

The Law of Adultery

📖 Matthew 5:27-31

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I want to start by responding to the question asked last week about whether a generation of Israel would come along that would actually obey the Mosaic Covenant. I responded by saying that a generation of Israel must come along and obey the Mosaic Covenant in order for the Kingdom to come. Since the Kingdom will come then yes, a generation will come along and obey the Mosaic Covenant. A related question was along the lines of whether that related somehow to the fulfillment of the New Covenant. I said that I didn't know the sequence but it did seem to have some kind of relationship. I want to respond to this upon further reflection and correct some things. Before we do I want to be clear about the big picture of what is going on because that's the critical issue. First, Israel had the Abrahamic Covenant and this covenant is unilateral, meaning it is one way, God made promises to Abraham that were repeated to Isaac that were repeated to Jacob who was renamed Israel and gave birth to the twelve tribes. The promises were for that nation alone but the ultimate enjoyment of the promises is reserved only for whom? The believing remnant. It was not enough to be a physical descendant. At the time of Christ they thought it was enough. But what did John the Baptist say? Don't think you can say we have Abraham as our father. Physical descent wouldn't cut it, you also had to be of spiritual descent, and that came by a faith like Abraham upon which you were justified before God, that's what qualified you for the ultimate blessing in the kingdom. So you may die like Abraham died, without having seen the ultimate blessing come, you may die like David or Daniel and not see the kingdom and ultimate blessing come. But if you were a believer then you will be resurrected when the kingdom does come in order to enjoy the ultimate blessing. Second, Israel was later given the Mosaic Covenant and this covenant is bilateral, meaning it is two ways, God promised blessing on the condition of obedience and Israel promised to obey. So what the Mosaic Covenant was sketching was the conditions that one generation of Israel had to meet for the kingdom to come. In other words, it was given for the sanctification of the believer. Sure, the whole nation was subject to it, it was their national constitution, but only the believers in the nation could actually follow it. It was their rule of life for sanctification and God was looking for a generation of believing Israelites who learned loyalty to Him according to the true spirit of the Mosaic Covenant.

Looked at that way, when you come to the questions asked last week about whether there would actually be a generation of Israel that would come along and learn loyalty to the Mosaic Covenant the answer must be yes. The other question, does that require God to fulfill the New Covenant I think there are several questions we have to ask to answer that correctly. First, "What kind of spiritual assets did an OT believer have available to him?" And "Could the OT believer grow spiritually and thus have victory over sin?" One of the false ideas I think we get from teachers is that because no one could obey the OT law 100% perfectly that we conclude it only served the purpose of showing them that they were dead in transgressions and sin. That's how Paul uses the Law in Galatians and Romans, to show they were condemned, but was that the only purpose of the Law? If that was the only purpose then you could get the impression from that that every Jew went around depressed all the time and never had spiritual victory. But what do the examples from the OT show us? What do the Psalms show us? David had a lot of spiritual victories. He failed too but isn't it obvious that he had some spiritual assets and enjoyed victory? Didn't Daniel have a lot of spiritual victories? Didn't Nehemiah have spiritual victories? Isn't it obvious that the believing Jews didn't go around all the time with some defeatist attitude that ruled their lives? Think about how spiritual the generation of David and Solomon was that resulted in God's blessing them tremendously. Tremendous blessing! That blessing could only come on the basis that they were keeping the Law. And a large number of Israelites were keeping the Law. Further, you've got Psalms like Psalm 119 where the Psalmist is saying amazing things about loving the law and diligently keeping the law and seeking Him with all his heart and walking blameless and keeping His statutes and remaining pure and meditating on His precepts and delighting in His word and praying that the Lord would incline his heart toward Him and teach him the ordinances. It goes on and on and surely we are reading the words of a believing Jew whose life was in step with the Mosaic Law. What's the take away from David, Solomon and psalms like Psalm 119? That there were spiritual assets available to OT believers that enabled them to keep the Law and grow spiritually and have victory over sin. Otherwise what do we do with Deut 30:11? "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach." Well, if it's not too difficult then couldn't they keep it? Verse 12, "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' ¹³"Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' ¹⁴"But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it." And he set before them blessing and cursing. It seems they were capable to some extent. How do we apply this to the Sermon on the Mount? When Jesus contrasts what the scribes and Pharisees taught with the true spirit of the Law do you think Jesus is presenting impossibilities for an OT believer? Not on an OT basis. And you have to remember who He's addressing here. Who is He addressing? Believers or unbelievers? Believers! See, I'm coming against that notion that so many have when they come to the sermon and they say "Jesus is presenting impossibilities! And that is to drive them to the inevitable conclusion that they don't have a

righteousness that pleases God and they need to believe in Jesus Christ!" Wrong. The audience is already believers, they're already justified. And what's the issue after you are justified. Let's get sanctified. The issue is sanctification and that was why the Mosaic Covenant was given; for sanctification. So Jesus is saying this generation of believers needs to come back to the true intent of the Mosaic Covenant in order for the kingdom to come. So I don't think He's saying at all, "Do the impossible in order to drive them to faith." There's nothing about faith in this whole sermon! I think He's saying "Do the possible, do what David and Daniel and Nehemiah and many other OT believers did and learn loyalty to the Law. Quit playing games with the Law like the scribes and Pharisees. And He's saying do this on more than an individual scale, do this on a generational scale and then the kingdom will come. So the first point is that I don't think what Jesus is saying is beyond the capabilities of an OT believer.

The second line of questioning that needs to be answered with clarity is, "What is the actual requirement that the nation must meet for the kingdom to come?" "What is God looking for?" "Is He looking for perfect obedience?" Some will no doubt look to 5:48 and say absolute perfection is the requirement. "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Note the Father-son relationship. In the English 'perfect' has the connotation of 100% obedience. That is not what the Greek word connotes. As Glasscock notes, "The word perfect (*teleios*) actually does not mean without flaw or sinless but implies to be "complete, whole, mature."¹ What God was looking for was a generation that had learned loyalty to Him, a son learning loyalty to his father, becoming mature. He wasn't looking for sinless perfection. He was looking for a generation of David's, so to speak, a mature man who sinned but who God said was a man after My own heart. A generation that was sensitive to their sin and had the right attitude toward their sin when confronted with it. I don't think He was at all looking for what we think of when we read the word perfect. I think He was looking for what every father is looking for in a son, the son to grow to maturity and be a man who walks with God! Lev 26:40 says that what He is looking for is for one generation of believers to confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers and their hostility toward Him, and a humble heart that is willing to make amends for their iniquity. It doesn't say perfect obedience is required. It says that they need to have the proper attitude toward their sin and their nation's sin and to have a humble heart. I think Daniel shows that attitude in Daniel 9 in his big long prayer of confession for himself and his nation. God is looking for a generation of Daniel's so to speak. Remember when he was praying that prayer and an angel was dispatched and as Daniel is praying the angel interrupts his prayer and says, Daniel, I'm here to give you understanding because you are highly esteemed. Highly esteemed? God highly esteemed Daniel? Yes, he did. So is it possible for an OT believer to become mature, have an attitude of humility and confession? Absolutely it's possible. So my conclusion is that I don't think at all it requires the fulfillment of the New Covenant for a generation of Israel to come along who has the right attitude toward their sin and a humble heart as

required under the Mosaic Covenant. But I do think that when a generation comes along that does then the New Covenant will be fulfilled and the kingdom will come. The New Covenant is fulfilled in order to secure perfect obedience continually. But the sequence is that a future generation will come along who will believe and then learn loyalty to the true spirit of the Law as Jesus is expressing in the Sermon on the Mount, with the right attitude toward God and their sin and then He will pour out His Spirit on them in fulfillment of the New Covenant and the Kingdom will come. So that is a very important discourse on the discourse and I think it really needs to be thought about.

Last time we started the section in Matt 5:21-48. What is Jesus doing in this section? I'll share with you that some think Jesus is giving a new law, something entirely above and beyond the Mosaic Law. They argue that the scribes and the Pharisees followed the true intent of the Mosaic Law and that Jesus is a progressive, He's bringing a new law and doing away with the former. Does that gel well with what Jesus said in verse 17? Jesus did not come to abolish but to establish? No. So we reject that approach. What is Jesus actually doing? He's giving the true interpretation of the law, the true spirit of the Law, over and against that of the scribes and the Pharisees who only regurgitated the letter of the Law. Did the scribes and Pharisees actually read and devote to memory the OT Law? Sure, no problem. Lots of people then and now read and memorize the Bible. What was the problem? Their interpretation of the Law. They had brought in oral interpretation of the Law that grew up alongside of the Law and was actually more authoritative than the Law itself. In the synagogue the people would hear the Law read but their minds went straight to the scribal and Pharisaic interpretation of the Law so that they missed the true intent. What was the core of the scribal and Pharisaic interpretations? The Law was to be kept externally; it was only on the surface. What happened in your heart was irrelevant. What was the essence of Jesus' interpretation? He said it was internal. It was a matter of the heart. So if the nation was going to have a righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees, they were going to have to hunger and thirst for the kind of righteousness, mourn over sin, be merciful to others, pure in heart; all characteristics entirely beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. In other words, that generation of Israel needed to seek first the kingdom and the righteousness He demanded and then the kingdom would come. So again, it's not perfection in the sense we think that He is demanding, but it is a loyalty toward God, a right attitude toward themselves and their sin. That is what He was looking for from that generation.

Let's review starting in 5:21 where Jesus gives six illustrations that show that the scribes and Pharisees did not go near far enough with the true intent of the Law. You note each time they were perfectly orthodox in their reading of the law but they interpreted the law to refer to the letter of the law. For example, in 5:21 they condemned the physical act of murder. Did Jesus in 5:22 deny that the physical act of murder was sinful? No. What did He do? He extended it to include anger, bitterness and malice that are the sinful roots of murder. If these roots were present then they were murderers. Consequently

was their worship being welcomed by God? No way! Look at verse 23, if you go to the altar with your offering and there you remember that your brother has something against you. You know, you've offended him by violating some Scripture. This isn't some trite thing like someone being offended just because of your personal preference. And it's not apologizing for the truth either. If someone gets offended by the truth you can't help that. But if you really offend someone by violating a Scriptural truth then you better leave your offering right there and go do what? Reconcile. This is how you quell anger that leads ultimately to murder. Under the scribes and Pharisees you didn't have to do that. You could be angry, you could call them bad names and all of that and because you didn't actually physically murder them they said, go, take your offering, God will accept it. Jesus says God will not accept it. Go reconcile with your brother, then come and offer it. In verse 25 He uses the example of a man who is in debt and can't pay back the debt and so what's the right attitude? What attitude should the man have who can't pay back the debt? Quick reconciliation! Not letting it fester because if he lets it fester then they're going to go to court and he's going to be thrown in prison and then he's going to be liable to pay every last penny. The point isn't debt but the importance of quickly reconciling so that things don't go too far!

What did Jesus mean by all this? He meant that if the nation continued to follow the scribes and Pharisees interpretation of the law of murder they would not have a righteousness acceptable to God that would permit them to enter the kingdom. They needed to conform their lives to the true intent of the law by going to those they had offended and making reconciliation. They should do this quickly before the offer of the kingdom was past and the kingdom postponed.

By secondary application, and this is only secondary because the kingdom was 'at hand' then, we can learn something from it. The principle still applies. If we have offended a brother by breaking a scriptural principle, then we should not think that we can just go to God and confess and be restored to fellowship. God wants us to go to the brother first and reconcile with him and then confess to Him. Then we are restored to fellowship and not before. Now when I say, if you offend a brother, understand that it does not refer to some personal preferences, which are of a minor nature, and neither does it refer to offending a brother by proclaiming the truth, we never apologize for the truth, though we may not speak the truth in love and then we have offended a brother. So understand that the critical application involves an offense that is a violation of a scriptural principle. In that case we need to go to the brother first and reconcile, then go get in fellowship with God. Otherwise you're just going through religious motion; saying words but with no genuine intent behind them and that is what God is interested in! He could care less if you mouth some words.

Today we come to the law of adultery in 5:27-30. Where does this law come from? Again it's one of the Ten Commandments. Which tablet of the Ten Commandments? The second tablet again. What did we

say the second tablet governed? The Jews horizontal relationship with his fellow Jew. What is the summary of the second tablet? Love your neighbor as yourself. That was the second greatest commandment according to Jesus because it summed up this second tablet. What was the greatest commandment of all? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Do you see how love gets to the heart of it? Love is internal; it's an inner attitude toward your fellow man and an inner loyalty toward God. But the two are connected. In other words, if you're not loving your neighbor can you be loving God? What did John say in his first epistle? "The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now." In other words, we have a Christian who is angry at his brother and he thinks he is walking in fellowship because he confessed to God. That man is not walking in fellowship with God. That man has gone through some religious motion. He has reduced fellowship to some lip service to God. It's ritual. That is what the Pharisee had done with the sacrifices. He went to offer sacrifices to God without having reconciled with his brother, remember? Did God accept the sacrifice? No way. It stunk. It was religious motion. God hated it and He hates it when Christians think they can offend their brother and then come to Him with some kind of phony confession independent of going to the brother and reconciling. I can't see that that Christian is in fellowship with God.² I see that he is playing religious games. He is just like a Pharisee. People need to get real. Do you think you're pulling the wool over God's eyes? Give me a break.

So we are in the second tablet of the Ten Commandments and the specific law prohibiting adultery, but it is connected to the first. Think about it, could you be in fellowship with God while committing adultery with your neighbor? Do you see how foolish that idea is? That is the foolishness of the Pharisees. Another thing about adultery; what is the presupposition behind adultery? What do you have to understand before you can understand adultery? Marriage. What's marriage? Marriage, fundamentally is a covenant. If covenant is too religious for you think of it as a contract. It is a legal contract. What do all contracts have? Terms that the two parties are agreeing to, in this case, one man and one woman. What are the terms in a marriage ceremony? The vows. You make vows and that's what you are vowing to keep. Whatever you say in the vows is the law. Then we have a sign of the contract and what is the sign, at least in our society? The ring. It's a symbol that vows have been made and this man or woman is in a contract with a member of the opposite sex so hands off. Jesus would say eyes off. Now what were the purposes of marriage? Why did God give marriage? Obviously to propagate the human race. Be fruitful and multiply. But what is the chief reason? Dominion. It is not good for man to be alone. He needs a helper to help him fulfill his proper role of having dominion. God said it's not good for man to be alone? Why was it not good? Because the man left to himself was not sufficient for having dominion. He needed the woman to complete him. He didn't need another man. He needed a woman because a woman complements a man. Why else did God give marriage? To satisfy our emotional and physical needs. Marriage is an outlet for the perfectly natural desires that God

created us to enjoy. Finally, what else? Marriage is the basis of society, not the individual. Actually the family is the basis of society but the marriage precedes the family so is a stable marriage fundamental to a stable society? Yes. And the children make it even more stable. So what do you need to have a stable society? Stable marriages! That's why God condemned adultery. It's for the good of society! If marriages fall apart families fall apart and if families fall apart society falls apart. That's why marriage is so critical, that's why it's given the status of a divine institution.

So with that background let's look at Jesus' words on adultery. He says in verse 27, **You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'** Was that the Law? Is that a proper reading of the Law? Absolutely. But how did the Pharisees interpret the Law? As condemning the physical act of adultery. You could sit around all day and fantasize about some other man or woman and that did not constitute adultery. You could look at dirty picture books and that was not adultery. You could do all of that and be in perfect fellowship with God because you did not commit the physical act of adultery.

Is that how Jesus understood the Law? Not according to verse 28, **but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** Jesus gets to the root of the issue. Ever whistle at a pretty girl going down the street? You already committed adultery. Ever look at a man and want him? You committed adultery. Pentecost says, "The Pharisees saw adultery as an illegal sexual union. But to refrain from the physical act did not fulfill the spiritual demands of the law, for the law demanded not only abstinence from a physical act but from the lustful desire that would produce the act. The law demanded purity of thought as well as abstinence from an act. Christ warned that the one who lusts is guilty of adultery and has thus violated the law."³ There are a good many people who think they live by the Ten Commandments. They say they have not murdered, committed adultery, perjury in a court, et al., yet that is only Pharisaic keeping of the Law. The Law actually taught that if you ever looked at a man or woman with lust you are an adulterer. I doubt there is any human who when confronted with this true interpretation of the law could honestly state they are not condemned. The fact that it goes on in the **heart** shows what God is really concerned about. Man looks at the outside but God looks at the heart. Adultery starts in the heart and prepares the imagination for the physical act. Glasscock says, "The idea of lustful looks as being the same as the act of adultery would certainly be foreign to these externally conditioned Jews."⁴ Yet that was the true intent of the Law nevertheless.

How were they to deal with it so that they could keep the actual intent of the Law? Verse 29, **If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into fiery hell,** i.e. gehenna. What's His point? Is this literal? Are you supposed to literally pluck out your **right eye** if it makes you stumble into sin? The right eye is typically the dominant eye. Is plucking it out going to stop you from

sinning with your left eye? You still have your left eye if you pluck out your right eye. Let's say you go so far as to pluck out both eyes. Is that going to solve your problem of lust? Of course not. What I am trying to do is help you see His point. Get used to this kind of language by Jesus because He is very figurative. Obviously He's not advocating physically tearing your eyeball out but unfortunately some people have actually done this.⁵ Why doesn't plucking your eye out solve the problem of lust? Because the eye is not the cause of the sin. What is the cause? The cause is setting up a stumbling block within yourself. In other words, don't deliberately look at some scantily clad man or woman, don't stare at magazine covers, don't go to websites that cause you to gawk, don't watch movies or read books that cause your mind to fantasize! Now that's put in 21st century terms but it gets the point across that what you are doing is bringing images into your mind that become stumbling blocks. They cause you to fantasize in your imagination. Toussaint agrees saying, "The warning is to make no provision for temptation; every occasion which may lead to sin is to be cut off."⁶ This is not only practical but realistic. Is this possible for an OT believer? Did he have the spiritual assets to overcome the propensity to set up a stumbling block within himself? Job was able. He said in Job 31:1, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin." He then asserts his integrity in this respect saying, "If my heart has been enticed by a woman, Or I have lurked at my neighbor's doorway, May my wife grind for another⁷, And let others kneel down over her."⁸ ¹¹For that would be a lustful crime; Moreover, it would be an iniquity punishable by judges." It was possible for Job to not set up stumbling blocks within himself and I think it was possible for an OT believer to do the same and avoid what he knows will lead to temptation. Jesus is condemning the deliberate setting up of stumbling blocks within ourselves. Jesus was challenging that generation to follow this true intent of the Law which enables one to overcome the sin of lust which leads to the physical act of adultery. Jesus didn't deny that the physical act of adultery was sinful; He simply denied that was the only intent of the Law. The true intent was that we cut off the propensity to lust by refusing to gawk at images which lead to temptation. I would also suggest by secondary application that the majority of our problem with lust is willingly subjecting ourselves to it by deliberately gazing at images through books, movies, TV, music, etc... All of those things are image based modes of communication that get lodged in our minds and cause us to stumble. Like Job we ought to make a covenant with our eyes to not listen to, read or gaze at such things.

Verse 30, **If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into fiery hell.** Again, will literally cutting off **your right hand** stop you from sinning? No, because you still have a left hand. People debate the identification of the right hand and why it is used in this context. The right hand, like the right eye, is typically dominant. Jesus is not picking on the right hand because it is somehow involved in lusting sexually. Typically the right hand is used in stealing. His point is simply to illustrate the point that this principle applies to other areas of life too. If we are going somewhere or doing

something that results in the setting up of a stumbling block within ourselves that leads to overwhelming temptation leading to sin then we should stop going there or doing that. These may differ among people but the principle remains the same. Do not set up a stumbling block within yourself. If something is causing you to sin avoid it at all costs.

In both verses 29 and 30 Jesus says that by comparison it would be better to literally tear out the right eye or cut off the right hand. Was Jesus saying that a believer could be cast into hell if he lusted? Not at all. He is using this comparison to play up the seriousness of what He has just said. It literally would be better to lose an eye or a hand than it would be to be cast into judgment. As Glasscock says, "Jesus was not intending for anyone to literally tear out an eye, but, by comparison, that momentary action would not be as terrible as the whole body's being eternally tormented in hell...Therefore Christ was not advocating mutilating the body but was emphasizing the horror of sin."⁹

In conclusion, to drive the point home by way of application I have some quotes to share. Carson says, "Imagination is a God-given gift; but if it is fed dirt by the eye, it will be dirty. All sin, not least sexual sin, begins with the imagination... Not everyone reacts the same way to all objects. But if (vv. 28–29) your eye is causing you to sin, gouge it out; or at very least, don't look . . .!"¹⁰ Pentecost says, "Christ warned His hearers to remove the cause of the offense. He was not teaching physical mutilation, for a blind man can lust, and a man with no hands can have unlawful desires. Christ taught that one must deal with the sin of lust because this was the root of the problem of adultery. It is not enough to merely abstain from lust's outward manifestation, that is, adultery."¹¹ But I still think Toussaint says it best when he says, "The warning is to make no provision for temptation; every occasion which may lead to sin is to be cut off."

The take away point for that generation was that they had a choice to make. They could continue to follow the scribal and Pharisaic interpretation of the Law which argued that only the physical act of adultery was sinful before God or they could follow Jesus' interpretation of the Law which argued that lustful thoughts of adultery were also sinful. Sin is a horror and all opportunity for the flesh ought to be cut off so that that generation's righteousness surpassed that taught by the scribes and the Pharisees. It gets back to 5:20 and the idea that if the believers of that generation returned to the true intent of the Law and kept sin at bay by refusing to set up stumbling blocks then the kingdom would come. Otherwise it would be postponed until a generation of Israel comes along that does.

¹ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, p 137.

² After the lesson a comment was made to the effect that David and others did re-connect with God in a mighty way after their grave sin without reconciling with a brother. I agree. This points up what I have suspected and held to for several years. It is a fallacy to reduce the spiritual life to being in or out of fellowship. Unfortunately few bible teachers or others have considered that the Christian life is

considerably more complex. Being in or out of fellowship is one element among many. To reduce the Christian life to being in or out of fellowship is the fallacy of reductionism. I seem to recall that Zane Hodges in his commentary on 1 John posited that there can be different areas where we are in or out of fellowship. That withstanding, I still think it is more complex.

³ Dwight Pentecost, *Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 179.

⁴ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, p 124.

⁵ E.g. Origen castrated himself.

⁶ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 102.

⁷ The Hebrew for 'grind' refers to doing the menial tasks of the household.

⁸ The Hebrew for 'kneeling down over her' refers to sexual relations.

⁹ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, p 126.

¹⁰ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 5:29.

¹¹ Dwight Pentecost, *Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 179.