

Matthew Round / General

Matthew: Christ The Promised King / Divorce; Lust; Marriage; Adultery; Sanctification / Matthew 5:27–32

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## **big point: the Kingdom's blueprint is for purity and faithfulness - from the heart**

Intro me

We're going to talk about some hard stuff this morning so I have two important things to say before we begin:

- First, we are fallen people, living in a broken world: we're each broken - part of the problem, getting life wrong, messing things up - but we are all victims of our world's brokenness too, hurt and wounded by it; some of us gravely.
- Second, the gospel commits Hope City to being a community of grace: none of us has earned our place here in God's family; instead we are all gifted our place by grace through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. We all stand on the same ground.

So whether Jesus' words today put the spotlight on your own wounds, or your own brokenness, I tell you that you are loved and welcomed here, that we are one family, and that we'll try and care well for one another as we figure this out - and as God continues his work among us.

Today we're looking at the next section of Jesus' famous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. We've been thinking and talking about this as him setting out his blueprint for the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom which is coming, which has drawn near - the good and right Kingdom we long for.

We've seen how this Kingdom is only possible because of Jesus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, giving up his life and transforming our hearts. God is going to change the world out there by starting with a change in here. We've been talking about it as the **blueprint for his kingdom of transformed hearts**.

And we've seen this Kingdom is about inside-out righteousness as a result: the green shoots sprouting up from the barren ground of our lives are evidence of the seed God planted, that transformed heart. Jesus says the only way to enter the Kingdom is through surpassing righteousness - and that's inside-out righteousness rather than an outside-in righteousness just painted on the surface.

Last week, Alex helped us unpack Jesus' teaching on the heart of the Law's command, "do not murder": showing us that inside-out righteousness demands we take aim at anger, the root of harsh words, the root of division - and ultimately the root of murder. And where we've failed, and our anger has broken out and damaged

relationships, Jesus teaches us we are to pursue reconciliation.

This week, we're going to try and begin to unpack Jesus' teaching on the heart of the Law's command, "do not commit adultery." There's some tricky stuff in here - but we're going to work our way through it together. So let's read - and you might want to have a bible open so you can read along with us and refer back to it. We're in Matthew's gospel, chapter 5, and we're starting at verse 27. Page 969 in these blue church bibles. Matthew chapter 5, starting at verse 27. And Suzi's reading for us this morning. Page 969.

#### **Matthew 5:27-32 NIV**

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Marriage is going out of fashion pretty amazingly quickly, becoming obsolete at a rate of knots, so it seems. Here's how **marriage rates have developed in the UK since the 70's**, plotting the number of marriages per thousand single males and females each year - up to that point, things were fairly stable. If these trends continue, then by 2040 less than ten in a thousand, less than one in a hundred singles will marry each year - down from 6 or 8 to less than one, in my lifetime. That's a staggering drop.

Why? There are lots of factors: probably first, that more marriages are failing, leaving people single again - in 2013, 42% of UK marriages ended in divorce and that's only rising. And if many marriages fail, why bother in the first place? At least you'd be best off to try before you buy, right? But then, do you really ever need a wedding? Weddings are expensive. So many more people are just going ahead and living together for the long term.

Changing social attitudes towards cohabiting, and towards single-parent families - one in four families in the UK - mean many just don't see the point of marriage in the first place anymore - if you don't need it and it won't last anyway. It's a complex topic and there's much more going on, particularly as you look across different cultures, but the big picture is that marriage increasingly seems to belong to the past.

And it's not just marriage which is in decline - it's something much bigger. The idea that there are any rules or boundaries at all feels increasingly archaic to most people: a prudish idea from a bygone era. Maybe it feels that way to you, too. Many people from our culture would say what consenting adults get up to behind closed doors is

none of anyone else's business so long as no-one gets hurt. if that's where you're coming from, there are many, many people in that camp - thanks for hearing me out this far - I'm really glad you're here.

When Jesus says **in his coming Kingdom** it's not just the end-game of adultery, breaking a rule related to an apparently outdated concept called marriage, that's a problem - but actually God has an issue with even a lustful look, a lustful heart, that's not an easy pill to swallow. When he suggests that sort of transgression can see you thrown into hell, that's a major problem, right.

Because here's **a sobering fact**: half the UK's adult population watched online pornography in September 2020. Fully a half of adults. If that's not about lustful looks, lustful hearts, I don't know what is. And Jesus' standard is so much higher than just not watching porn. So according to Jesus our world has a big problem.

But if we were to pretend for a moment this is just a problem out there, we'd be totally kidding ourselves. The truth is this is a major problem for many a follower of Jesus too - probably for most of us. Last week in our quick poll, we broadly felt we could probably manage not to murder someone. Reassuring. Well, mostly.. 60% reassuring if I remember the poll results correctly. But when Jesus tells us the heart of murder is anger, it's a much bigger problem. So maybe adultery is no issue for you - or feels like no issue for you. But when Jesus tells us the heart of it is lust, **it's a much bigger problem.**

And when Jesus opens the door on adultery and shows us inside, tells us a man lusting after a married woman has already breached God's good design and committed adultery with the thought, in the heart - like he does here if we're being tight and specific with the words Jesus uses - we'd be a fool to just put those narrow limits around the kind of lust God hates.

We could pretend it's only and exactly that one case - only a problem around marriage, but we'd be doing that at precisely the moment Jesus is showing us such narrow interpretations are insufficient, as he's filling things out from adultery. It is any selfish wanting of another, any wanting outside of God's design, any wanting apart from faithfulness, that's the essence of this command. Wanting even in our heart, not just wanting that's acted out.

Jesus' Kingdom blueprint, Jesus' standard, is going to be a problem for many of us - for most of us. Just like it's a problem for the world around us.

Maybe you don't come from a Christian background, maybe this all seems crazy to you, anti-sex or just mega unnecessarily restrictive - **but if we're talking about Jesus' Kingdom, then it follows that he's the King - he gets to set the agenda, to make the law, to define how things are going to work. There's no place in his kingdom without accepting him as king. So we've got to wrestle with what the King puts on the table.**

But as much as what Jesus lays out here is a big problem, an extremely high standard - perhaps we can also see the potential, the beauty even, of **a Kingdom whose blueprint calls for such purity and faithfulness** - because that's what Jesus

is setting out here: purity and faithfulness.

- Do you wish you never needed to wonder about the fidelity of those around you? your partner, your parents, your friends
- Would you like to never face the heartbreak of watching a family torn apart as a couple separate?
- Imagine never having to doubt for your safety, or the safety of your daughter, walking across the city at night?
- When someone looks at you, would you like to never have to question what's going on in their mind?
- Do you wish not one single person would be trapped and exploited for others' pleasure - viewing or doing?

That's what this blueprint for purity and faithfulness will mean when it is fulfilled. That is Jesus' design for his coming Kingdom. And that's a good design, a beautiful design, a righteous design.

The problem is how we could ever get there.

First, we need to see that Law doesn't work: "you shall not commit adultery" the Law said. Fair enough, we said. Alright. But aha, it's not adultery if there's no marriage. So just need a divorce and problem's solved. That's why I think Jesus brings in divorce here in **verse 31 and 32** as he's talking about the heart of this commandment.

In essence what he's saying in these two verses is don't think you've kept the command against adultery if you're using divorce as a means to enable what would otherwise have been adultery - as a means to justify and gratify your lust.

Up to here, Jesus has quoted from the Jewish religious Law. Here, what's in quotes, what "has been said" doesn't come from that Law, it comes from the standard practice of his day instead, where divorce was the exclusive right of the husband, seemingly common, and pretty easy - though there were a range of views on how high the bar was to justify one.

If you've got one of these blue bibles, you'll see a tiny 'f', a footnote pointing to Deuteronomy 24 - but if you **turned there and read carefully**, you wouldn't find quite the same thing - it's not a direct quote. The Jewish religious Law *regulates* divorce - it says "if it happens, these are some boundaries, some protections" but it certainly doesn't command it - it doesn't even directly permit it, just acknowledges it as a reality in society. It doesn't clearly set out what grounds could warrant divorce - and Jesus is absolutely clear here that lust for another does not.

I think that helps us understand **verse 32**: if an illegitimate divorce to justify lust doesn't work, if all the paperwork might seem to be in order but it means nothing, then the apparently divorced couple are still effectively married. So it's still adultery for the man. And the divorced wife is the *victim* of his adultery. Which, by the way, is a hugely countercultural statement from Jesus affirming the value and rights of

women.

See, although it's unthinkable now, the culture of that day regarded wives as the possession of their husband. Adultery was seen primarily as a violation of that exclusive possession - so when Jesus describes the *wife* as a victim of adultery, he's overturning that picture, showing us both male and female in the marriage have rights and responsibilities.

**Reading that last phrase is difficult.** Two potential ways to understand it: first, it could be saying anyone who was to marry the *illegitimately divorced* woman would be committing adultery - because she's still effectively married; that illegitimate divorce doesn't work - but it's not a general statement. Second, it could be saying that a man who breaks someone else's marriage so he can have the woman is causing an illegitimate divorce, so really she's still married, and it's still adultery when he does, despite the paperwork. If that's the right way to read it, first Jesus talks about a married man divorcing his wife for another, then second he talks about a man driving someone else's wife to divorce so he could have her. So that would make sense too.

Either way, it's underlining the key thing these verses tell us: it is an illegitimate divorce if the divorce is intended to justify what would otherwise be adultery.

This is a big, complex and sensitive subject and I'm only touching on it - I'm very conscious this might bring big things to the surface for some. Like I said at the start, we live in a broken world and we're both victims and authors in that - Hope City is committed to being a community of grace and care whatever your story.

Jesus returns to this topic in a later chapter so we'll speak about it again - but if you have any questions or concerns in the mean time, the elders have tried to set out our position on this in our **public policies which you can find here**. You can see exactly what we think and how we got there from the Bible and I'd really encourage you to read that, to consider the bible's teaching on this carefully for yourself, and to come and talk to any of us in confidence - or to the pastoral support team.

Back to where we're focused today, though: I think Jesus touches on divorce here primarily because it's our sneaky way of trying to get around the letter of the Law. It's not adultery if there's no marriage, we think. That's our typical human evasion response when it comes to law. We look for ways around, limits, excuses. Like with tax rules. Or contracts. Or agreements. We're looking for the loophole, the way to get what we want anyway.

Law doesn't work - so when Jesus gives us a sharper, wider, clearer law, Mt 5:28

#### **Matthew 5:28 NIV**

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

is that going to be any different? The Pharisees, often Jesus' opponents, put laws around God's Law to keep from breaking it. Then laws around those laws around the Law. Do more fences change anything? Apparently not - most of the time it seems

they almost draw us towards the wrong like a moth to a flame. **"do not push this button"** - anyone feeling the urge.

But I don't think what Jesus is doing here is just giving us more laws, laws around the Law. He's showing us the heart of the law, remember - its good, wonderful righteous heart. It describes a pure people, pure in heart; a faithful people.

The problem isn't so much with the Law as it is with us. It's **not about the having the right rules to follow, but the right heart to follow with**. And we have to bear that in mind as we come to these extreme sounding instructions Jesus gives us next. I actually think they're designed to lead us to exactly the same conclusion.

If you were listening to Jesus, attracted to this Kingdom of purity, of faithfulness, you might imagine the two pictures he gives his listeners as practical, if extreme, **ways he intends you to pursue it**: if your eye's the problem, gouge it out and throw it away; if your hand's the problem, cut it off and throw it away. If I really want this, guess I'd better go get a knife and a spoon. Committed? absolutely. Aggressive? absolutely. Effective? well.. not necessarily.

Here's the thing: when the root problem is lust in here, even gouging out an eye isn't a fence high enough to keep us back. Gouge out your right eye, Jesus says - but if you did, if you lose the right eye... well you still have the left. Was the problem really that right eye? Is it really solved without it? Or even without two eyes for that matter? Would that really solve the problem?

We can't un-see the things we've seen. And anyway, we have an imagination that can start from just concepts and build more than the worst our eyes could ever see. I wonder really here if Jesus isn't leading his listeners to the conclusion that we need something even more fundamental, an act more radical, extreme and deep than gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand for the surpassing righteousness that his Kingdom demands.

Want this Kingdom of purity and faithfulness? Yep. But the problem is us - you and me - the problem's deep within us. How could we ever be part of a kingdom of purity and faithfulness when at heart we're neither? We'd just break it, destroy it. It takes a transformed heart. The route to purity, the only route to purity, is a transformed heart.

A transformed heart which hungers and thirsts for righteousness; a transformed heart wants this Kingdom; a transformed heart which belongs in this Kingdom. A transformed heart that's moved to follow this King. And this is exactly what God has promised to us: Ezk 36:26-27

#### **Ezekiel 36:26-27 NIV**

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

If you're not a follower of Jesus here today, but you like the sound of his Kingdom, I have to tell you there's no other way into it. If you like the sound of this new heart,

this is the gift the King stands ready to give. You only have to name him as your king to begin that journey and it can start today. Right now. This is the path he invites you to walk.

Maybe you've got rubble and ruins behind you. And the shame and failure that goes with them. Many of Jesus' followers in this room would say the same. Maybe you've got hurts that can't be mended, wounds you'll always carry. Some of the damage of life just doesn't come undone - whether we're its author or its victim. Still Jesus is calling you and inviting you into his Kingdom. His death covers everything that's behind; it's settled. His life lights the path ahead. His gift of a new heart will change your life forever.

Name him your king. Now is the time. If you want to take a step but you don't know how or what, speak to a friend who follows Jesus today. Speak to me. Don't let this just pass.

...

And what if you have named Jesus your king? What if you have called on his promise of a new heart, a new Spirit within? And what if you know the truth is that you're still far from pure in heart, far from faithful? At Hope City we talk about **faith as a journey**. The bridge from death to life through Jesus' cross at its heart, but a journey still on both sides. We're not the finished product. We haven't arrived yet.

But we need to hear Jesus when he says loud and clear that this is his plan for our life. And we need to believe that he has made that fundamental change to our being, our heart. That the Spirit himself is alive within us just as God promised.

And then we need to stand up and do something with that.

As we started into this chunk of Jesus teaching, we talked about this not just being a long list of stuff we can't do, intended to send us to God for help - which it is, by the way - but also stuff he actually wants us to do once we've been helped. Perhaps you need to hear that again this morning: Jesus intends for us not just to listen to what he has to say, not just to come to him for help, but to actually put it into practice too. **Mt 7:21**

#### **Matthew 7:21 NIV**

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

There is doing to be done here. And let's not kid ourselves, it's doing that we often don't: purity of heart is a mega problem. Lust is mega problem. Faithfulness is a mega problem.

Christian, have you failed here? Have you failed again and again so many times you've given up? Is it worse, still? Have you even been the author of other's brokenness? A transformed heart knows the King's grace for where we've failed - we're going to share bread and wine a little later in our gathering, fixing our eyes on the cross where Jesus dealt with that once and for all. There is true and total

forgiveness.

Perhaps you haven't failed here, at least not big-time, but you know you're in danger. Walking close to the edge, taking risks. On a downward trend. Either way, you can't go back and change the story you've lived so far. But as CS Lewis says **"you can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending."**

You have the necessary ingredients to choose now to begin again to walk the King's path. You are called to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ 2 Cor 10:5. You are called to put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust Col 3:5. And by the Spirit alive and at work within you, you can do this. Rom 8:13

So perhaps you need to take some extreme action - no gouging out eyes please, but maybe there is *something* you need to cut out of your life to help you walk the path of purity. Something your transformed heart is perhaps ready today to put on the altar. Is there a show you just shouldn't watch? A place you just shouldn't go? People you just shouldn't be around? Decide now to Start where you are and change the ending.

Perhaps you've started and failed so many times it just seems hopeless? Maybe the dramatic act for you would be bringing someone else in on your story. Sure it's hard to talk about this stuff, to confess where you struggle and fail. It would be a gutsy move - but not gouging an eye out gutsy. Having someone walk with you through this, pray with you, keep pace with you, check in with you as you go can be really powerful. This could change the game for you. If you don't know who you could walk with, reach out to our pastoral support team in confidence. Start where you are and change the ending.

Perhaps you're holding your ground - but you could use some peers to share notes and tactics with as you fight this battle. Why not pick one or two people and dare to open up to them on how this is really going for you? Or ask us to help you establish a very small group, find other people who are looking for something similar. Start where you are and change the ending.

A lot of heavy stuff this morning. We have some times for questions in a minute but first we're just going to sit with this for a bit and give ourselves the chance in the silence to stop, think, pray, plan.