

# BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THAT!

Sermon-Based Study Guide  
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Matthew 5.31-37  
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## I. Connecting With One Another

Are you more inclined to be “different” than those around you or to “conform” to those around you? Why? Does it depend on the situation? Share some thoughts on these questions.

Before continuing in this study, spend some time in prayer:

- a. Our 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders and our high school students are both at Forest Home summer camp this week. Pray that God will use that camp experience to plant and water seeds of faith in each of them. Pray also for their leaders: Karen and Michelle (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>), and Werner and Dani (high school).
- b. Thank God that GSPC had the opportunity to host S.H.I.P. once again. Pray for the S.H.I.P. guests who are transitioning back to self-sufficiency. Pray that our church would continue to find ways like this to Serve in Love.
- c. Ask God to strengthen and protect the marriages of those in our congregation, that those marriages might be a reflection of God’s love.

## II. Introduction to this Study

Last week Curtis got us started looking at two of the six teachings in which Jesus seeks—not to *destroy*—but to *deepen* the disciples’ understanding of the law. Indeed, Jesus’ interpretation makes the law *more* demanding, not less. This week we will look at two more of those teachings, those that address divorce and taking oaths.

Regarding the teaching on divorce, I second the words of John Stott (below) and urge us to be sensitive and courageous.

*I confess to a basic reluctance to attempt an exposition of these verses [on divorce]. This is partly because divorce is a controversial and complex subject, but even more because it is a subject which touches people’s emotions at a deep level. There is almost no unhappiness so poignant as the unhappiness of an unhappy marriage, and almost no tragedy so great as the degeneration of what God meant for love and fulfillment into a non relationship of bitterness, discord and despair. Although I believe that God’s way in most cases is not divorce, I hope I shall write with sensitivity, for I know the pain which many suffer, and I have no wish to add to their distress. Yet it is because I am convinced that the teaching of Jesus on this and every subject is good—intrinsically good, good for individuals, good for society—that I take my courage in both hands and write on.*

*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, p.92*

## Study the Text

- a. Read Matthew 5:31-32. What do you learn about Jesus' views regarding marriage/divorce from these two verses? Now read Matthew 19:3-9. What more do you learn from these six verses?
- b. At the time Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees on this topic two rival rabbinic schools held differing views on the subject of divorce. Their views hinged their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in which Moses, giving the Israelites the law, allows that a certificate of divorce may be given to a wife who becomes "displeasing" to her husband, whose husband finds something "indecent" about her. Rabbi Shammai taught a rigorist view of this Mosaic law: the only grounds for divorce was a grave matrimonial offence. Rabbi Hillel held a very lax interpretation: a man could divorce his wife for any cause whatsoever that he found "displeasing."

In reading Jesus' words on the subject which interpretation does he favor?

- c. The Pharisees supported Rabbi Hillel's lax interpretation and when they confronted Jesus in Matthew 19:3-9, they wanted to know where *he* stood. His response to them (and his words in Matthew 5:32) showed that his interpretation is that marriage is meant to be both exclusive and permanent. "Why then", the Pharisees ask in Matthew 19:7 "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Re-read Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Do you see a "command" in these verses for a husband to divorce his wife? Read again Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question in Matthew 19:8-9. According to Jesus why did Moses permit divorce?

*(Note the concern Jesus has for the rights of women in his treatment of divorce. Whoever divorces his wife, "except for sexual immorality" deprives her, in that culture, of her means of financial support and thus makes it probable that she will need to enter into a second marriage in order to survive. Remarriage under these conditions will make her an "adulteress" through no fault of her own. And the man who marries her also becomes an adulteress since in the eyes of God she belongs not to him but to her first husband. Jesus wants the Pharisees/disciples to understand the implications of this lax view of marriage and divorce.)*

- d. The one instance that Jesus teaches is allowable for divorce is "sexual immorality," a sexual relationship outside of the marriage (5:32; 19:9). Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. What further exception does the apostle Paul add to that of Jesus?
- e. Look back at the beatitudes (5:3-12). Disciples are called to live differently than the culture around them. How might a Christian influenced by the beatitudes (and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount) respond to a spouse that was found to have had an adulterous relationship?
- f. Let's turn to the second topic, the taking of oaths. Read Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus says, "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.'" This is not a direct quote of any one law that Moses gave. Rather, it summarizes the main idea of several laws that require people to keep their vows. (Look up Exodus 20:7, Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 23:21 for examples.)

John Stott puts it this way: *...the vows in question are, strictly speaking, 'oaths' in which the speaker calls upon God to witness his vow and to punish him if he breaks it.*

- g. The Pharisees decided that while it was not okay to profane the name of God by swearing it was okay to invoke God's name in the taking of oaths. And so they developed elaborate formulas for what was and was not okay when making a vow. They also taught that if the divine name has not been used in making a vow then those vows are less binding.

For an example of both the ridiculousness of this practice and Jesus' impatience with it, read Matthew 23:16-22. Read 5:34-36 again. What reasons does Jesus give for not swearing an oath at all?

- h. Compare 5:37 with James 5:12. What warnings are given?

### III. Reflect and Respond

- a. Studies have shown that the divorce rate among Christians is comparable to the divorce rate among non-Christians (about 50%). What can the church and individuals do to reduce this percentage?
- b. In many ways Jesus' teaching on divorce is really a teaching on marriage. Jesus seems to be saying (if we include the Matthew 19:3-9 passage) that if his hearers had a proper understanding of marriage as meant by God to be exclusive and permanent then they wouldn't be worried so much about what was allowable for divorce. What would you say to a Christian friend who came to you with marriage problems?
- c. Read and respond to the following quote from Douglas Hare from his commentary on Matthew:

*While [Jesus' teaching on marriage] points to God's ultimate will for men and women, there are numerous instances in which a marriage is no longer real, whether because of infidelity, neglect, abuse, failure to communicate, or simply unresolved tensions regarding reciprocal expectations. While every effort should be made to redeem fractured marriages, some must be acknowledged as beyond repair. In such cases divorce may be not only the lesser of two evils from the point of view of God's ultimate will but also a positive step.*

What do you think?

- d. If you are married what steps can you take to strengthen your marriage? And whether you're married or not how can you encourage and strengthen the marriages of people you know?
- e. Jesus' teaching on the taking of oaths is really about honesty and integrity. What does it mean to you to be an honest person, known for integrity? Is your "yes" really a "yes"? Is your "no" really a "no"?

A recommended book on marriage: *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* by Timothy and Kathy Keller