

Prayer

Lord God, open my heart to the world around me:
May I not just see with my eyes and hear with my ears,
but understand with my head, feel in my emotions,
and with the help of Your Spirit, decide with my heart
to do what is right and just in Your sight, O Lord my God;
and in this way give glory to You, my Maker and Redeemer. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

On-going prayers

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Meditation

The Lord says; 'Listen to me, my voice is consistent.
I am your only true guide.'

The Lord says; 'Do what I have placed before you to do.
I have prepared your way.'

The Lord says; 'Do not hold back from doing your best.
I will bring fruit from your conduct.'

The Lord says; 'Take care in speech; bless, do not curse.
I am the true and Living Word.'

The Lord says; 'Give your time to the people you love.
I have given you your friends.'

The Lord says; 'Learn from your past and move on.
I am the source of forgiveness.'

The Lord says; 'Take your rest, I have given it.
I am the Lord of Sabbath.'

Bible passage - Matthew 5:31-37

³¹ 'You have heard that it was said, "whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, apart from on the grounds of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ 'Again, you have heard that it was said to people of old, "You shall not break your oaths, but carry out what you have promised to the Lord." ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear oaths 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, because you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this is evil.

Bible Study

Review

Here are two more sayings of Jesus which relate to the Law. Jesus spoke with authority not merely to give a new interpretation of the Law, but to tell us the foundational truths upon which the Law was based. There were many people in His day attempting to interpret the Law in new ways, but Jesus sought to go deeper by indicating the moral reasons for the laws.

If ever there was a difficult and important social subject, then it is adultery. In Jesus' day it was assumed that a man could divorce his wife, but Jews were split on what grounds this should be allowed. The source of this debate was Deuteronomy 24:1-4, '*When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes ... he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house.*' If you read on, you will discover that this passage assumes the practice of divorce and it reflects the abhorrence of God towards the actions of a man who has divorced his wife, sent her away to another man, and then married her again! The truth is that the Law in the Old Testament does not say anything about divorce itself, it only comments on how divorce is practised.

So when Jesus quotes 'whoever divorces his wife must give her a notice of divorce' (5:31) He is not quoting from the Old Testament, but rather the oral Law within Jewish tradition (called 'Talmud'). He declares that divorce is not God's will, and says that it is acceptable only grounds of sexual immorality, and describes all else as adultery. It is interesting to see that Jesus holds the actions of the man under scrutiny, and the target of the saying appears to be men who dismiss their wives at will. As we discover later in Matthew, divorce does not fit with what Jesus says about the unity of marriage (19:3f.). The real problem with divorce says Jesus, is that it makes people into adulterers, that is, people with more than one sexual partner, and He has already spoken about the dangers of adultery and lust (5:27-30). Jesus does not talk here about any penalty or further punishment for divorce, and when we deal with the distressing cases of divorce which proliferate in some societies today, it is perhaps worth bearing this in mind.

The issue of swearing oaths can be misunderstood unless we look at what this meant in Jesus' day. Jesus was concerned about the manner in which people swore, much as people do today, but he was keen to emphasise the difference between common swearing and the honest 'oaths' people made to God in worship, as prescribed in Leviticus (Lev 22:18, 27:2ff see also 5:33). By means of a 'vow' or pledge Jewish people would promise special worship to God if He brought them through some difficulty; a journey, or the birth of a child, for example. Jesus accepted that such vows must be honoured.

Jesus' concerns were similar to those which lie behind two of the Ten Commandments; the third one 'you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God ...' (Ex 20:7) and the ninth one 'You shall not bear false witness' (Ex 20:16). Rabbis had tried to prevent people swearing 'by God' for a long time, suggesting that they should swear by things such as heaven, or earth, or even one's own head! It was an ingrained social phenomenon. Jesus went to the heart of the matter, implying that anyone who has to resort to swearing at all was probably far from telling the truth! Jesus pointed out that swearing on earth, heaven, or Jerusalem did not avoid God, but rather implicated Him (5:34,35). His comment about swearing 'by your head' is interesting, because in those days white hair was seen as a sign of age and wisdom, so the subtle meaning of verse 36 is that we cannot manipulate this honour because only God knows when hair will turn white!

Lastly, Jesus gave some powerful advice; 'let your word be 'Yes Yes' or 'No No' (5:37). In Greek this means something like 'enough said'. Jesus was saying that our word should always be sufficient evidence of our integrity. The sting in the tail of this practical saying comes when Jesus says 'anything more than this is evil', which is a sound warning. Most of us find it hard to let issues go, so we tend to repeat ourselves. Jesus said that if it's right what is said is sufficient, and we do well to leave things at that!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

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Going Deeper

Application

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you believe that divorce should be allowed in church? If not, how are divorced Christians, in practice, to be cared for by God's people?
2. In what ways is swearing affecting the social fabric of society today?
3. Is there any way that the moral standards set by Jesus on swearing can be made applicable?

Personal comments by author

I have come across a great deal of distress in dealing with matters of divorce today, and it is almost impossible to try and sort out the complex situations which arise. I do not find here any disciplinarian attitude to divorce which forbids the Christian minister from working with the Spirit of God to help those who have so suffered in divorce at the hands of others, they need to be made whole again so that they can live their lives.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take the opportunity to think carefully about how often you swear, and ask yourself the question why? With great care and the guidance of the Spirit, and sometimes with the support of others, we can be helped to get rid of swearing.*
- *As you go about your ordinary life, listen to the swearing all around you, and when you hear it, rebuke the enemy in Jesus' name. If the Lord so tells you, talk to others about their swearing, directly, but helpfully.*

Final Prayer

Save us, dear Lord, from believing that we are so mature that the challenges of Scripture do not apply to us, but only to others. Give us a true spirit of grace by which we apply truth personally before looking to others; and may the example of our lives be worthy of Your name. We ask this through Jesus, our Lord; AMEN.
