

Radical

“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)

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

(Luke 6:36 ESV)

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:20 ESV)

Radical Marriage

August 11th, 2019

Matthew 5:27-32

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! I’d love for you to open your Bibles now to Matthew 5:27, that’s on page 810 in your pew Bibles. This morning we are starting a new series. We are going to be talking about some of the RADICAL THINGS that Jesus said. We’ve called this series RADICAL because that word means two things at the same time. According to the dictionary the word “radical” refers to:

“change or action relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something”

Or secondarily:

“relating to the roots of a word.”¹

Or relating to the roots of a chord in music or the roots of a plant in biology.

That’s what I’m after in this series.

¹ Online dictionary.

I want to talk about the things that Jesus said that changed the world and I want to talk about how our distinctive witness as the people of God is connected to our adherence to the things that Jesus taught and commanded.

That's what this series is all about - so hopefully you have your Bibles open now to Matthew 5 verses 27-32. We're going to begin by looking at Jesus' radical teaching on covenant marriage as presented to us in the Sermon on the Mount. 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.³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:27–32 ESV)

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

Now I don't want to waste any time trying to be fancy this morning so our outline is going to be very simple. I want to ask two questions. First of all: What is Jesus saying in this passage? And then secondly: “How can we live this out in the 21st century?” Let's begin with the first question:

What Is Jesus Saying In This Passage?

It seems to me like he is saying at least 4 things. First of all he is saying that:

1. Adultery begins in the eye

Look at verses 27 and 28. He says:

“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)

Hear how Jesus frames this teaching. He says – you have heard it said – but I say to you. You see the problem was that all the teaching that his disciples had heard on this matter of adultery had come from the Pharisees – and that’s a problem. Because the way of the Pharisees is not adequate. Jesus says that in Matthew 5:20. He says:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20 ESV)

So Jesus says – the way of the Pharisees is WRONG. It is a road that leads to death and hell. Do not listen to them – listen to me. My way is the way that leads to life.

So the Pharisees are the FOIL for most of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. They taught a very PERFUNCTORY observance of the law. They were interested in keeping the letter of the law and they were interested in checking off boxes so as to ACHIEVE and DISPLAY their own righteousness.

That is the way of death Jesus says.

If that is your concern – checking off boxes and looking good to your neighbours – then you are on the highway to hell. That is not what the Law is about. I will tell you what the law is about, Jesus says – and that’s what the Sermon on the Mount is – it is Jesus telling us what the law is all about. It is Jesus saying – don’t listen to the Pharisees, listen to me.

So you have to bring that understanding with you into this passage. The Pharisees taught a very permissive approach to divorce. Josephus – perhaps the best known Pharisee

from that era, said proudly in one of his works that he believed that it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife for ANY REASON WHATSOEVER.²

So that's what Jesus was up against.

The Pharisees thought the law was just there to set a limit – they couldn't have sex with their neighbours' wives – right? They couldn't commit adultery - but they believed that they could divorce their wives whenever it suited them so that they could marry a younger and more attractive model. That was ok – because the law didn't say anything about that.

Enter Jesus.

No, he says, you've missed the whole point. When God talks about adultery he is talking about faithfulness and contentment. He is saying that he wants you to focus on your wife and to love her with your whole body – your whole mind and your whole eye.

That's where Jesus goes. He says that if God doesn't want you to commit adultery with your body – then you need to begin obeying that command at the point of the eye. Jesus takes us right to the heart of the matter. He says: "If you have a lust problem today then you are going to have a marriage problem tomorrow – so let's fight the battle right here! At the point of the eye."

That's the first thing Jesus says.

The second thing he says is this:

2. Sin will lead you to hell

Look at verse 29:

² Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews IV*, 253 (viii. 23) as cited in D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13-28 The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 411.

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. (Matthew 5:29 ESV)

So Jesus is saying here that if you surrender to your lustful thoughts then they will take over your life and drag you down to hell – the battle is just that urgent, he says.

But let me ask you a question – do you actually believe that?

I mean, I know this series is called Radical – but that’s really radical, isn’t it? Particularly given WHO Jesus says this TO. Look back to Matthew 5:1 – the Bible says:

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, **his disciples** came to him. (Matthew 5:1 ESV)

This teaching is TO THE DISCIPLES. Jesus is saying this to people are following him. To those people he says – if you don’t battle the sin in your life - it will drag you down to hell.

Do you actually believe that?

Do you actually believe that there is a connection between obeying the teachings of Jesus and your eternal destiny?

Or let me put it another way. Suppose you believed that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead on the third day. You believe in the essential WORKS of Jesus. But suppose also that you decided to ignore this WORD from Jesus in Matthew 5. You decided to make peace with you lust. Would that sin – the sin of lust – that you have surrendered to – drag you down to hell – despite that you believe in what Jesus did?

That’s the question.

Jesus seems to have expected us to believe equally in what he DID and what he SAID. He expected us to believe the WORKS and to obey the WORDS. In fact he said in Luke 6:46:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46
ESV)

So its both or nothing according to Jesus. If we don’t HEED this WORD and make WAR on our SIN then it will destroy us, diminish us and eventually drag us down to hell.

That’s what Jesus seems to be saying here – although, I’m not sure how many Christians today believe that.

Interestingly, the early Christians appear to have believed that. Perhaps you know the story of the church Father Origen. He actually castrated himself in an effort to obey this teaching. He was that committed to obeying this teaching. Now, to be clear, I don’t think Jesus is calling for castration here – I share that only to suggest that our generation of Christians is the only one that has been ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN that we don’t need to take this teaching seriously – that we can believe in Jesus and lust like animals – and still go to heaven.

But no generation before us has ever believed that.

Christianity historically has been characterized by a strong concern to limit all sexual activity AND DESIRE to the arena of covenant marriage.

Historically.

Are we still believing that?

Do we still believe that such a thing is reasonable and achievable for the born again Christian? You see the Bible seems to teach that TRUE born again, Spirit-filled Christians will slowly but surely begin to grow in freedom from the temptations of the world and the flesh. The Apostle John believed that, he said:

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. (1 John 5:4 ESV)

So according to John, if you are a real Christian then you will be an overcomer – you will experience victory! Slowly but surely, making painful progress, over the course of your whole life – only to achieve total victory, finally at the return of Jesus Christ. That’s what Christians historically have believed.

We believe that in Christ we have freedom immediately from the penalty of sin, progressively from the power of sin, and one day, ultimately even from the presence of sin – thanks be to God! That’s what TRUE Christianity is all about.

And so giving free reign to your sin – specifically here making peace with your lust – essentially proves that you are not a true believer.

That’s what Jesus is saying here.

That is a RADICAL teaching – but here it is, brothers and sisters - right before our eyes on the pages of Holy Scripture.

The third thing Jesus is saying here, obviously is that:

3. Divorce should be extremely rare

Jesus mentions only ONE EXCEPTION to the general rule that a marriage covenant should last forever. He says in verse 32:

“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of **sexual immorality**, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:32 ESV)

Jesus uses the Greek word *pornea* here which the ESV rightly translates as sexual immorality – it probably refers to the list of prohibited forms of sex itemized in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18-20. The Holiness Code mentions adultery, it mentions

homosexuality, it mentions bestiality and it mentions incest – those were all prohibited forms of sex – those were all types of sexual immorality – and so here Jesus is saying that only in such cases is divorce even to be considered.

Now to be clear – he does not REQUIRE divorce in such cases. Again that was part of how Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees. They seemed to think that divorce was REQUIRED in a multitude of situations including sexual immorality. No – Jesus says, rather divorce is PERMITTED ONLY in the case of sexual immorality – but never required.

God hates divorce.

He says that in Malachi 2:16:

“For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel (Malachi 2:16 NASB)

That seems pretty clear; God HATES divorce. It is not his will. It is not his design and intention.

Nevertheless, because of the hardness of human hearts God permits divorce in certain circumstances as a concession but never as a command.

And it is a concession, I think we can say, that no true Christian should ever have need of. If both members of the marriage are true Christians then they shouldn't have hard hearts – to be a Christian is to have a new heart and a new Spirit within you – that's the essence of the New Covenant. And real Christians should be making war on their sin. And they should be changing daily into the image of Christ. And they should be willing to forgive the failings and faults of their spouse – Jesus said that in Luke 17:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:3–4 ESV)

That's pretty radical too isn't it? Jesus is saying that if your brother or sister sins against you and he repents and returns to you – seven times in a day – and says I repent – you must forgive him.

So – if real believers have new hearts and real believers are making war on their sin and real believers are changing and growing and real believers are extending mercy – then..... real believers are not getting divorced – as far as I can see.

In fact I will state plainly that I don't see how two legitimate believers could get divorced – not given all that the Bible says. Therefore I would conclude that if two PROFESSED believers get divorced then one of them – at least one of them – must be tragically deceived.

Now that's radical – but it is meant to be. This is supposed to be one of the main ways that Christians stand out as radically different than the surrounding culture. Lord make it so again in our day!

The fourth thing Jesus says here is that:

4. A wrong divorce results in a sinful remarriage

Look at verse 32 again:

“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:32 ESV)

So here Jesus is saying that if a man puts away his wife **WRONGLY** – for something other than sexual immorality – then he **CAUSES** her to commit adultery. Because she will have to get remarried. In that culture a woman had to marry or face starvation or become a prostitute – she had no other options. So if you put her away **WRONGLY**, Jesus says, you are responsible for her subsequent adultery. Both of the sins get hung on you, brother.

By the way let's just pause and appreciate the gentleness with which Jesus treated women. In pretty much every situation we come across Jesus is being hard on men and gentle with women. He expected an awful lot from men – he expected them to lead, to serve, to initiate and to protect; and he is saying here that if you lust and you covet and you wrongly divorce your wife – then when she gets remarried – all of that sin is on you. You will answer for your lust and your coveting and your adultery – and you will answer for her adultery too.

That's pretty radical – but that's what we see in the text.

Jesus was very gentle and merciful toward women – and he had very high expectations for men. I know it is not politick for me to say this but, how much I WOULD LOVE to see a return in the church and in the culture to such an approach. How marvelous it would be to live in a world where we had high standards for men and in which we treated women with infinite gentleness and respect.

But the point here is that a wrong divorce leads to a sinful remarriage – regardless of whose account that sin is credited to. And of course the corollary of that truth is that a right divorce leads to a permissible remarriage. Careful Bible teachers have always understood that. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones in his commentary on this passage spoke about the certificate of divorce that Jesus mentioned and which he explained was intended by God to slow the man down and to make him understand the severity of what he was thinking about doing. Don't just send her away when you get angry – you sit down and consider her situation and you get it notarized. But then Lloyd Jones said that if the man went through with it and sent her away with a certificate of divorce:

“With that in her hand she is entitled to marry somebody else.”³

He went on to say, this time speaking of the man who has rightly divorced an adulterous wife:

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 225.

“This man is now free and as a free man he is entitled to remarriage.”⁴

So we must be careful not to say less than or other than Jesus says here. If the divorce is wrong then the remarriage is wrong. But if the divorce is right then the remarriage is right – but only in the Lord.

That’s what Jesus is saying in this distinctive and essential passage.

So that brings us to our second question and we won’t be able to take quite as much time with it. The second question is this:

How Can We Live This Teaching Out In The 21st Century?

We are a long from here so how can we get back on track? Allow me to make 4 suggestions.

1. Let’s watch what we watch

Again – in previous generations Christians understood that this would have to be part of the process. William Hendriksen, for example, a pastor from the middle of the 20th century said this in 1973 when commenting on our text – specifically verses 27-30; he said:

“the obscene book should be burned, the scandalous picture destroyed, the soul-destroying film condemned, the sinister yet very intimate social tie broken, and the baneful habit discarded.”⁵

Wow! Who talks like that? Not too many Christians today. Our grandparents talked like that. They understood that you had to be careful what you watched on TV and at the cinema – and we laugh at that now and we call it legalism. And maybe it was at times, but see how far into the ditch on the other side we have gone in the last 20 years.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 230.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 303.

Christians watch anything and everything now and we are losing our souls in the process.

So Brothers and sisters – and I’m including myself in this – if this really matters; if healthy, forever marriages are supposed to be distinctive to the Christian community – if this is essential Jesus stuff – then let’s fight where Jesus says we should fight. Let’s fight the battle for our eyes.

And for our kids’ eyes.

I said earlier that if you have a lust problem today you are going to have a marriage problem tomorrow. Let me tweak that a little bit and say this – if your kid has a pornography problem today they are going to have a marriage problem tomorrow. So let’s help our kids as well. Let’s get control of the iPad and the Netflix account and let’s fight the battle of the eyes. Let’s start watching what we watch.

And:

2. Let’s wage war on our sin

Jesus talked about gouging out eyes and cutting off hands – the language is figurative – obviously – but the meaning is clear. We need to wage all-out war on our sin. We need to take drastic measures.

We need to delete apps that cause us to sin.

We need to end friendships that cause us to fantasize.

We need to alter our hobbies, change our routines and slowly but surely bring our bodies and minds into submission.

Paul said that in Colossians 3:5:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Colossians 3:5 ESV)

Put to death – wage war – that’s what we are talking about here. Let’s wage ALL OUT WAR on our sin and let’s do that as a community of Christ followers.

Thirdly:

3. Let’s commit to covenant faithfulness

Let’s just decide in here that when we get married – it will be forever. Of course we will annoy each other, of course we will disappoint each other – but if we are Christians then we will grow, we will change, we will forgive and we will survive the long night so that we can flourish again come the morning. Joy comes in the morning – the Bible says – so let’s decide in here that we will not quit. We will do the work. We will get the help we need and we will make our marriages a sermon that preaches the love of Jesus Christ to our friends and loved ones.

Let’s decide in here to be the forever marriage people. Let’s make that again one of our main community distinctives.

And then lastly:

4. Let’s give good counsel and support to couples who are struggling

I am so thankful for this lay counselling initiative. I have spent more time in marriage counselling as a pastor in the last 3 years at this church than in the previous 10 years of my tenure here – the load is increasing because the strain on couples is increasing. One pastor – or 2 pastors or 3 pastors and Dr. Craig – are not going to be able to meet this need. So I am thankful for people who are taking the training – but we need more than just those people too. We need every couple in this church – and every individual – to know and love and affirm what the Bible says about marriage.

And more than advice - we need to give support.

You know, maybe you are sitting here today as a 22 year old single person and you're thinking "I don't even need this. I'm not getting married anytime soon, so I have no role in all this" – that is not true! It takes a tribe to save a marriage! You can serve in the nursery so that couples can sit in church together; you can provide free babysitting so that they can go on the occasional date night – and you can provide friendship because sometimes marriages struggle because the husband and the wife are asking too much of each other. Same gendered friendships are often the solution to marital disappointment – I've experienced that in counselling many times. So there is a role for you – there is a role for all of us in restoring and pursuing this distinctive quality as a church.

Conclusion:

I want to end this morning by sharing with you another quote from Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones. He said:

"Even adultery is not the unforgivable sin. It is a terrible sin, but God forbid that there should be anyone who feels that he or she has sinned himself outside the love of God or outside His kingdom because of adultery. No; if you truly repent and realize the enormity of your sin and cast yourself upon the boundless love and mercy and grace of God, you can be forgiven and I assure you of pardon."⁶

I wanted to end with that quote because I don't think I could say it any better and I'm worried that I might say it worse.

We talked about what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount – it was radical! He said that if we make peace with our lusts and our adulterous desires they will drag us down to hell – he said that. But I would hate for you to hear that if you have ever lusted or if you have ever committed adultery then you are already condemned to hell.

No.

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 230.

You can keep fighting! You can repent! You can turn around! And you can come home.

I believe that!

I believe in grace and mercy and HELP to live as the distinctive people of God. We cannot follow Jesus without the help of the Holy Spirit and without the kindness and forgiveness of Almighty God. So let's go to God now and confess our sins and call upon him to give grace and mercy in time of need. Let's pray together.