

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 5:27–30

Heart Matters

1/7/2024

Let's turn to Matthew 5 today.

We are picking up where we left off in November - we are spending probably a couple of years walking through Matthew's gospel and zooming in on the sermon on the mount - the longest sermon in the Bible, delivered by Jesus Himself.

And back in the fall we said that in this sermon, Jesus is laying out for us the Christian way of life. To live as a Christian is very different than to live as a non-Christian. And if we obey this, as we should, together we will make the church into a true counter-culture, a place where the values are the values of the kingdom of heaven, where we will be a city on a hill that shines a light that can't be hidden, and where the ways of Jesus will be made evident in our community.

He said in this sermon that we are the salt of the world - we are distinct from the world, small in size compared to the world, but in our distinction and holiness, we can have a massive effect.

But if we aren't distinct, if we lose our saltiness, we don't do anyone any good.

So in this sermon Jesus lays out a high standard of holiness. He says,

Matthew 5:48 “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

And when we hear a command like that, there are two errors we can commit - there's a ditch on each side of the road.

On the one side, there is the ditch of legalism - where we think that if we perfectly obey the command, we will go to heaven, and if we fall short, we will not. So we, very insecurely and with lots of fear, strive to obey. And when we fall short, we are despondent, thinking God could never use me and I am doomed, I'm useless, I'm permanently marked, I could never hope for God's blessings, I can only expect His judgment or just a JV Christian life of mediocrity. Or, we do what many legalists do, which is we tie our conscience in knots by pretending we aren't guilty of breaking the law that we needed to keep to be ok. This gives rise to the double life and hypocrisy and all the secret corruptions that grow as a result. So if we do the wrong thing with this sermon, we can be legalists, and that's worse than having no religion at all.

On the other side, there is the ditch of antinomianism, or lawlessness, licentiousness. We hear the commands and we think, “Nobody is perfect - these are ideal commands and I'll never keep them, so I won't try, I'll just be glad Jesus died for me.” Which means that we don't develop in holiness and distinction from the world as Jesus calls us to. We blend right in with the world around us.

But neither of these alternatives is the right response.

On the one hand, it is true that we will fall short of obeying these commands. So we will pray, as Jesus said in this sermon, **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** We will trespass, and if we are at all self-aware, we will read this sermon and be aware of our need for forgiveness and a Savior and go running again to Jesus. He is our

righteousness, He is our holiness, and it is only clothed in the alien righteousness that He gave us that we could ever have confidence to approach our Father in prayer now or in the life to come. We will tie our consciences in knots if we pretend we don't have guilt here, and the first use of this sermon is to humble us and send us back to Jesus again and again.

But on the other hand, Jesus does expect people who believe in Him to obey His words. He doesn't expect perfect obedience, or we'd never have to ask for forgiveness. But He does expect true obedience.

Matthew 7:24–27 [24] “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

No, we won't be perfect. But that doesn't mean we give up trying to obey - Jesus spoke these words with the expectation that we would hear these words and do them.

So we read the sermon on the mount expecting to realize our need for Jesus all the more, to have humility and a willingness to admit that we've been wrong as a defining feature in our lives. AND we also expect to be shaped into people with different values and ethics and to, because we are truly obeying, be shaped into a true counter-culture.

So where we pick up in Matthew 5, Jesus says some things that are certainly counter-cultural in our day, and we will see that we need Jesus as we fall short of perfect obedience, but that true obedience will make us truly unique in our day, we will be really distinct people if we take this to heart.

Matthew 5:[27] “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. (ESV)

This is obviously a counter-cultural passage for a number of reasons.

One is it contains a view of lust and sex that doesn't land well in our culture. And two, it has a view of hell and judgment that is repugnant to our culture - a view that there is also confusion about in our church.

So let's start at verses 27 and 28, where Jesus takes God's ancient law about adultery and says that it applies to the heart.

Matthew 5:[27] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

Right in the ten commandments there was the good law from God that His people should be faithful to their marriage covenants by not committing adultery.

We'll talk more about the importance of marriage next week and the good thing that these laws were protecting.

But their understanding of adultery at the time was that if you are married and sleep with someone who is not your spouse, or if you're single and sleep with a married person, you're committing adultery.

But Jesus says that God isn't only concerned with the outward appearance. The command about adultery applies to the heart.

Matthew 5: 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.

The kind of covenant keeping he calls for is not only being faithful and pure outwardly, but inwardly. Jesus says, "If you're lusting, that's adultery too"

Lust? How can it be just as bad as outward adultery?

If adultery hits your marriage, you're not going to say lust is just as bad. You're going to say, "I wish we had caught this when it was lust and stopped it then."

Jesus is NOT saying lust is just as destructive as adultery - obviously full blown adultery does a lot more damage.

But Jesus is getting at a heart issue here: An adulterer is someone with lust in his or her heart that overflows.

If you have lust in your heart but it hasn't overflowed into adultery, is what is in you any better than what's in a person who commits adultery?

If I could use a gross metaphor to illustrate a gross sin here, the parents among us are probably all familiar with diaper blow-outs. Changing diapers is never fun, but occasionally something happens that causes it to be much, much worse - some force of evil somewhere causes an eruption, that makes changing the diapers and usually all the other clothes a much bigger event.

Now, what's in a diaper is gross. And it's basically the same stuff that blows out. In some situations it's contained, on some dark days it is not. It's far more destructive when it's not, but it's the same stuff.

And adultery is a gross and hideous thing. When it comes out and happens on the outside and not just in the heart it is far more destructive. But Jesus is pointing our attention to the reality that it's the same stuff when it's only in the heart.

God's commands are not just to be applied to the surface, but to the heart as well.

And when adultery is only in the heart in the form of lust: whether it's feeding fantasies of someone not your spouse, pornography, allowing your heart to linger on adulterous thoughts - that may all still be contained in the diaper of your mind. But it is the same stuff - it is sin.

Now again, this doesn't land well in our culture, and to believe this would make us counter-cultural people.

Dr. Carl Trueman, who is confirmed to be coming to Grace Road a year from now - I believe for our next men's conference and to preach on Sunday, wrote THE book on this called The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self.

In chapter 6, "Sigmund Freud, Civilization, and Sex," he speaks of the influence of Freud on the way we view what it is to be human. Freud was an atheist, so he thought morality had "no transcendent, objective foundation"¹

Freud saw the goal of life as our being happy, he equated true happiness with sexual satisfaction, and therefore made sexuality the most important part of being human.

Before Freud, we thought of sex as an activity. After Freud, we thought of it as an identity and central to what it is to be human. Trueman notes that even the education of children is "in some quarters preoccupied with the liberation of children's sexual instincts and the elimination of any religious influence whatsoever. Today's education as therapy exhibits these two pathologies: a liberation from traditional sexual codes and (given its role in maintaining traditional sexual codes) liberation from religion"².

¹ Carl Trueman, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self, (Crossway, 2020), page 212.

² Ibid. 223.

So we would be right to say that Christianity just doesn't fit the way modern people think about the self. It says we are wrong in the way we perceive something as core as what it means to be human.

Christians aren't just people who go to church. They are people who think about everything differently - who we are, what a human is, what the purpose of a human life is, morality, and related to all of that, what we think about sex.

We believe that sex is a good and God-given activity. But not central to what it is to be human, because Jesus, who is the most human guy there ever was, didn't have sex. And we think there is right and wrong when it comes to sex, and that that standard applies even to our minds.

And we are reaping the fruits as a society of not believing this.

The Washington Post called porn a public health crisis.

Nancy Pearcey in Love Thy Body writes,

"The viewer disconnects the woman's body from any interest in who she is as a person. Pornography tears apart what is meant to be integrated, treating the body as an object or instrument for one's own purposes."

And as a result of many children growing up immersed in it today, Pearcey writes that *"Time magazine reports, 'Many of them are simply unable to experience a sexual response with a real live woman. They are only able to respond to pornography. In fact, they prefer pornography.'⁴ In other words, they prefer not going to the trouble of dealing with a real person."*

And there is far more to say, but as we look at what's happening around us, we have to ask if all of this liberation has really liberated us.

And I can tell you this: everybody who works with people regularly in ministry sees porn as wildly destructive. To minds, to hearts, to marriages, to the way we perceive people, to the programming of young people for a certain way of thinking about sex. It brings so much damage and so much despair.

So God's commands are for our good. They may seem restrictive, just like the sign that says you can't swim at this beach because of the undertow can seem restrictive. But the warning and the command is for our good.

"His commands are not burdensome," 1 John 5:3. The God we trust for our salvation, the God we believe in when He tells us His son died so we could have life, is the God who gives these commands. And if God is that good to us in Jesus and in the cross, we can trust He is good to us when He gives these commands.

He's given us the good gift of sex as part a way of expressing unity and holding nothing back between a married husband and wife. It is a way of bodily expressing trust, and experiencing mutual enjoyment with a spouse. It is an expression of total trust, and works to further build that trust.

And when it is used outside of marriage, it builds distrust - you want this from me, but won't give yourself to me. When used wrongly in our minds it dehumanizes another and sees that other person as an object. So Jesus says to fight lust:

Matthew 5: [29] If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...

Now in telling us to pluck out an eye and cut off a hand Jesus isn't speaking literally. None of the original hearers of this, like his disciples, literally cut off hands or plucked out eyes - that would have been notable, but Matthew and

Mark (who both record this saying of Jesus) never say someone took this literally.

So we don't want to see any of you coming in with an eye patch and a hook for a hand next week. (Is that a pirate church?)

In fact, part of what he's getting at is that what causes you to lust mainly is not your eye and your hand. There's a heart issue - we need new hearts, hearts that have been renewed and see people as those who are made in God's image, not as objects.

But Jesus is saying that obedience can be costly. I've known people who quit jobs and lost career paths to keep themselves out of an environment where the temptation was too great, people who don't have smart phones because for them personally (not for all - this isn't a universal law), the temptation is too great. And they even get mocked sometimes for it - but they are fighting. Changing situations and phones isn't all there is to it, but that can be part of the battle for some, and it's better to lose what you have to lose to win this battle.

But notice that in this passage, Jesus doesn't mainly focus on the societal affects of unchecked lust, the marital strife it brings, or any of the other real and serious consequences I've talked about so far. He says something else:

Matthew 5:29 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.

He says, "fight lust so you don't go to hell."

That is strange - strange to us as Christians who believe we are saved not by the things we do, but by faith in what Jesus has done for us.

Titus 3:5 says, “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,”

We are not saved, or made righteous, or heaven-bound on the basis of our good works.

In other words, He is saying that if we make peace with sin, we are giving evidence that we have never been saved and received God's grace.

Jesus is saying that if you don't go after lust aggressively, you are giving evidence that you don't believe.

He is not saying you need perfection and constant victory. He is saying your pattern should be constant struggle. If there is no struggle, there is no real faith. And we can expect as Christians not perfect obedience - we all read this passage and recognize our need for God's mercy - but we can expect true obedience.

If a guy comes up to my house in a suit, tells me he is from the government and a truck tipped over and toxic gasses are headed toward my house, and that if we stay here overnight it will kill my family, if I believe him, I will act. I will say, “honey, pack some bags, let's get the kids in the van, let's get out of here.” I can't say, “I believe you” to the guy and then plop down and watch TV.

If Jesus comes and says, “Sin is toxic and fatal” and we say, “I believe in Jesus” but then make no effort to obey his word, our belief in Jesus just isn't real. So the authentication of our faith is at stake in our fight against lust.

I met with a guy many years ago who was in open adultery, and I told him his soul was at stake. His answer was that he knew he was converted because he meant it when he prayed the sinner's prayer.

The way you know you meant it when you first turned to Christ is you have an ongoing struggle to follow Christ.

We said already in the sermon on the Mount that people who believe, do. We saw this already in Matthew 5:22

Matthew 5:22 [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Notice this other dehumanizing sin - hating someone. The OT defines hatred like this:

Leviticus 19:17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him."

Treating someone as beneath you, as a fool and not a person, refusing them the dignity of even a conversation about their sin that is dividing you, is hatred.

And Jesus says that those who persist in hatred - dehumanizing another - are liable to hell.

Because those who know the forgiveness and redemption that is theirs in Christ can't treat others as unworthy of the same redemption. Those who believe, do.

In teaching us to pray in Matthew 6, Jesus will say we should all pray this way:

**Matthew 6:12–15 [12] and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
[13] And lead us not into temptation,**

but deliver us from evil.

[14] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Another dehumanizing sin - refusing to forgive - when persisted in, means that we will not be forgiven.

Which doesn't mean we earn God's forgiveness with our own. But it means that people who are forgiven are forgiving people. And if we don't forgive, it just shows we are not forgiven - we don't really believe the gospel.

I could go on pointing out this pattern, but throughout scripture, peace with our sin is evidence of ongoing war with God. Peace with lust here in Matthew is evidence of unbelief - it is evidence that we are still enemies of God and on the way, according to Jesus, to hell.

You really can't read the Gospels and say that Jesus didn't believe in hell. Jesus in this passage and in about a dozen others calls hell a reality. I

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus says this to his disciples:

Matthew 10: 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

He knows what kinds of deaths his disciples would die: crucified upside down like Peter, crucified on an X shaped cross like Andrew, drawn and quartered. And he says, "Don't fear that - that's nothing compared to hell."

Which is another reason we know that hell is eternal. If people are just annihilated in hell - extinguished, then he couldn't say that these deaths weren't as bad as hell. Being tortured is worse than being extinguished. But he said don't fear the torture, fear something worse.

So it's real, it's eternal, and its bad.

When God offers us His love and mercy as He does, and we reject it, he gives us what we want. (Romans 1 talks about God's wrath as the giving us over to what we want. And when you give us what we want and allow that to grow for all eternity as we live on, you have the wrath of God in hell.

One author wrote that "Hell is just a courtesy for those who insist they want no part of forgiveness."³

And the way it normally works is, we will go through our lives, hear the Gospel, and say, "I don't want Jesus" - either by ignoring him, or putting it off, or outright rejecting it.

God, meanwhile, without us realizing it's Him, showers us with blessings to show his goodness: the sunrise, the blue skies, the health of our family, anything good in our hearts, anything good we do, the fact that people are good to us, it is all given to us by Jesus. And was all paid for by the death of Jesus so that even giving those gifts could be just.

But we choose not to have Jesus. And then we die. But human life goes on forever.

And then God says to us, "You have chosen not to have me in your life. Well, your life goes on forever. So "have it your way."

And he gives them a God-free existence for all eternity. An existence where all the blessings that were purchased by God are gone – so now there is only pain, and agony, and thirst, and sorrow, and nobody doing any good for anyone, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. When God is removed from a life that goes on forever, it is only bad all the time.

³ Robert Capon, not an author I recommend in general.

C.S. Lewis said it well, "There are only two kinds of people – those who say, "Thy will be done" to God, or those to whom God in the end says, "Thy will be done."

Hell is the direction you chose projected into eternity.

Hell isn't only our reaping what we sow, it is divine wrath. It is active punishment from God, not just the natural consequences of our sin. But allowing our chosen paths to be projected into eternity and go on forever is the active wrath of God for what we've chosen.

And hell does begin here.

In "The Great Divorce," CS Lewis puts it like this:

"Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others...but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself, and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine...In each of us there is something growing which will BE HELL unless it is nipped in the bud."

And so our lust has within it the bud of hell that will grow into a full flower. The collapse of the family that we see around us and all of the societal implications, the pain and misery brought into marriages, the harm and abuse brought to others, is all a growing taste of hell.

So Christians are people who fight to nip it in the bud.

And Jesus says it is better to live with a fight against lust. Twice in this passage he says, "It's better..." "It's better..." What we gain is better than anything we lose in fighting lust.

But again, let's avoid the ditch of legalism.

If our only response to this is to say, "I must fight harder to eliminate this sin", we actually won't eliminate the sin.

We should fight this, but we should also recognize that we've sinned and fallen short. Our obedience has been far from perfect.

And so first we have to run to Jesus. Who was perfect. He was tempted but never sinned. At the heart level He perfectly obeyed God's commands.

And then was cut off on that cross. Like a hand that causes you to stumble, Jesus was cut off - but he never stumbled. Jesus was maimed and disfigured. But there was no sin in Him.

And that was for us.

And for us to truly to begin to get this sin, or any sin, out at the root, we have to start with a humble confession of our sin, a recognition of our need, and by receiving the free gift of forgiveness that His substitutionary death on the cross offers us.

So turn to Him by faith.

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we thank you for giving us design and purpose, and then for being gracious enough to speak and explain and guide. But we confess that often, in an attempt to be our own gods, we usurp your design and live according

to our feelings. We believe that what feels right is right, that we are our own, and that we define ourselves. So forgive us our arrogance.

Jesus, we thank you that as the True Son, you only always did the will of your Father. You obeyed in heart and deed. Though tempted, you didn't sin. And then endured punishment as if you were a son who had fallen, and did so in our place. Thank you for your mercy.

Spirit, keep convicting us. Keep moving us toward the Father - help us live for Him, and run to Him when we've fallen instead of away from him in shame or in arrogance. Remind us of the true depth of the redemption we have in Christ, our total forgiveness, that our shame and guilt are truly lifted, and let us live out that reality.

Assurance:

Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why do the scriptures contain so many warnings about adultery and lust?
- 2) Why does lust that remains in the heart (and never becomes full-blown adultery) matter to Jesus?
- 3) How are God's commands about these things are good for us?
- 4) What might some misuses of Jesus's commands in this passage be?
- 5) What strategies might we employ to fight lust?
- 6) What good thing are these commands protecting?