

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Much And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Lust

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Matthew 5:27-30

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I'd invite you to open it now to Matthew chapter 5:27. I mentioned last week that in this section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is acting as the final and authoritative interpreter of Holy Scripture. And why not? After all he is the WORD OF GOD in the flesh; he is the Spirit of Prophecy, he is the author of the book – so he is the only one who can speak definitively about what the law means and how it was meant to be applied. And that's what he is doing here. In 6 consecutive sections he is overturning or correcting superficial or in some cases, completely aberrant, interpretations or applications of the Old Testament.

6 times in this part of the sermon he says some version of:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old ... But I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21–22 ESV)

He says that or something very much like that in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43.

So this is Jesus teaching us – with authority – what the law of God is really all about. Last week we saw him correcting their superficial understanding of the 6th commandment and now here in verses 27-30 we will hear him dealing with their superficial understanding of the 7th commandment having to do with adultery. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matthew 5:27–30 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

There is an important principle here and an urgent application – and we’ll get to those things in just a minute, but before we do, I think it is important for us to acknowledge an underlying assumption that we can see at work here as well. Jesus is clearly operating under the assumption that adultery is a sin of maximum significance.

Assumption: Adultery is a sin of maximum significance

He doesn’t say: be careful about adultery because that will complicate your marriage. He doesn’t say: be careful about adultery because that will mess up your kids. Now, those things are true of course, but Jesus assigns an even HIGHER significance to this issue, he says be careful about adultery, because adultery will drag your body and your soul down to hell.

He says that twice in these 4 verses. He says:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members **than that your whole body be thrown into hell.**³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members **than that your whole body go into hell.**” (Matthew 5:29–30 ESV)

Listen, friends, one of the things we need to understand is that NOT all sins are treated equal in the Bible. I know we like to say that, but that doesn't make it true. If you steal a sheep in the Bible, then you have to pay back 4 times the value of the sheep – according to Exodus 22:1. So the sin of THEFT results in having to pay a fine – but committing adultery is a whole different ballgame. According to Leviticus 20:10:

“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” (Leviticus 20:10 ESV)

Adultery is treated in the Bible as a capital crime. It is a sin of maximum significance. It is treated in the Bible the exact same way that murder is treated. And that makes sense, if you think about it because according to the Bible, a marriage is a living thing. In Genesis 2:24 it says:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and **they shall become one flesh.**” (Genesis 2:24 ESV)

The Hebrew word there, translated “flesh” literally means “body or person” – so a marriage is understood as two people becoming ONE NEW PERSON. It's not “you and me” now, when you get married, it's “us” and adultery is a deadly assault upon that US - and it is treated as such in both the Old and New Testament – and that's why what Jesus says here sounds so much like what we were looking at last week when he was talking about murder.

Adultery is a big deal, brothers and sisters, and as with murder, Jesus says here, it is ultimately a matter of the heart.

Principle: Adultery is a matter of the heart

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her **in his heart.**” (Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

So again, the issue here is that the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching a very superficial understanding of this commandment. They were saying that if you have sex with your

neighbour's wife, then you will have placed yourself in mortal peril. All they were focused on was the fruit at the furthest reach of the branch, but here is Jesus again saying that the bar is much higher than that! God is going to look at FRUIT on Judgment Day, of course, but he is also going to test and scrutinize the ROOT. He's going to look at the whole system.

Brothers and sisters, we need to hear this again in the modern-day evangelical church – because it looks to me like we are no different than the scribes and the Pharisees on this issue. We've come to the place where we think that all that matters is the fruit at the end of the branches. "As long as I'm not committing adultery – as long as I'm not having sex with my neighbour or my co-worker – then I'm good to go." That's what we think – and then we go on from there to give ourselves permission to watch things on our phones or to engage in emotional affairs or to send pictures of ourselves or to solicit pictures from other people – and it doesn't matter, we tell ourselves – because we're not committing ACTUAL adultery.

It's amazing how widespread that mindset is - which means, of course, that we have the exact same defective interpretation of the Bible as the scribes and Pharisees. We are taking a lowest common denominator approach – and here is Jesus calling us out on that. He is saying clearly and authoritatively that adultery is a matter of the heart!

Just like murder is a matter of the heart!

So if there is contempt living unchecked in your heart on Judgment Day that will be submitted as evidence of your unconversion – and according to this passage, so too if there is lust living unchecked in your heart on Judgment Day, that too will be submitted as evidence of your unconversion.

LUST is a cancer of the heart. LUST – like CONTEMPT – is the opposite of love. Love is about cherishing another person; love is about caring for that person – in a marriage, the husband who loves his wife takes as his model for that love, the love that Jesus demonstrated for the church. That's a giving love, a serving love, a sacrificing love – which of course is the exact opposite of LUST. Lust is about taking; lust is about stealing; lust is about consuming. So if that cancer is growing in your heart then it 100% calls into question the reality of your conversion.

Listen, brothers and sisters, one of the things we need to understand is that God is not going to take our word for it on Judgment Day. I am convinced that North American evangelicals have been absolutely hoodwinked by the devil into thinking that whatever we say about ourselves will be treated as true and unassailable by the God of the Universe – despite that there is absolutely no evidence in support of that assumption, not that I can find anyway, anywhere in the pages of the Bible.

Here is what I see in the Bible; Jesus in Matthew 12 says:

“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:36–37 ESV)

It sounds like, on Judgment Day, you come to the front and you enter a plea. You say: “I’m a Christian, Lord. I’m a follower of Jesus Christ.”

And God says, “very well then, let’s take a look”. And then some kind of tape recorder is brought forward and it starts playing a recording of everything you ever said since the day you made your profession of faith. And God listens and he is looking for evidence of the Holy Spirit’s influence in your life. Did your foul language slowly but surely disappear under the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit – yes or no?

Did your accusatory rhetoric, your slander and insults toward others – did those things slowly but surely disappear under the influence of the Holy Spirit? Yes or no?

That seems to be what the Bible is saying about our experience on Judgment Day – am I reading that wrong?

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God is just going to take your word for it. It sounds to me like he is going to examine the evidence to see if the Holy Spirit of Jesus has truly taken up residence in your heart. Because if the Spirit of Jesus is there, then things like CONTEMPT and LUST should be on their way out - because the Spirit of Jesus is a DIVINE ANTIBODY that

slowly but surely CURES the human heart of all DISEASE, all CORRUPTION and all CONTAMINATION.

So if your heart is overrun with the cancer of contempt or the cancer of lust – that will be received as evidence of your unconversion on Judgment Day – I don't know any other way to make sense of what Jesus is saying to us here in this section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Unless I'm missing something, this is Jesus saying here, just as he said in the matter of murder, that the bar is much higher than we think – that the inquiry of God is much deeper than we think. These commandments are about more than whether we kill our neighbours or sleep with our neighbours – the issue here is the health and purity of our hearts.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8 ESV)

If you have anger in your heart, if you have lust in your heart, then you will have to give an account to God for those things on the day of Judgment.

Are you prepared for that?

You better be, Jesus says; you better do everything you need to do to prepare yourself for that encounter.

Application: You need to wage all-out war on the lust in your heart

And that leads us to the matter of application. And once again, very helpfully, Jesus himself provides it. He says:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matthew 5:29–30 ESV)

Alright! That's pretty clear brothers and sisters. Jesus is saying here that you need to wage all-out war on the lusts of your heart.

That's the application.

Don't think for a second that the fact that you haven't slept with your neighbour or your co-worker will be impressive to God on Judgment Day. He is going to look deeper than that. He's going to sample the waters of your heart. So you need to do absolutely everything in your power to eradicate lust and sinful desire in your heart.

The early church took this stuff very seriously – way more seriously than we do. The Apostle Paul said to his people:

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” (Colossians 3:5–6 ESV)

The wrath of God is going to fall on these things wherever he finds them, come Judgment Day, Paul says, so make sure that he does not find any of these things IN YOU.

That's the application.

So how do we do that?

How do we “gouge out our eyes” and “cut off our hands” metaphorically speaking. And to be clear, it is METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING. The church Father Origen took this literally and emasculated himself so that he wouldn't succumb to lust and temptation – but that is a ridiculous misunderstanding of this passage – and one that was outlawed, thankfully, in 325 AD at the Council of Nicea. So – this is Jesus using forceful language. He is saying: “I want you to wage ALL OUT WAR on the lusts and corruptions of your heart.”

So, again, how do we do that? In the time we have left let me just draw your attention to some essential counsel that arises naturally out of the text and that has stood the test of time over the centuries within the covenant community.

The first thing and most important thing, I think is this: you need to deal with yourself.

i. Deal with yourself

There has always been a temptation within the church to try and make this an external issue – to make the problem THE ENVIRONMENT or to make the problem the behaviour of other people. But that’s not what Jesus says here! He doesn’t tell people to wage war on their environment – he doesn’t tell his disciples to wage war on other people – he tells his disciples to wage war on themselves! Gouge out YOUR EYE, he says, cut off your HAND! Do what you need to do to bring yourself under management; that’s what he’s saying.

Martin Luther picks up on this theme in his commentary, he says:

“Therefore Christ is a true Master, who teaches you not to run away from people, nor to change your place; but to **lay hands on yourself**, and cast from you the eye or the hand that offends you, that is, to remove the occasion of sinning, which is the evil lust and desire that sticks in yourself and comes out of your heart.”¹

That’s the issue. Far too many evangelicals today seem to want to blame the environment. “The culture is corrupt!” “Women dress too seductively!!” So they want to hide out in the woods and make everyone wear ankle length skirts – but is that going to solve the problem?

No.

According to Jesus the problem isn’t the environment, the problem isn’t other people, the problem is the corruption of your heart, so you have to put the focus there.

¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary On The Sermon On The Mount* in Lexham Classics, translated by Charles A. Hay (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2017), 104.

Now, listen, is the culture corrupt? Sure. Is it helpful and loving to dress modestly? Sure. But at the end of the day, Jesus says, this battle is going to be won or lost IN YOUR HEART. This is about you, so you need to do whatever it is you need to do to LAY HANDS ON YOURSELF. By the grace that God supplies, you need to apply the truth of the Gospel to every spot of cancer in your heart. You need to throw open the doors to every nook and cranny of your heart. If you do that, and if the Spirit comes IN then you will be healed!

Because the Gospel is not deficient and the Spirit is not without power. The issue is ACCESS and APPLICATION – that’s where the rubber meets the road – literally. So if you don’t open up and if you don’t practically apply then you don’t really believe and that will be demonstrated, definitively on judgment day through the examination of the state of your heart.

So deal with yourself, deal with your heart, and then secondly, as indicated by the imagery that Jesus uses in this text, you need to guard your approaches.

ii. Guard your approaches

The Bible talks about the EYE as the window of the HEART – so if you want to keep contamination out of your heart then you have to be careful what you look at with your eye. That’s not rocket science. This is Jesus saying “Guard your approaches!” Understand your weaknesses. Know how the enemy is going to come at you and plan accordingly.

That’s exactly what Solomon told his son in the Book of Proverbs, he has a whole chapter on this. Proverbs chapter 5 is all about how not to commit adultery – and the first thing he says is – you’ve got to give the house of the adulteress a wide berth. He says:

“Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house” (Proverbs 5:8 ESV)

Don’t think that you can just walk by her laneway and take a quick peek in through the curtains, because if you do that, you are going to feed the lusts of your heart, and before you know it, you won’t be peaking in through the curtains, you will be walking in through the front door and down the stairs that lead to death and hell. He says that exactly, he says:

“Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol” (Proverbs 5:5 ESV)

Run away, son!

Don't look, don't peek, don't go.

Paul says the same thing to Timothy, his son in the faith, he says:

“flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness” (2 Timothy 2:22 ESV)

Don't look at the bad stuff, look at the good stuff! Brothers and sisters, you can't binge watch Game of Thrones and Temptation Island and expect to root out the cancer of lust from the inner recesses of your heart. You have to be smarter than that. You have to guard your approaches.

John Stott talks a lot about this – and John Stott knew a lot about this, because he lived his whole life as a single man – and so he talks a lot about making use of “moral sentries”, of guarding the normal approaches of sin and temptation. He says:

“What is necessary for all those with strong sexual temptations, and indeed for all of us in principle, is discipline in guarding the approaches of sin.”²

Isn't that good? Brothers and sisters, that's a huge part of what it means to wage war on the lusts of your heart. You have to post sentries, you have to draw lines, you have to stand guard.

Then thirdly, the Bible says that it is really helpful to rejoice in the permission that you are given.

iii. Rejoice in your permission

The Bible deals frankly with matters of human sexuality; I wish we did too. I wish we had more dads who talked to their sons like Solomon talked to his son. He said to him:

²John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 90.

¹⁸ Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
¹⁹ a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.
²⁰ Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? (Proverbs 5:18–20 ESV)

That's pretty good counsel right there. Solomon says: "Have a great marriage. Enjoy your wife. Have a great love life – and you will be less likely to go fishing for happiness in the gutter."

That's a good word, friends. One we would all be wise to attend to.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in the New Testament. He says:

"Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Corinthians 7:5 ESV)

Doing that which is good, is often the best way to avoid doing that which is bad – so rejoice in the permission you've been given.

And then lastly, whenever and wherever the contagion of lust rears its ugly, rotten head we need to repent of it, immediately, fervently and appropriately.

iv. Repent immediately, fervently and appropriately

Just like the Apostle Paul said about not letting the sun go down on our anger – so too we need to deal quickly and directly with the sin of lust. You don't want that cancer to take root and spread – so deal with it as soon as it happens. Attack that sin as if your life depends on it – because it sounds for all the world, based on this passage, as if it does. So repent of it immediately and repent of it fervently – we need to take sin far more seriously than we do – if the Sermon on the Mount isn't giving you that vibe, then you're not paying attention.

Unaddressed sin will sink your soul to hell, so repent of it immediately and fervently and I think it is important to add, repent of it appropriately. Your confession of sin should be as broad as the

sin itself. Every sin of lust is a sin against your own body – which according to Genesis 2:24 – includes your spouse. “The two shall become one flesh – one body” – so obviously the sin of lust must be confessed both to God and to your spouse. But then, depending upon how far the rot has spread, some sins of lust will need to be confessed a little wider than that. If your lust has led you to engage in inappropriate actions with another person – someone’s husband or wife – then that needs to be confessed as well. Remember adultery is an act of violence against marriage – yours and in certain cases, someone else’s so that needs to be dealt with, and like we said last week, better to take a bad deal here than to arrive at the Final Judgment with something like that unresolved on your record.

Jesus said:

“Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (Matthew 5:25–26 ESV)

We need to deal with this stuff now, brothers and sisters. We need to uncover that which we have covered. We need to open the windows, open the doors and let the healing light of Jesus Christ shine through. It is going to be hard, it’s going to be ugly, it’s going to be painful – but in the end, it’s going to be worth it. You’re going to have a faith that is real, a faith that is saving and a faith that is attractive to your friends and loved ones.

Do you want that, brothers and sisters?

Me too.

Oh God – help! Let’s pray together.

Note to Worship Leader:

I may ask people to stand before I pray if they need particular grace from God to address a root of lust and sinful desire in their heart. The worship team should NOT move from their seats or come up on to the stage until the end of my prayer. Thanks!