

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 8, Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-6 Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome to your deep dive. Today, we're going to be looking at Dr. Craig Keener's lecture on Matthew chapters 5 and 6. The Sermon on the Mount. Yeah, the Sermon on the Mount.

You've asked us to unpack some of Jesus's most challenging teachings, kind of those radical ideas that, you know, turned heads back in the first century. And still do. Yeah, they still make us squirm a bit today.

Yeah. I'm particularly intrigued by what Keener says about divorce. He starts with this personal story about, you know, struggling with lust, especially when he was single.

And he connects it to the whole idea of faithfulness in marriage. It's a great way to start. I mean, he gets our attention right away.

Because who hasn't wrestled with that? Yeah. You know, and then it kind of sets us up to see just how serious, how intense Jesus's call to purity really is. And that's going to be important as we go through this whole discussion on, you know, on divorce.

Okay, so to really grasp what Jesus is saying, we kind of need to understand what divorce looked like back then. We do. In, you know, first-century Palestine, Jewish culture.

Yeah, it was a very different world. You know, a woman could be divorced for practically anything. Really? And she had, like, almost no legal protection.

Yeah. Can you imagine? Like, the vulnerability, the potential for abuse. Wow.

Yeah. Keener actually shares a couple of rabbinic stories to kind of illustrate this point. There's one about this woman who's, like, begging the rabbis to stop her husband from divorcing her.

She loves him. She depends on him. But they basically tell her, you know, tough luck.

It's his right. Yeah, it just breaks your heart. And then there's that other story about the couple who were forced to divorce because they couldn't have children after 10 years.

Yeah. They really, you can tell, they loved each other. But the pressure, the cultural pressure was intense.

Right. And she ends up getting her husband drunk and having her brothers carry him back to her father's house. All because he had jokingly said she could take whatever she loved most from the house.

Yeah, it's kind of a funny story on the surface. Yeah. But it really underscores how, you know, how ingrained those expectations around divorce and remarriage really were.

It shows that even though divorce was allowed, a lot of people recognized it wasn't ideal. Yeah. Some rabbis even compared it to the altar of God weeping.

Yeah. Just showing kind of the emotional and spiritual weight that it carried. Yeah.

This context makes Jesus' statement about remarriage even more shocking. He says that anyone who remarries commits adultery. Whoa.

Wow. It's a statement that always gets people talking. If we take it literally, it would mean no remarriage is ever okay.

Right. Keener explores the possibility that Jesus is using hyperbole here. Yeah.

You know, as a common technique he used to drive home a point. So like when he talks about a camel going through the eye of a needle? Exactly. We know that's not meant to be taken literally.

Oh, wrong. It's just this powerful image to illustrate the difficulty of, you know, a rich person entering God's kingdom. Similarly, Jesus could be using hyperbole in Matthew 5. Yeah.

To really emphasize, you know, the seriousness of the marriage covenant. He's not throwing out the law. Right.

But he is spotlighting the ideal. Complete and unwavering faithfulness to your spouse. Exactly.

So it's less about a rule and more about protecting people from the pain of broken promises. I think so. Yeah.

Yeah. And Keener points out that Jesus does make an exception. He specifically mentions unfaithfulness as grounds for divorce.

Right. Is that exception huge, isn't it? It seems like he's saying the believer shouldn't be the one initiating the break. That's right.

The one breaking the covenant. Yeah. The other person's choice to be unfaithful.

Releases the innocent party from that bond. Yeah. But it gets really tricky, doesn't it? I mean, when we try to apply this to modern situations.

What about like cases of abuse, for example? Yeah, that's a tough one. Because those situations feel like a violation of the marriage covenant too, don't they? Keener suggests we might need to consider exceptions in those kinds of situations. You know, following Paul's example of making an exception for abandonment.

It comes down to recognizing the heart of Jesus's teaching, right? The radical commitment to faithfulness and love within marriage. Yeah, right. But it also requires careful, compassionate discernment.

This idea of integrity in our most important relationships, of letting our yes be yes, really makes me think about Jesus's teaching on oaths. He seems to be saying we shouldn't need them at all. It was a radical concept.

In a world obsessed with oaths, back then oaths were like a really big deal. You were essentially putting God on the line as a witness. Oh, wow.

You know, calling down divine judgment if you broke your word. So breaking an oath wasn't just like bad manners. No.

It was a spiritual offense. Absolutely. Keener talks about groups like the Essenes and the Pythagoreans who were known for their honesty, and their word was their bond.

No oaths needed. And he tells this amazing story about Christians in Nigeria a generation ago. And their reputation for trustworthiness was so strong that their word alone was enough to settle legal matters.

Really? Like, isn't that amazing? It just highlights the power of actually living what you believe. That's such a stark contrast to how things often work today. I mean, we're so used to contracts and fine print and legal loopholes.

Like, we don't trust each other anymore. Yeah. But Jesus is calling us to a higher standard.

You know, he's saying, let your yes be yes and your no be no. In other words, just live a life that's so consistently truthful that your integrity speaks for itself. So we don't need to bolster our credibility with fancy oaths or promises.

No. Just be a person of your word. That's radical in its simplicity, isn't it? It really is.

He's not talking about, like, legalistic rules. He's talking about a deep inner integrity that shows up in everything you do. Yeah.

And you know what? That kind of integrity actually sets the stage for the next challenging teaching that we're going to unpack. Yeah. Resisting evil and loving your enemies.

Get ready for this one. This one's a game changer. Bring it on.

All right. Loving your enemies. This one feels almost impossible sometimes.

Right. You know, especially when we're so used to this idea of an eye for an eye. Doesn't that justify, like, getting even? Well, remember that an eye for an eye actually originated in the Old Testament.

Right. And it was a pretty progressive idea for its time. It was all about limiting retaliation, making sure the punishment actually fit the crime.

So it was meant to, like, prevent things from spiraling out of control. Exactly. And stop people from taking revenge, like, way beyond the original offense.

Right. Compared to other legal codes, that allowed for, like, unchecked vengeance, especially if you were from a higher social class. Right.

An eye for an eye was a huge step forward. But Jesus, as he so often does, takes it to a whole other level. Yeah.

He tells us to turn the other cheek. Now that's going to be one of the most counterintuitive teachings out there. It almost sounds like he's saying we should be passive doormats.

It definitely goes against our natural instincts, you know, for self-preservation. But to really get it, we need to step back into that first-century culture where honor and shame were everything. So back then, getting slapped in the face wasn't just about, like, physical pain.

It was a public humiliation. Absolutely. It was a deliberate insult, a way to challenge your honor and put you in your place.

And by turning the other cheek, you were refusing to play that game. You were breaking the cycle. You were breaking the cycle.

It's like saying, "Your insults have no power over me. I won't let you define my worth. That's good.

It's a powerful statement of defiance. But it's also an act of love, you know? You're choosing to de-escalate the conflict. Right.

To not let anger and revenge take over. It makes me think of that saying: holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It's so true.

And Keener uses this fascinating example of Roman soldiers having the legal right to demand goods and services from the local population. Okay. It was a law that was often abused, leaving people feeling powerless and resentful.

And what does Jesus say? If someone forces you to go one mile, go with them two. He's talking about actively cooperating with injustice. It sounds crazy.

Yeah. Right. But it's also brilliant because instead of resisting and getting into a power struggle, you go above and beyond.

You demonstrate a generosity of spirit that completely disarms the oppressor. It's almost like you're turning the tables on them, showing them a different way to be. That's right.

But how far do we take this? What about when our physical safety is at stake? Does turning the other cheek mean we can never defend ourselves or others from violence? That's a great question. And it's a question that has challenged Christians for centuries. And Keener acknowledges that Jesus himself and even Paul responded to physical aggression in ways that weren't purely passive.

So it seems like there's a difference between non-resistant love and appropriate self-defense. Right. Figuring out where that line is, that's tough.

Yeah, it really is. And it gets even more complex when we consider how this principle applies to enemies on a national level, you know? Do we respond to aggression from other countries with nonviolence? Yeah. And there are no easy answers.

And Keener presents a range of Christian viewpoints on this. But he does share a deeply personal story that I think really brings this teaching home. Yeah.

He talks about wrestling with hatred and the desire for revenge after those jihadists attacked his friends in Nigeria. It's awful. He felt that anger deep down, and he had to face it head-on.

He describes this moment of conviction, this realization that clinging to those feelings would violate everything Jesus stood for. Yeah. You know, loving your enemies isn't about condoning their actions or being naive about the danger.

Right. It's about choosing not to let hatred poison your own heart. It's a powerful reminder that this kind of love is ultimately about our own spiritual well-being.

I think so. About becoming the kind of people who can reflect God's love. Yeah.

Even in the face of darkness. And it's a supernatural kind of love, one that we can't muster up on our own. You know, it's a gift from God.

Speaking of gifts, I'm curious how this idea of radical love plays out in Jesus's teaching on prayer. What's so different about how he taught his disciples to pray? Well, Keener contrasts the Jewish approach to prayer with how their pagan neighbors viewed it. The Jewish people understood God as a loving father, not some fickle deity you had to manipulate with rituals.

Whereas pagans were all about trying to strike a bargain with the gods. Right. Offering sacrifices and reciting these elaborate incantations to get what they wanted.

Right. Keener even tells this hilarious story about this pagan guy who's praying, and he's listing off every single name he can think of for this certain goddess. Oh, wow.

Just in case he misses one and offends her. Just to cover all his bases. Yeah.

It's kind of funny, but it makes you think about how different those two mindsets are. It really is. Trying to control the divine versus approaching God with humble trust.

Yeah. Where does Jesus fit into all of this? Well, Jesus criticizes the religious folks who pray publicly just to be seen by others. Right.

He calls them hypocrites, which actually means actors in Greek. Interesting. They're putting on a show.

They're seeking applause rather than genuine connection with God. So it's like they're more concerned with their reputation than with actually talking to God. Exactly.

But Jesus also warns against empty phrases and trying to manipulate God with words. Which is basically what the pagans were doing. Right.

Yeah. So instead of those extremes, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer. It's just this model of how to pray.

Short, simple, and focused on aligning our hearts with God's will. It's not about getting God to do what we want. Right.

It's about surrendering to his plan and trusting his goodness. Keener shares this sweet story about his father-in-law in Congo who would pray these short, powerful prayers. And the amazing thing is God would often answer immediately.

Wow. That's amazing. It's a reminder that it's not about eloquence or length.

It's about the posture of our hearts. It's about that childlike dependence on God. Yeah.

That willingness to say, not my will, but yours be done. Amazing. And this all leads us into Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus really digs into this whole idea of genuine piety.

What's he saying about doing the right things, but with the wrong motivation? You know, it's interesting how this idea of approaching God with the right heart ties into what Jesus says in Matthew 6 about giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. It's like they're putting on a performance for an audience, instead of actually seeking a genuine connection with God. Right, right.

So it's not about the act itself. It's about the motivation behind it. Exactly.

And you see this over and over in Matthew 5 and 6. It's not enough to just follow the rules to go through the motions. Jesus is after something much, much deeper. He wants to transform us from the inside out.

Yeah. He wants us to examine those hidden motives, you know, those subtle desires for approval and recognition that can like creep into even our most spiritual acts. So when it comes to giving, for example, what does it look like to give with the right heart? Well, Jesus tells his followers, when you give to the needy, don't announce it with trumpets.

Again, it's classic Jesus, you know, using hyperbole to drive home a point. Yeah, because nobody literally blew trumpets when they gave to the poor. Would be kind of hard to be discreet if you did that.

But Jesus is using this vivid imagery to highlight the importance of humility. You know, don't make a big show of your generosity. Don't brag about it.

Don't seek recognition for it. Just do it quietly from the heart because you care. It's like that saying: don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Exactly. It's about being discreet, unassuming, almost anonymous in your giving. But isn't there always a part of us that wants credit for doing good? Of course.

I mean, we're human, but that's where the real challenge lies, right? Jesus is calling us to a higher standard, to a deeper level of integrity. He wants us to really examine those motives and purify them. So how do we apply that same principle to prayer? Well, think about the Pharisees, right? They love to pray loudly and publicly, you know, drawing attention to their piety.

But Jesus saw right through their performance. He knew their hearts weren't really in it. It's like they were more interested in impressing their audience than actually talking to God.

Exactly. And Jesus contrasts that with the kind of prayer he encourages, prayer that's offered in secret, in the quietness of your own heart, where it's just you and God. So it's not about performance.

It's about intimacy. Exactly. It's about cultivating a deep, personal relationship with God, a place where you can be honest, you can be vulnerable, you can pour out your heart without pretense or posturing.

And what about fasting? Where does that fit in? Well, fasting is similar to prayer in that it should be a private act of devotion, a way of humbling yourself before God, seeking his guidance and aligning your heart with his will. So it's not about earning brownie points with God or trying to manipulate him into giving you what you want. Not at all.

It's about stripping away the distractions, the things that we rely on for comfort and security, so that we can focus on God and deepen our dependence on him. So it sounds like the theme that runs through all of this is authenticity. It's about being real, genuine, transparent with God and with ourselves.

Yeah. Yeah. And recognizing that true piety isn't something you can fake.

It's not about outward appearances. It's about an inward transformation that starts in the heart. And that transformation leads to a different way of living, a way that's marked by love, integrity, and a deep desire to please God rather than people.

Exactly. And that's the beauty of the Sermon on the Mount, right? It's not just a set of rules. It's an invitation to a whole new way of being.

It's a call to live out the kingdom of God in every aspect of our lives. This deep dive has been incredible. We've covered so much ground, but I keep coming back to how challenging these teachings are.

They push us out of our comfort zones. They do. But they also offer so much hope and freedom because ultimately, Jesus isn't just pointing out our shortcomings.

He's offering us a better way. He's inviting us into a life of love, joy, and purpose that's rooted in something much greater than ourselves. And He's not leaving us to figure it out on our own.

He's promised to be with us every step of the way. That's right. To empower us by His Spirit to live out these radical teachings.

So for you listening, we encourage you to take some time to reflect on what we've discussed today. Ask yourself, what resonated with me the most? What challenged me? And what small step can I take today to live out the radical love and integrity that Jesus calls us to? Because even the smallest act of obedience can have a ripple effect, making a difference in your life and in the world around you. Thanks for joining us in this deep dive.

We'll see you next time.