

Kingdom Relationships Part 4: *Spiritual Honesty vs. Spiritual Head Games*

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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. 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. (Matthew 5:31-37 ESV)

It's one of the things employers dread most: having to give a reference for an employee who was a terrible worker. If you share honestly about the poor work habits of the ex-employee, you can find yourself in legal hot water, but it just doesn't feel right to mislead a potential employer by saying good things about them that aren't true. The solution can be found in what I'm going to call "creative ambiguity" - statements that are ambiguous enough that the prospective employer thinks you're saying one thing, when you're really saying the complete opposite:

For the employee who is chronically absent: *a man like him is hard to find.*

For the employee who is lazy: *You would be fortunate indeed to get this person to work for you.*

For the employee who is totally inept:

"I most enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever."

For the employee who had problems getting along with fellow workers:

"I am pleased to say that this candidate is a former colleague of mine."

For the employee who is so unproductive that the job would be better left unfilled:

"I can assure you that no person would be better for the job."

For the employee who is not worth further consideration:

"I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment."

These statements may technically be true, they aren't what we would call honest statements because they're meant to give an impression of one thing: a positive report, when the truth is they are the opposite: a bad report. Which is kind of funny when it

comes to an employer reference. But where creative ambiguity and cloaked truth is not humorous is in the area of our relationships. Nothing is as important to the health of our relationship with God and with each other as pure and simple honesty.

We are in a section of the Sermon on the Mount that I'm calling "Kingdom Relationships" because from vs. 21 to the end of the chapter Jesus gives us a picture of what relationships that are governed by the principles and values of the kingdom of God should look like. In the passage we opened with, Jesus talks about two subjects that might seem unrelated: divorce and swearing oaths, but there is a common thread that connects them to each other and that is that both of these issues had been high jacked by a

religious system that loved to play word games and head games with the commandments of God in order to arrive at the conclusion they wanted. Jesus calls his disciples do away with those kinds of head games and live out our Christianity honestly and simply. Let's look at each section separately.

Word games regarding divorce

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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. Vv. 31-32

Scholars agree that Jesus is not attempting to be exhaustive in his teaching on divorce in these verses. In fact he will say more in Matt. 19 about the same subject and the Bible says a lot more about divorce and remarriage than what is contained in these two verses. At some point I want to do a more comprehensive message on this important and sensitive subject, but in the meantime, you can find a more extensive message on the subject of divorce and remarriage at our website, gracecorner.org. Simply go to the message series on 1 Cor. called *Letter to a Really Messed Up Church* and you will find a message called Concerning Divorce and Remarriage. that covers this subject far more thoroughly than I will be doing this morning.

Jesus is addressing a debate that was raging in his day over the meaning of Deut. 24:1 which says that if a man marries a woman and finds "something indecent" about her, he can write out a certificate of divorce, give it to her, and send her out from his house. The plain meaning of the Hebrew is that he finds sexual immorality in her, but in the century before Jesus a rabbi named Hillel reasoned that what Moses meant was if he finds *any cause*, including sexual immorality, that causes her to fall out of favor with him, he was free to divorce her. By Jesus' time, it was estimated that 3/4 of all divorces were based on Hillel's "Any Cause" teaching. The Pharisees try to trip Jesus up on this divisive debate in Matt. 19:3.

*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife **for any cause**?" (Matthew 19:3 ESV)*

God had made it clear in the OT that marriage was the joining of a husband and wife as one flesh, and that the union which God has joined together was not to be lightly separated by men. But these religious leaders were playing word games with scripture in order to arrive at the opposite of what God intended. Instead of the marriage union being a sacred union NOT to be lightly broken, God's word was now being used to justify a man divorcing his wife for any cause whatsoever if she ceased to please him. If a man married a woman and 3 months later regretted his choice? That's cause enough: write out a cert of divorce. If his wife accidentally burned his dinner? That's cause enough: write out a cert of divorce. If his 23 year old secretary begins to catch his eye? That's cause enough: write out a cert. of divorce. They were playing word games with God's word for the sake of their own self-serving agenda.

Jesus brings them back to the clear, honest meaning of Deut. 24:1 which is that anyone who casually divorces his wife is guilty of adultery in God's sight. God's word does provide grounds for divorce, that being when the marriage vows are broken by sexual immorality (Deut. 24:1) or neglect of marital duties (Ex. 21) but the heart of scriptural allowances of divorce is to protect either spouse from being chained to the shell of a marriage that has been violated and ravaged by sexual immorality or neglect or abandonment and to protect the wife from being sent out by the husband without having the freedom to

remarry that a legitimate divorce certificate provides. The heart of the laws that God laid out was to protect the innocent victims, but the religious leaders had twisted it into a "get out of marriage free" card for the man and it resulted in women being abandoned by finicky husbands and victimized by casual divorce. The end result was the opposite of what God intended: women were getting hurt, marriages were being terminated, men were being unfaithful to their vows. Relationships were being destroyed by the head games being played with God's word.

There is a valuable lesson and warning for believers today. When we come to God's word we need to be really careful that we aren't reading our own agenda into God's word - twisting it to say what we want it to say, squeezing out of it what we don't want it to say. We need to be so careful that we aren't bending God's word to fit our agenda instead of bending our agenda to fit God's word. If we believe that God's word is authoritative and inerrant then we must be willing to submit our thoughts, beliefs, and convictions to His word, regardless of how much pressure our culture is putting on us to believe something different. We must not twist God's word to say what we want to hear.

That doesn't mean we can't ask hard questions about how God's word applies to our current situation and culture. We can and we should. But it's vital that we come with honest hearts and motives, yielded to the authority of God's word, and sincerely seeking to honor God's word in our lives and practices. Even after all that, we may get it wrong on some points. Churches all around the world wrestle with these questions and good churches come to differing conclusions. No believer or church has a corner on the truth! But if we love and honor God's word and desire to be true to it, I am confident that God will protect us from serious error and from dangerously twisting His word to fit our preferred conclusions. In the next passage Jesus deals with another religious "head game" that was being played:

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. Vv. 33-37

The OT was very clear that if you swore a vow to the Lord, you needed to be sure to fulfill that vow. But again, the Pharisees had taken the practice of oaths and vows and had corrupted it by coming up with a complicated system of rankings where some vows you needed to keep and some you didn't. Jesus calls them out on this in Matt. 23:16-22

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. (Matthew 23:16-22 ESV)

When I was a kid, if we wanted to prove that we were being truthful we would say, "cross my heart and hope to die." That meant, I'm telling the truth, I promise, and that promise was backed up with a kind of

curse attached: if I'm lying may I be struck dead. But even with a vow as sacred as "cross my heart and hope to die" there were legal loopholes, if you knew what they were. If you crossed your fingers behind your back while you said something, it overrode any other vow, even one as serious as "cross my heart and hope to die". Crossing your fingers behind your back meant that you were exempt from having to tell the truth - the equivalent of having diplomatic immunity from lying.

In a similar way, the Pharisees and scribes said, if you swear by the temple, your vow means nothing, but if you swore by the gold in the temple, then you are bound. You swore by the altar? Means nothing. By the gift on the altar? Then you're bound. First of all the religious leaders had it all wrong - their priorities were totally messed up. They felt the more you zeroed in - from the temple to the gold in the temple, from the altar to the gift on the altar - the more serious the vow. But the temple and the altar were holy and represented God and His presence. The gold and the gift were just incidental. Their priorities were all mixed up.

But the deeper issue was that they came up with a system of crossed fingers behind their backs. Swearing by the temple gave them two great benefits: they gave the impression of being men of their word, and they didn't need to keep their word. They gave the impression of telling the truth with no obligation to tell the truth. Their agendas and hypocrisies and head games were baked right into their religion and they thought it was all ok. But it wasn't ok to God. It was an abomination to God.

Jesus teaches his disciples to keep it simple and keep your word. You shouldn't have to swear on this or that or the next thing to be trusted. Your word should be enough. When you say yes, that should be as binding as a vow. When you say no someone should be able to take that to the bank. Because your word is good.

Ps. 15 describes the kind of person who can dwell with God, and verse 4b says it's one *who swears to his own hurt and does not change*. He doesn't have his fingers crossed, doesn't find a loophole out of keeping his word, even when it hurts to keep your word.

Kingdom relationships are governed by truthfulness. Followers of Jesus shouldn't play head games, not with our faith and not with our relationships. I would much rather someone be straight with me - even if it's hard for them to say and hard for me to hear - than to have them say one thing to me and something totally different to other people.

Relationships are built on honesty and trust. We can trust God because He is always truthful (in fact, He is truth) and He always keeps His promises. We are fallen, we are flawed, but we should strive to be men and women of our word. We should strive to be honest. And we should strive to not play head games.

Head games are telling half the truth to make us look like something we aren't. Head games are manipulating people for our own agenda. Head games are trying to control people by finding some string to pull, like a marionette, and pulling that string to make them do what we want. Head games are flattering people so that they like us more or do what we want them to do (it is a form of manipulation). Head games are acting like someone is your best friend when they're around and then bad-mouthing them when they're not around.

Do you ever stop and think about what makes a true friend? There are many qualities, but your best friends may not be the ones who are the friendliest. That may sound strange, but think about it. There are friends who maybe say encouraging things, pay a lot of attention to you, or have a lot in common with you. And these are all good things in a friendship. But if you hit a wall, if hard times come, if a stress point in the relationship is revealed, the best friends are the ones who stay with you. Who have your back when times get rough. Who don't turn against you when you hit a rough patch or maybe don't do everything they think you should. They aren't perfect, but you can trust them. Trust is essential to close relationships.

So spiritual head games is never what Jesus wants. Head games of any kind, in fact. Jesus calls us as his followers to be honest, pure and simple. What you see is what you get kind of people. Trustworthy kind of people. Kingdom relationships are built on loving God and loving others and honestly seeking for God's good word to govern how we live and how we treat one another.

Let's pray and ask God to help us submit our lives to Him and His word.