**Sermon Manuscript**

**February 12, 2017**

***Deuteronomy 24:1-4***

 *“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,****2****and if she goes and becomes another man's wife,****3****and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife,****4****then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.*

***Matthew 5:27-37***

***27****“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’****28****But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.****29****If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.****30****And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*

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|  ***31****“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’****32****But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* ***33****“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’****34****But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,****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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.****37****Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.* |

Clarifying divorce and oaths

This morning we are continuing with part six in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. And again (as in week’s past) I’ll be drawing some from Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy*.

But over the last two weeks we’ve looked at what Jesus had to say about the 6th and 7th commandments: “You shall not murder” and “you shall not commit adultery”. And we talked about how the assumption held by many in Jesus’ day was that as long as they followed the letter of the law they could consider themselves righteous in these areas. But, as Jesus showed us, this couldn’t be further from the truth. As he taught, even if someone manages to avoid committing murder, they can still be filled with anger and contempt, and both of these cause great harm to others. Likewise, even if someone manages to avoid committing physical adultery, they can still be consumed with lust, which will inevitably impact not only their marriage relationship (if they’re married), but how they relate to all people.

Well, in the final two paragraphs of our Gospel passage *this* *week*, Jesus has moved on to the subjects of divorce and oaths, which will provide us with a sort of double-feature this morning, or two mini-sermons inside of one.

Now, unlike murder and adultery, neither of these subjects are *directly* addressed in the Ten Commandments, but the Jewish scriptures *did* contain laws on *both* (you may have noticed we read the Old Testament guidelines on divorce in our First Lesson today). But divorce and oaths were similar to murder and adultery in Jesus’ day, in that people also approached these with that same harmful attitude: that following the letter of the law was all that mattered. #

So when it came to divorce, seeking divorce wasn’t really an *option* for a woman back then. However, most men felt free to divorce their wives over almost any issue as long as they gave her a certificate of divorce as the Deuteronomy passage requires (this certificate would give her a legal right to remarry). So in Jesus’ day, this led men to not only seek a divorce if their wife committed adultery, but there were guys divorcing their wives over issues as minor as *burning the supper* (and I’m not exaggerating!). And this sort of devaluing of marriage is what leads Jesus to address it in verse 31, where he teaches, ***31****“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’****32****But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

So Jesus has ruled out divorcing over burnt supper, but unfortunately throughout much of the history of the Church, Jesus’ words in verse 32 have been misunderstood to the great harm of many. For example, based on this verse the Roman Catholic Church teaches that any of its members who have divorced are perpetually committing adultery. So they’ve essentially distorted divorce into an *unforgiveable* and *irredeemable* sin, which is *completely* inconsistent with the Gospel of grace.

Well, we can safely say that *this* was *not* the outcome Jesus was hoping for when he uttered these words in verse 32. Jesus is not teaching divorce is an unforgiveable sin. Instead, Jesus is merely trying to highlight how *harmful* divorce is for these men who thought it was no big deal, and *especially* how harmful it was for a woman in his day. You see, as Willard says, in first century Jewish society, “To not marry again was a terrible prospect for the woman. It meant, in nearly every case, to grow old with no children as well as with no social position, a perpetual failure as a human being.” So when a woman was divorced, she “had three realistic possibilities... 1) She might find a place in the home of a generous relative, but usually on grudging terms and as little more than a servant. 2) She might find a man who would marry her, but always as “damaged goods” and sustained in a degraded relationship. Or 3) she might, finally, make a place in the community as a prostitute.” So remaining unmarried wasn’t a real option, but having to re-marry meant living in a degraded state. So **this** is why Jesus says that when a man “divorces his wife… (he) makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” because that woman would’ve entered that second marriage with a “degraded” sexual status, “and precious few husbands would allow her to forget it.”

So even though the Roman Catholics and many other Christians read verse 32 and hear a law, instead Jesus is actually trying to highlight for these men the enormous impact divorce had on a woman in their day! Jesus wants them to understand that if they divorce their wife for some flippant reason, it may not *feel* like a big deal to him, but it will be *devastating* and *life-altering* for their wife! And shifting to the present day, Jesus’ message is important for all of us to hear, not just the men, since both men *and* women in our society are free to file for divorce for any reason they choose, but too often they minimize the *seriousness* of such action and its damaging effects. # #

Of course, Jesus is not saying all of this to beat up on us or scare us. Remember, if we ever hear the scriptures as bad news, we’re failing to hear the full message! Actually, the context of the sermon on the mount as a whole tells us that Jesus is addressing this subject because he wants to encourage us to not only remain in our marriages, but to approach our marriages in his kingdom power! As Willard says, the good news here is that “the resources of the kingdom of the heavens (are) sufficient to resolve difficulties between husband and wife and to make their union rich and good before God and man—provided, of course, that both are prepared to seek and find these resources.” Indeed, *even* the damage physical adultery can cause on a marriage – of distrust and betrayal – can be healed through grace provided in Jesus. And Willard further points out it’s no “accident that Jesus deals with divorce **after** having dealt with anger, contempt, and obsessive (sexual) desire” and teaching how to overcome those through his kingdom. After all, “how many divorces would occur, and in how many cases the question of divorce would never even (come up), if anger, contempt, and obsessive fantasized desire were eliminated. The answer is, of course, hardly any at all.”

On the other hand, we should say there are *still* some situations where divorce may be the most appropriate course of action. As Willard suggests, there are situations where divorce could be an *act of love*. Think of the physically abused wife who keeps going back to her mate without ever implementing any new boundaries. The key principle we are always called to consider is what is the most loving thing I could do for my spouse here? I would argue that in situations like I’ve just described, the woman is sinning by *not* divorcing her husband (or at least separating), because she is failing to love her spouse by continuing to enable his abuse! And this principle applies not only to physical abuse, but also to sexual or emotional abuse from a husband *or* a wife.

Jesus’ aim with these verses is to discourage us from taking the easy way out, because honestly the challenge of marriage – of trying to sacrificially love our imperfect spouse – that challenge should drive us to the feet of Jesus time and time again, which can only be a good thing for *our* character. ### ### ###

Well, after addressing marriage and divorce, Jesus *then* moves on to oaths. Now, at first glance this may seem like an outdated topic. In Jesus’ day it was not uncommon for people to invoke God by swearing in order to convince someone that what they were saying was true or that a commitment they were making was sincere. But people do this today as well, don’t they? They might say, “I swear to God such-and-such happened” or “I swear on my mother’s grave that I’m telling you the truth” or “that I’ll pay you back if you loan me this money”. Well, the mentality of people in Jesus’ day was that *whenever* they swore to something they were *really conscientious about* was making sure that they followed through on it. Because in Exodus 20 God commanded “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn” (verse 7).

Now Jesus certainly would have agreed that it is important for people to keep their word, but what concerned him more here was the motive for making such oaths in the first place. Jesus recognized that, whether they kept their oath or not, when people swore like this their *intent* was *almost always* **manipulation**. In reality, making oaths – like saying “I swear to God” – is really just a method for ***getting our way***! Don’t you agree? We do it because we want the person to accept what we say and do what we want. “So (we) say, ‘By God!’ or, ‘God knows!’ to lend weight to (our) words… (But, in truth, this) is simply a **device of manipulation**, designed to **override the (other person’s) judgment and will**.”

So in verse 33 Jesus says,*“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’* *But I say to you, Do not take an oath* **at all***, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.**And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.**Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

Now, because Jesus says “do not take an oath at all” (in verse 34), some over the years have concluded Jesus must be prohibiting practices like taking an oath if testifying at a trial. But, again, *this* is ***not*** what Jesus is worried about. What Jesus *is* *concerned* with is our human impulse to manipulate others through exaggerating or deceptive speech. This is why he says, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” ##

Now, you may think, “well, what’s the big deal with that?” It may feel again like Jesus is making a mountain out of a mole hill. But perhaps it’s *easier* to appreciate why Jesus takes verbal manipulation so seriously when we consider what it *feels* like to be on the other side of it: where *we’re* in the position of being manipulated rather than the one doing it. And the best example of this that I think we can all relate to right now is in the realm of politics. Now, I’ll tread carefully here (don’t worry), but we truly are now living in a Post-Truth era. Between the 1) epidemic of selective and biased news reporting by the media, to the 2) “alternative facts” emerging almost daily from the new presidential administration (that’s *their* words, not mine), and the fake news accusations now being hurled in *all* directions, I’m sure by now *all* of us can admit to feeling like we are victims of verbal manipulation on an almost daily basis, no *matter* ***what*** our politics are. “Spin” is what they call it. But, you know, if anything could ever unite this country, maybe it’s that we’re all just *sick & tired* of being spun to!! I mean, when you feel like you’re being fed with spin – *from whatever source* – doesn’t it just make you feel *disrespected* and *used*? And when it’s done so brazenly, doesn’t it feel like just such an *insult* to your intelligence?

Well, when we think about what it feels like to be on the *receiving* end of verbal manipulation and deception, maybe we can begin to appreciate why Jesus says, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

But as I began to think this week about how easily and often I can slip into verbal manipulation in my own life, it was sort of discouraging. I realized that I’ve even been susceptible to behaving this way for seemingly “noble causes” (or what I think are noble causes). For example: take evangelism. I was remember a time back in college when I went through a season where I was *particularly* passionate about sharing my faith. And I was friends with this person who had fallen away from the faith, and I wanted so badly for them to return to God that I found myself literally trying to *talk them into it*, *selling* them on it. Now did I want what was best for them? Sure. But more importantly: I wanted them to do what **I** wanted them to do! I wanted *my* *will* to be done!

And yet, if we think about how Jesus ministered and preached, he never behaved this way. He didn’t try to beg or trick *anyone* into his kingdom. He didn’t treat salvation like selling vacuum cleaners! Well, the same goes for us: we aren’t trying to manufacture conversions, we’re trying to make disciples, which means our aim is conversions that are going to *stick*. So we should share our testimony with people, explain the truth, & pray for them, but we must always respect people’s intelligence and will, and trust that God is the one who will bring faith anyway, not us. #

However, if it was only causes as noble as evangelism where we could resort to verbal manipulation and spin with people, that would be one thing. But truthfully, we can find ourselves trying to override people’s judgment and will on just about anything throughout our daily lives. And if it feels *at all* to them like **I** feel when I’m being spun to, I don’t wanna do it!!!

Whenever we find ourselves using spin or exaggeration to get our way or swearing to God so someone might believe us, or if we ever feel like we ***need*** someone to do something or believe something in order for ***us*** to feel okay and at peace, then we’re probably knee deep in trying to **manipulate** them. #

And Jesus wants to help us overcome this. But this isn’t accomplished by having putting verbal manipulation on a list of things to avoid. It is accomplished as we allow Jesus to change our hearts to value the truth as he does and acceptance that He has given *all people* free will. And we should also ask him to help us acceptance that all people have been given free will. Because the more our hearts accept that, the more we will naturally respect people’s right to make their own decisions, and the more naturally we will simply say “Yes” or “no” and let the chips fall where they may. ## ##

But not only does Jesus want to root out any habit of verbally manipulating people, his theme of valuing the truth should also make us passionate about not ***accepting*** **spin**!!! So, since I’ve already brought it up, I want to say a little more about that before I close.

Perhaps more than ever in history, we believers now need God’s help not only to avoid being spinners ourselves, but to resist absorbing spin when it comes our way. And the reason this is important is because spin produces polarization. We need only look at our country right now to see that misinformation has led directly to an increase in polarization. Spin – or blatant disregard for the truth – by media and politicians has produced an atmosphere of confusion (people are left wondering who they can really believe?), but also a huge rise in distrust and animosity between Americans, causing our country to become more polarized than ever before.

Now, if the average secular American wants to become polarized, that’s up to them. But as Christians, becoming polarized *on any issue*, whether its politics or church doctrine or something else, is a very dangerous position. The reason is: whenever someone becomes polarized on any issue, it means they believe their side is 100% right about that subject. But for a person to have such confidence in their own infallibility is really to deny their humanity; it’s really pretending to be God, because *all of us* have limited perspectives; none of us has the market cornered on the truth! The second problem with a Christian being polarized is that it always involves harboring anger. It was just two weeks ago that we found Jesus teaching that harboring anger is an indication we are *not* operating in his kingdom. Yet, despite this, there are *entire movements* of Christianity that are unabashedly polarized, even proudly so! As I’ve said before, “a fundamentalist Christian is an evangelical who is angry about something,” that was a fundamentalist (Jerry Falwell) who says that, not me!

So, if we want to know whether we have become polarized on any issue, we should ask ourselves this…

1. Am I open to the possibility that my position or parts of my position may be wrong?
2. Am I willing to admit that the other side has *any* good points?
3. Am I able to consistently treat those I disagree with on this issue with respect?
4. Am I willing to admit that there will always be *some* difference – some daylight – between what I understand to be true and God’s Absolute Truth?
5. And in the area of politics specifically: have I refused to justify actions by my “side” when they are contrary to the principles revealed in the scriptures rather than rationalizing the scripture away?

If our answer to any of those questions is “no” when it comes to some issue, then we have likely become polarized about it. The bad fruit of polarization is it makes us incapable of respecting those who disagree with us and it causes us to care more about being “right” or our "side" winning than we care about the truth. Now, we may give *lip service* to the truth and even claim that’s all we care about, but if we’re polarized our actions will show that what we *really* care about is (not truth, but) ***triumph***, getting *our* way. And that’s a problem for Christians, because on the cross our Lord demonstrated that he cared more about the Truth *than Triumph*. He let his Father provide the triumph, and he intends for us to be the same way: to care more about seeking truth regardless of if it matches our ideology or not, loving our enemy, and letting God take care of lifting us up.

So, you know this Adam & Eve & Evolution course I’m gonna do? It’s not about getting everyone to believe the same thing. I’m not that unrealistic! My *real* hope for it, honestly, is to make a dent in polarization among Christians. Somehow, around the 1920s this subject became polarized for many Christians for reasons I’ll explain in class one. Indeed, there are many churches that *teach* their members to be polarized about this issue. But there’s just *no reason* for it! So this course is about giving people the opportunity to be more informed, whatever your position is, and being open to the fact that even as believers – *even though we believe Jesus died and rose from the dead and would hopefully stake our lives on it* – *none of us* has completely cornered the market on truth because *none of us* are God. ## ## ##

So, whether it’s politics or church doctrine or a variety of other issues, it is imperative that we resist being polarized and repent if we have been. But this can only be done by living in the kingdom: by giving our anger and self-righteousness to Jesus and letting him replace it with *his* righteousness.

Amen.

Source used: Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy*