a Modem at the Sermon on the Mount?” The booklet contained, as its subtitle revealed, “inspirational thoughts for the information age.” As technology has dramatically changed in the past twenty years, I have updated a bit the poem with which the book begins:

Did Jesus use a smart phone at the Sermon on the Mount?  
Did he ever text or tweet to send his message out?  
Did his disciples carry iPads as they went about their route?  
Did Jesus use a smart phone at the Sermon on the Mount?

One of the things this poem highlights is just how different our world is from the one in which Jesus lived. And so we might be tempted to think that our hi-tech sophistication would make Jesus and his teaching pretty much, if not completely, irrelevant. But, every time I use our current technology, be it the nightly news on television or my New York Times app, I come face to face with issues such as murder, adultery, divorce, fraud, revenge, and hatred, all of which are part of what Jesus addresses in the SM. So, although we are centuries apart and technologically distant from Jesus, we are just as in need of what he brought to his original audiences. Jesus, of course, knows this because he is smarter than our phones!

More to the point, what Jesus brought with him was life, real life, life that is truly life, abundant life. He makes this kind of life available because he brings God’s dimension of reality – the kingdom of heaven – near. This abundant life is available to all who take him up on his invitation to be transformed from the inside-out, by repenting, believing, and following him in the power of the Spirit in the way that he lived. In the SM, Jesus gives us a variety of pictures of what this kingdom life looks like. Today, in a couple of different situations, we’ll see that life in the kingdom of God should be characterized by promise keeping, by keeping our word.

I. Beyond the Divorce Papers

A. The first situation has to do with divorce. Now, in the days when Jesus lived, divorce was widespread. Worse, it was absolutely brutal for a woman. Not only could she never divorce her husband, but if he divorced her, society would not provide her with much support. Unless she had a wealthy relative with whom she could live, she would either have to find another man to care for her, or turn to a life of prostitution. So, in the graciousness of God, the Law of Moses, which Jesus refers to in v. 31, was intended to provide some protection for a woman.

B. It begins this way: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce . . .” (Dt. 24:1). The point to note here is that by requiring the husband to provide a certificate of divorce for his wife, she would be protected from simply being sent away by her husband without cause, and would have proof that she wasn’t a runaway harlot or adulteress. That might not seem like a big deal from our perspective, but it was a big deal then.

C. The problem arose in what constituted cause for divorce. What was meant by the phrase “something indecent?” By Jesus’ day, two major schools of thought had arisen, and it was a pretty large debate in Jewish religious circles. A bit later, some of the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into this debate, as we see in Matthew 19, with the question, “Is it lawful for a man to

divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Ma. 19:3). They asked because one group of rabbis held that “something indecent” was limited to sexual immorality, meaning adultery. That would be the only grounds for divorce. But another group of rabbis held that “something indecent” could be just about anything a man didn’t like about his wife. Simply losing her looks, putting too much salt in the soup or serving burnt toast for breakfast could serve as grounds for divorce!

D. Jesus didn’t take sides. While not forbidding divorce, he chose instead to focus on God’s intention for marriage, making it very clear that divorce was never part of God’s plan. The union of a man and a woman in marriage is the deepest union of all human relationships. It first involves the leaving of parents, then the making of a personal commitment, and finally the uniting together as “one flesh,” one natural unit that was to be for life, symbolized and facilitated by a sexual union.

Illustration: One very cool way to see this is that as woman was made from man, God removing the rib of a man, the coming together of man and woman in the one flesh relationship of marriage is a kind of “reunion.” “So they are no longer two, but one flesh,” Jesus declared. “Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate” (19:6). Marriage joins a man and a woman back together. To tear that union apart would be highly damaging, kind of like trying to pull apart two pieces of cardboard that have been glued together. Lots of damage occurs in the process, to the husband and wife, to the children, and even to the society in which they live. Studies in fact have shown children whose parents have divorced are, on average, less emotionally stable, show more behavioral problems at school, leave home earlier, are more likely to have a child before the age of 20, are less likely to secure a full-time job, and are divorced or separated more frequently themselves. In other words, God has designed a pattern in marriage for the ongoing health of the human race. Again, Jesus is smarter than our phones!

E. Jesus does allow for exceptions. He calls it “marital unfaithfulness.” This, too, is certainly open to interpretation. Like the days of old, there are those who would limit this unfaithfulness strictly to adultery. But I think Jesus would acknowledge, given that he is concerned with matters of the heart and not just an act, that there is also such a thing as mental infidelity. This can range from abuse, to the addiction to pornography, to probably a number of other things that can be damaging to a one flesh relationship. Not that a marriage has to end in these cases, but it sure shouldn’t continue without some repentance and reconciliation and ongoing help. But what Jesus is arguing against in the SM is the “you’ve burnt the toast,” “you’ve lost your hair,” “I’m not in love with you anymore,” reasons so many use to end their marriage, reasons that stem from a hardness of heart. If our hearts are kingdom hearts, they are soft. They will be characterized by promise keeping.

## II. Beyond a Stack of Bibles

A. How we keep our promises is the next matter of the heart that Jesus tackles. Essentially, a heart that has been shaped in the kingdom of God, a heart that has been spiritually formed to be like the heart of Jesus is one that will lead us to keep our promises, without the need for a whole lot of extra bells and whistles. We won’t need to “swear on a stack of Bibles” to try and convince others of our trustworthiness. Our word will be enough. Once again, Jesus is digging down to the level of the heart, because what we speak with our lips comes from there.

B. As Jesus digs, he provides, in v. 33, a summary of the OT teaching on oath taking: “Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.” The Mosaic Law permitted a person to swear by the name of God to substantiate an important affirmation or promise, while at the same time, warning them to keep that promise. For example, “Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God

with your own mouth” (Dt. 23:23). What had happened over time, and it probably shouldn’t surprise us, was a search for loopholes. To that end, the rabbis developed a highly structured hierarchy of oaths, ultimately declaring that in the end, what the Mosaic Law really meant was that only oaths taken in the name of the LORD were binding. If a person wasn’t really serious, he or she could swear by less sacred things, like heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or even one’s head (Ma. 5:34-36). Ultimately, it was kind of like making a promise with your fingers crossed behind your back. Since the oath didn’t invoke the literal name of God, it wasn’t considered binding.

C. It’s worth thinking for a moment about why one would do such a thing. We, of course, live in a world where promises are routinely broken, despite the invitation to read the lips of the one making the promise. From politicians who promise to make changes if only we will vote for them, to advertisers who promise us happiness if only we will buy their product, to a teenager who promises his undying devotion to his date if only she will spend the night with him, rarely do such promises come true. The making of promises really becomes a device of manipulation, a way to get others to let you have your way. Many are made with our “fingers crossed.” But life in the kingdom of God should be characterized by promise keeping.

D. So, Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter. Making an oath by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or our head doesn’t really keep God out because all of those things come from him anyway. God can’t be kept out, whether we’ve named him or not. As Jesus describes it, heaven is his throne, earth his footstool, and Jerusalem his city. The color of our hair even comes from him. Life, therefore, cannot be divided into compartments, one where God is and another where God is not. So, making an oath in order to deceive or manipulate others can only come from the evil one, also known, interestingly enough, as the “father of lies” (Jn. 8:44).

E. Should we not, then, place our hand on a Bible in a court of law and swear to tell the truth? Again, we must be careful about simply focusing on the act. Jesus himself went “under oath” before the high priest at his trial (Ma. 26:63). Paul seemed to call upon God as his witness in some of his letters. Ultimately, what we want to be is people of our word. If we find it necessary to call God as our witness, either because the law of the land demands it, or because someone doesn’t know us very well, we should follow through on what we promise so that God will be glorified. In other cases, our simple yes or no should be sufficient. In the end, the thrust of Jesus’ words is that we should be people of our word.

Illustration: In the Alpha Course, Nicki Gumbel tells the story of a young clerk at a department store in London called Selfridges. One day, when the owner of the store, Gordon Selfridge was there, the phone rang and the clerk answered it. The caller wanted to speak with Gordon, but Gordon told the clerk to tell the caller that he was out. Instead, the clerk handed the phone to Gordon and said, “You tell him you’re out!” Gordon took the call but later was furious with the clerk. In response, the clerk said, “If I can lie for you, I can lie to you.” From that point on, the clerk became one of Gordon’s most trusted assistants.

Kingdom of God life, abundant life, is characterized by being people of our word, people with soft hearts, people whose hearts are led to both keep our commitments and who can be trusted. How can we guard against hardness of heart? How do our hearts become so softened? It comes from resting in the heart of God, whose very nature is that of a promise keeper. Hear Moses sharing this aspect of God’s character with the people of Israel:

But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from

the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt . . . he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations . . . (Deut. 7:8-9).

This covenantal love, this love of God for us no matter what, is then ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus, who loved us to such an extent that he gave up his life for us that we might be redeemed from the slavery to sin. The more our hearts are softened by, and live within, this promise keeping love of Christ for us, the less we will feel a need to get our own way, to deceive or manipulate others, or to break our promises. Let us sing of and celebrate his beautiful love . . .