

*Mary Lewis shares this: When I was a kid, I discovered among my parents' books an ornately illustrated volume of the Ten Commandments. It looked like it was probably a reproduction of an illuminated manuscript that had been painstakingly created by medieval monks. The writing was big and old fashioned; the language was King James.*

*Something about that book drew me to it, although it wasn't exactly because I liked it. Taken together, the words and the pictures and the "Thou Shalt Nots" effectively conveyed a solemn warning about transgressing God's commandments, and the scariest one for me was the seventh commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery."*

*You wouldn't think that would be scary to a little kid, but it was, and the reason it was scary was because I had no idea what adultery was. I knew it had to be serious, because it was stuck right between "Thou Shalt Not Kill" and "Thou Shalt Not Steal." I knew what those two meant and I knew they were both really bad, therefore, adultery must be something really bad, even though, I had no idea what it was, and I was afraid I might accidentally commit adultery and never know it.*

*So, I put my reasoning skills to work. I used my best trick for figuring out words, which was to relate the word I didn't know to words I did know. The only word I could relate to "adultery" was "adult" so I thought adultery must mean, "to act like an adult." I figured that it must be okay for adults to act like adults, so this commandment had to mean that kids shouldn't act like adults. I didn't know why God would make such a big deal of kids who acted like adults, but who was I to understand God's ways. Obviously, God was very serious about it – and so, I decided I would never act like an adult and have not done so ever since.*

That was a cute little story, but I just think she had her reasoning a little backwards. Her concern should not necessarily be about kids behaving like adults, but rather adults who are misbehaving like kids.

We have been away for two weeks due to the Easter break, and yes, we've jumped from the resurrection story to adultery. We're back in **Matthew**, working our way through the *Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus has been focused on matters of the heart. Unlike the religious leaders of His day who lived by a system of lifeless rules, Jesus goes right to the heart for He knew that if you focus on the inside – the outside tends to take care of itself.

If you recall, Jesus is up on a hill somewhere near Capernaum, likely among thousands of people who have hiked up to listen to His teaching from God's point of view, and at the onset of His teaching, Jesus made it clear that He is the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture – meaning in its *law*, He would perfectly obey it by living a sinless life, and in its *prophecy* – it all led right to Him just as promised.

In every way, Scripture pointed to Jesus, He wrote it, and therefore, He had the greatest authority to teach it – not as it was taught by those who had turned it into a system of rules, but in contrast, taught from the perspective of having a heart that is near to God. For Jesus, this was not about empty *religion* – it was about a *relationship* with God entered into by faith – a relationship with God that is best expressed in our relationships with one another, and that's where Jesus leads His listeners through this *Sermon on the Mount*.

So, if you have your Bible, let's pick up where we left off in **Matthew 5** beginning with **verse 27**. Jesus says,

**<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; <sup>28</sup> 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.**

Just like the last time when we looked at murder, Jesus begins with the words “**You have heard**” and as a reminder, He says this because He's talking to a crowd of average everyday people who did not speak or read Hebrew – the main language of the Old Testament.

In Jesus' day, *Aramaic* was the common language, and *Hebrew* was primarily used by the Pharisees and the Sadducees – it was used by the Jewish rabbis who taught in the synagogues – rabbis who added, and subtracted, and substituted God's Word with their own.

Jesus says, “*You have heard*” – it was taught to you – **You shall not commit adultery**. Now, as we know, that comes straight from the Ten Commandments, and it's a simple, straightforward command that God gave to His people for their protection – to protect the sanctity, and the intimacy, and the joy of marriage between a man and a woman.

Jesus knows what they had been taught. He's aware of the popular opinion – that is – as long as they didn't do the physical act of adultery, they're okay – but they

weren't okay, for Jesus drops this bombshell on them and explains that if you even look at a woman with lust in your heart, you have already committed adultery with her. And I want to point out that even though Jesus is addressing men here, and rightly so because men tend to be the main culprits, His teaching also applies to women just as well.

Just like Jesus did with the previous topic of murder, He raises the bar on sexual sin to include both the *root* and the *fruit* of adultery – the root being **lust**, and just for clarification, Jesus is not saying that lust is just as harmful and hurtful as the physical act of adultery – that's not what He's saying – instead, what He's saying is that if you look upon another person with lust – in God's eyes, the *attitude* and the *act* are both judged the same. In other words, from God's perspective, a person can commit adultery in their heart without ever touching someone.

Now before we press on, I do need to explain what it means to **look at a woman** in the context that is given to us. The “**look**” that Jesus is referring to is not the casual *glance* where you notice a woman – or maybe even notice that she is an attractive woman. That's not what Jesus is describing here, instead He's talking about a man who has his *gaze* fixed on a woman *for the purpose of feeding his sexual fantasy*, and in my mind, that would also include the use of pornography. In essence, it produces the same lust, it's the same heart problem, and lucky for us, Jesus shares some practical advice in how to deal with it.

Let's look at **verses 29-30**. Jesus says,

**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 hell. 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 hell.**

I don't know about any of you, but if I had been in that crowd up on that hill, my hand would have shot right up.

*“Excuse me, excuse me Jesus. I'm really sorry about this, but was in the middle of a text message when I thought I heard you say something about the loss of a body part to deal with my lust problem. Apparently, I must have missed something – obviously, I heard you wrong, so Jesus, can you go over that again?”*

Fortunately, Jesus is not being *literal*, but He is being *radical*. He's shocking the audience to get their attention. He's exaggerating to make a serious point, and I know this because if I pluck out my right **eye** – or both of my eyes for that matter, I can still have a problem with lust. It goes the same for my **hand** because as Jesus has already pointed out – this is a heart issue and removing body parts on the outside will not solve that problem on the inside. **So, then what is Jesus telling us?**

If you noticed, Jesus used the word “**right**” a couple of times and that word suggests that something is favored – it's the dearest – the most cherished. The sheep are on the right, the goats on the left. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. So, in context, in so many words, Jesus is saying,

*“You should eliminate from your life anything that is going to cause your heart to stumble into sexual sin – even those things you might favor and cherish the most.”*

Listen, this is serious to God, and we may need to get radical in dealing with this, especially when living in a culture that is not doing us any favors when it comes to sexual sin. Our culture is not helping us in anyway, so to protect our hearts – and again, this is a matter of the heart, *we need to draw the line before we cross the line* – meaning, in advance, we need to establish some boundaries.

For example, there are some television programs and some movies we already know we should not watch. There are some websites we should not enter. There are some places we should not go. There are some gatherings we should not attend. There are some books and magazines we should not read, there are some conversations we should not share, and there are some relationships we know we should not have. There are some people in our lives, outside of our marriage, that we should not mingle with and definitely should not be alone with – and we know who they are – they are the people you feel your heart drifting towards other than your spouse.

So, listen, we are going to be tempted, that's a given for all of us, but when it comes to temptation of a sexual nature – it's not something to *flirt* with – it's something to *flee* from. God will make a way of escape, He promises to do that, and when He does, put on your track shoes and run like the wind.

**“Do not commit adultery.”** According to Jesus, this commandment speaks to both the *attitude* and the *act* – the *root* and the *fruit*, and it's given for our protection.

Now, we come to a passage that has been discussed, and dissected, and debated for many years. Beginning with **verse 31**, Jesus says to the crowd:

**<sup>31</sup> “It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; <sup>32</sup> but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

Before we begin, let me say this is a hard passage which I know prompts some hard questions. In all honesty, it makes me very nervous, in fact, in my studies, I discovered that some preachers skipped right over this – apparently it made them nervous too, but I just can’t skip it. This passage is going to require some explaining, so let me set it up for the sake of context.

In **Deuteronomy 24**, beginning with **verse 1**, this is what Moses told to God’s people:

*<sup>1</sup>“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, <sup>2</sup> and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife, <sup>3</sup> and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, <sup>4</sup> then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.*

In this passage, we read that Moses made a provision for **divorce**, although divorce was never God’s intention. From the beginning, God’s original intention was for marriage to be a *lasting* and *loving* union between a man and a woman whereby they created a godly family. That was God’s intention, but unfortunately, God’s people were a stubborn, hard-hearted people – a people who did what they wanted to do – divorce had become rampant, and so as a way to curb this practice that was already occurring, Moses made this concession to ensure a wife who was divorced by her husband was not left destitute and forced to fend for herself.

A woman had little to no rights in this male-dominated culture, so in order to protect them, Moses told the people that a wife must be given a **certificate of**

**divorce** by her husband which legally severed the marriage and granted the wife the right to remarry without being slandered and abused.

This certificate was to be put in the hand of the wife – it took time to prepare, it was done in public – it could be humiliating – it created a *cooling off period* if you will – Moses was wise, and then on top of that, he commanded that a divorced woman could not return to her former husband if she remarried and was then divorced again. **So, what's that about?**

In a roundabout way, it was meant to discourage the practice of treating a wife as “*disposable property*” as it would cause the first husband to think twice about letting his wife go, since he could never get her back again. A *former* husband could not have a *future* interest in his divorced and remarried wife.

Now, if you notice, divorce was permitted only if some **indecent** was found in the wife, and in Jesus' day, the definition of *indecent* became really blurred – there was a lot of confusion, and Jewish men were basically divided between the teaching of two rabbis: Rabbi *Shammai* and Rabbi *Hillel*.

Rabbi *Shammai* understood that *indecent* meant sexual immorality, and he said that was the only valid reason for divorce. It was a very strict and conservative stance that he and his followers had taken.

Rabbi *Hillel*, on the other hand, understood *indecent* to mean anything a husband considered shameful or obnoxious, so divorce was allowed for almost any reason and there was no appeal by the wife. A husband could divorce his wife if she was seen talking to other men on the street, if she burned dinner, if she said something unkind about her in-laws that embarrassed her husband – really almost any reason would be grounds to kick the wife to the curb, and as you can imagine, this liberal view was very popular among the men looking for a way out of their marriage.

So, Jesus is up on the hill, and He acknowledges that divorce is a real thing – it's become as common as marriage. Jewish men were getting rid of their wives – just because they could, and Jesus says to the crowd,

**<sup>32</sup> but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

Before we dive into this, I want to quote something from Ray Pritchard. He says:

*In thinking about the question of divorce and remarriage, there are two extremes we must avoid. First, we must avoid saying more on this subject than the Bible says. In years past, divorced people often felt like lepers inside the church. Even today, they sometimes feel like second-class citizens who are barely tolerated by the rest of the congregation. In our zeal to condemn divorce, we sometimes condemn those who have been divorced. We hate the sin and the sinner.*

*Secondly, we must also avoid saying less than what the Bible says. In some ways the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme in many churches. Because we are truly living in a divorce culture, and perhaps because we want to respond to hurting people with the grace of God – sometimes in our zeal to reach people, we have actually lowered the biblical standards or abandoned them altogether. Sometimes the church has simply winked at unbiblical divorce because it would be too difficult or too painful to hold Christians to the high standards of God’s Word.*

That was a lot to digest, but Pritchard was right, and with all that said – **what was Jesus saying?** Well to get this started, and this is important, Jesus was not suggesting that divorce *must* happen – even for sexual immorality. He’s not suggesting it *must* happen – only that it *may* happen, but if it does happen – and I need to toss this out here, please understand that divorce is not the unpardonable sin to God and it shouldn’t be to us. Now, that doesn’t mean we are lowering biblical standards, but it does mean we are to have a heart of compassion and forgiveness. If divorced and remarried people don’t feel comfortable in the church, perhaps that says more about the church than it does about them.

So, Jesus knows God’s original intention for marriage – it was to be *lasting* and *loving*, but God’s hard-hearted people seemed to put more emphasis on securing a divorce rather than saving a marriage. They were making divorce way too easy – it was casual, wives were being routinely victimized for trivial reasons, and it’s here that Jesus confronts the crowd with an “*in your face*” reality check.

*“All along, you thought you were obeying God’s command by not committing adultery. You believed you had that command in the bag. You assumed it was only a physical thing, but from God’s point of view, you are committing adultery left and right by looking and lusting after other women. You are committing adultery in your heart without even touching them, but let’s not stop there. In your view of divorce, in your misinterpretation of God’s Word, you are victimizing innocent women and leaving a wake of adultery behind you. All along, you*

*thought adultery was not a problem for you, but look what you have done. It's all around you because of you."*

Now, I could be wrong, but after a lot of wrestling with this, I don't think this passage is about divorce although divorce is mentioned, instead I think Jesus was simply challenging their views of what is right and what is wrong – this time in the matter of adultery. All along, they were all thinking they were in the religious right, when in reality – and they had it all wrong.

The heart of the problem has always been a problem with the heart. That's what Moses was dealing with in **Deuteronomy**. It's what Jesus is dealing with here, and when it comes to our own relationship difficulties, it seems to boil down to that as well – it's the heart.

**Psalm 139:23-24** reads,

**<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.**

Here, David invites God to search his heart to root out any hardness or hurtful thing. May we do the same.

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