

"Look Out for Lust"
Matthew 5:27-30
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Back in 1976... Wow! I cannot believe I remember this; Jimmy Carter was running for president and the nominee of the Democratic party. A reporter asked Carter if he had ever had a sexual affair. In response, Carter admitted that he had "committed adultery in his heart." The negative reactions by many to that confession revealed a couple of things. One, 47 years ago we had a much higher standard for sexual conduct by politicians than we do today. Two, a lot of people didn't understand what Jimmy Carter meant when he used that phrase. Carter, a long time Baptist Sunday School teacher, was quoting from the text we are going to explore this morning. Matthew 5: 27-30.

As we do that, our topic will be sexual lust and sexual sin. For a number of reasons this is not an easy topic on which to preach. And for a variety of reasons, it may not be an easy sermon for you to hear. So, maybe we should just skip these verses and move on to the next passage.

Actually, I would love to do that, but won't for three reasons. Number one, it is my job to preach and teach God's word to you. That is a big part of what the congregation pays me to do, and more importantly it is what God has called me to do. The Bible addresses the topic of sex quite often. When we are going through the book of Matthew, as we have been doing for a few months, and come to a verse like this, it really is inappropriate to just skip them. When God speaks, we all need to listen, even if the topic is sex.

Number two, this is an important topic to address because many Christians struggle with lust. Years ago, Leadership Journal, a publication for pastors, printed an article entitled, "The Battler Within." The author's name was not given, but he was a Christian leader who traveled to various parts of the country speaking at churches and conferences. The article was about his struggle with lust. It recounted how even though he knew it was wrong, even though he would pray about it and even fast, he would end up watching pornographic movies whenever he was out of town. The editors of Leadership received more requests for reprints of that article than any other the ever published.

A Christian counselor told me about a couple, a Christian mom and dad, who were upset because their six-year-old son was sneaking downstairs after the parents were in bed and watching X-rated movies of the Playboy channel. The counselor was puzzled why a Christian couple would be subscribing to that channel.

Yet, pornography is very common in our society. According to a Barna study, 68% of men who identify as Christian, including 50% of pastors, view pornography on at least a monthly basis. Now, the percentages are less for those active in Bible believing, Evangelical churches, but not that much less. And while only about 10% of Christian women over 65 say they have ever been regular user of pornography, 50% of Christian women, age 18-35 admit they view pornography on a monthly basis. Wow! Those statistics might seem exaggerated, but if you Google it you will find a variety of studies have found similar numbers.

So, I think we should talk about lust, because it seems a lot of Christians struggles with it. And even if you have never glanced at pornography, you still live in a sex-saturated society. TV and the internet are full of images intended to incite lust. You can be watching a PG rated TV show, and the ads, whether for automobiles or toothpaste, will often try to use lust to sell their products. In this type of environment, we need encouragement if we are seeking to live a life characterized by sexual purity.

Number three, this is important too, because Christians don't just struggle with adultery of the heart or lust. People in churches like ours sometimes commit physical adultery. Surveys reveal that about 50% of teenagers who attend an evangelical church will be sexually active by the time they are 18. One study found 23% of evangelical pastors admit to having inappropriate sexual contact during their marriage. I know numerous pastors, including my brother, who are no longer in pastoral ministry because they were involved in sexual immorality.

But before you get too upset with pastors, the same study found that 45% of lay leaders in evangelical churches, deacons, Sunday School

teachers, etc., admit they have had inappropriate sexual contact sometime during their marriage. It seems many folks who are committed followers of Jesus end up falling into this type of sexual sin. And friends, though you may think that would never happen to you, it is probably good to hear the warning the Apostle Paul gives in **1 Corinthians 10:12 If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.**

So the reality is we as Christians fall into sexual sin with both our minds and bodies. Because of this, it is important to hear and heed what God say to us through His Word. Let's pause and pray the Lord would help us do that this morning.

Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. This passage is closely tied with the text we explored a couple week ago, where Jesus reminds us that those who hate and insult others are guilty of murder in their hearts. That is the sixth of the 10 commandments. Now Jesus turns to the seventh; You shall not commit adultery.

Once again, the problem with Pharisees, Jewish religious leaders, is that they are too narrow in their interpretation of this commandment. Oh, they recognize you can sin against a neighbor by coveting his wife, that is commandment number 10, but their warped view of women meant they viewed that more as desiring property that belonged to someone else. Jesus says, "Wrong." Lustful thoughts toward a woman whom is not your wife are a violation of her rights as a person made in the image of God. Those thoughts are also a violation of your marriage vows, and a misuse of the gift of sexuality God has given us.

As we focus on sexual sin this morning it is important to note that this is a misuse of a gift God has given us as human beings. The Bible is not against sex. Augustine was one of the greatest theologians in church history. But he really messed up the church and a lot of Christians with his teaching about sex. Augustine, because of his own struggles with sexual sin, said "it would be best that procreation, having babies, could be accomplished without sex, but if sex was necessary, it would be best if it was not pleasurable." Whoa! How tragically wrong!

God created us as sexual beings. The Song of Solomon is an Old Testament that has symbolic meaning, but it is also a celebration of the love, the sexual love, between a husband and wife. In 1 Corinthians 7, God, through the apostle Paul, commands a husband and wife to have a sexual relationship with each other. It is a good thing. The problem is that many people in both the first and 21st centuries, often worship sex. That is idolatry and is wrong and is dangerous to the soul.

The Biblical perspective is to be grateful for sex as a gift from God, who is the One we are to worship. I think a good analogy is that sex is like fire. In the proper context, such as a fireplace, fire is wonderful. But in the wrong context, fire can be very dangerous and destructive. In the right context, the marriage relationship, sex is wonderful. Outside of that context, however, it can be very dangerous and destructive.

Understanding God's purpose in creating us as sexual beings is an important topic, but one that is too big for us to tackle this morning. Let me just mention two things. The first commandment the Lord gave us as human beings was to "be fruitful and multiply." Contrary to Augustine, I am confident the Lord intends that be accomplished through sex, and God graciously intends that to be a pleasurable experience. Also, I would note that Ephesian 5 points to the sexual union as being an important part of the marriage relationship. And that text also says the marriage relationship points to one of the most important realities of all, the relationship the Lord Jesus has with us, His Church. There is a lot in that passage, and it clearly affirms that sex is a gift from God and is intended to be a good thing. We must not conclude that the Bible's condemnation of sexual immorality, including Jesus' warning about lust, somehow means the Bible is against sex, any more than a fireman who puts out fires, is against a fire in your backyard fire pit.

Okay, as we consider what Jesus says in our text, there are two things we need to understand. First, the prohibition against sexual sin, both lust and adultery, applies to all. It includes both men and women. Jesus' focus is certainly on men. For various reasons men struggle with sexual sin more than women do. Yet, women are certainly not immune, and as I mentioned, it seems that women struggle with lust more today than ever before. A

woman who looks lustfully at and desires a sexual relationship with a man who is not her husband is committing adultery in her heart.

Jesus' statement also applies to people who are not married. The Bible says a single person involved in a sexual relationship is committing the sin known as fornication. Though not marital unfaithfulness, it is still sexual sin. Thus, a single guy, who entertains lustful thoughts and desires a sexual relationship with a single gal, is guilty of sexual sin. And I will add, just to be clear, heterosexual and homosexual lust are both sinful.

Second, Jesus does not view lust and physical adultery as identical sins. Some have twisted Jesus' words to suggest that if you have lustful thoughts you are already guilty of sexual sin, so you might as well go ahead and commit the physical act. Wrong! If you wish someone were dead, it is certainly better that you not put that thought into action. And if you have lustful thoughts, it is best that you don't put those thoughts into action.

Jesus' point is that any disobedience to God's commands, whether in thought, word or deed, is a sin. All sins are equal in the sense that each one violates God's holiness. Yet, some sins are, I will say, more equal than others. Physical murder or physical adultery certainly have a more destructive impact on others than hateful or lustful thoughts. Jesus does not deny that at all. He simply points out that words, thoughts and attitudes can be sinful as well.

So, how are we to respond if we realize we have been guilty of committing adultery in our hearts? Number 1, we should seek God's gracious forgiveness. In this sermon on the Mount, Jesus intends to help us realize that keeping the Law of God is more challenging, more difficult, than the Pharisees, or many of us ever imagined.

Suppose I said, "If you have never committed physical adultery, please raise your hand." I suspect many hands would go up. And you would not be lying. Many of you are not guilty of that type of sin. But Jesus reveals that it is very likely that most, if not all of us, have violated the seventh commandment with our thoughts, and therefore are guilty of sexual sin. And sexual sin is something for which we need God's forgiveness.

Whether you had lustful thoughts about someone many years ago, or you had wrong thoughts this morning about someone in this room. You need God's forgiveness. Whether you bought a Playboy magazine back when you were in college, or you were watching pornography on your computer last night, you need God's forgiveness. Whether you and your spouse were sexually intimate before you got married, or whether you are involved in a sexual affair right now, you need God's forgiveness.

In the Bible, the first purpose of the law, whether in the Old Testament or in the law of love spelled out by Jesus, the first purpose is to reveal our sin and need for grace. When Jesus tells us that lustful thoughts are sinful, are adultery of the heart, it should become obvious, at least to most of us, that we are sinners in need of grace and forgiveness. And if that is the case for you, the good news is that you can experience that forgiveness today. If you are not a believer in Jesus, I urge you to turn to the Lord Jesus and simply put your faith, your trust in Him, and in what He has accomplished for you through His life, death and resurrection. If you are not sure what that means or if you have any questions just give me or one of our pastors a call.

Now, if you are a believer in Jesus, truly are, the good news is the Lord has already forgiven your sexual sins. That is amazing grace. However, these sins are not pleasing to God. When you realize you have been sinning, whether in thoughts or actions, you need to follow the instructions of **1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** That is a wonderful promise. And not only is the guilt gone, but so is the shame.

My friend, Betty (not her real name) was promiscuous when she was in college. She was at a Christian college, but sexual immorality happens at those places too. Fifteen years later I am talking to her. Betty tells me she has confessed those sins to the Lord, has been faithful in her marriage, and has avoided sexual immorality, for those 15 years. She is serving in the church in numerous ways but Betty still feels guilty and very ashamed for what she did when she was in college.

So read 1 John 1:7-9 and talked about how the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us, cleanses her from every sin. And then I read **Romans 8:1** **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** I say, Betty, Satan will condemn you, other people may condemn you, but God never will, and there is no need for you to condemn yourself. You do not need to feel guilty or ashamed and since the day we had that conversation, Betty has pretty much avoided condemning herself.

Friends, we all need to keep in mind that sexual sin is not the “unforgivable” sin. It is true that the consequences of these sins can sometimes be greater than others. That is part of what the apostle Paul means in **1 Corinthians 6:18** when he says, **The man who is guilty of sexual immorality sins against his own body.** However, God extends grace to any type and any number of sexual sins.

When Jesus was on earth He didn’t hesitate to interact with, hang with, prostitutes and other “immoral” people. The Pharisees, of course, thought this was disgusting. How could a so called “holy man” associate with people like that? But Jesus loved these folks. He wanted them to find grace, forgiveness and healing for their souls. So often these people had been abused and broken and Jesus wanted them to know that He could put their lives back together again.

That is most evident in the account involving the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John chapter 8. She, and whoever her partner was, are caught in the very act, apparently by religious leaders. These guys let the guilty man go, but are intent on executing this woman, stoning her because of her sexual sin. Jesus puts a halt to that by saying, **John 8:b “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”** When the hypocritical accusers all walked away, Jesus speaks these words to the grateful woman, **John 8:11b “Neither do I condemn you go, and from now on sin no more.”**

And that is the Lord’s message to all of us who have been forgiven for our sexual sin. Go and sin no more. Or as Paul puts in in 1 Corinthians 6 “Flee from sexual immorality.” Or in **1 Thessalonians 4:3** he writes **For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.** Indeed a significant

part of growing as a Christian, being a disciple, is striving, by God’s grace, to avoid sexual sin, either with our bodies or minds.

How do we do that? It is not easy, especially in our culture. Jesus gives us some advice that seems rather bizarre on the surface, but that is actually quite practical. **Matthew 5:29,30** **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.**

That sounds rather extreme, but I am confident Jesus did not intend that we take Him literally. He makes is clear in other texts that your eye or hand cannot cause you to sin. It is from the heart that evil thoughts and desires come. So, what does Jesus mean by these verses? Let me read John Stott’s paraphrase that I think is very helpful. *If your eye causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your eyes, objects, you see, then pluck out your eyes. That is, don’t look! Behave as if you had no eyes and were now blind and so could not see the object which previously caused you to sin.* If an ad for pornography comes up on your computer screen, behave as if you do not see it. Don’t even consider going there. Just click away, exit out.

I suspect an addiction or a struggle with pornography may be a big problem for some of you in this room. If that is the boat you are in, I encourage you to talk to one of the pastoral staff, Mark, Ron, Bryan, or myself. If you are a gal, struggling with pornography, Britney would be glad to talk with you. Actually, whatever the sexual sin is of which you are guilty, I would say the best thing to do is pray and ask God to help you overcome and avoid that sin, and then talk to one of us. We don’t have any magic wand to wave over you, but we will do our best to help. Talking to another good Christian friend may be a good idea as well, but we, as pastors, are committed to doing what we can to enable you to overcome that sin. I was going to say we get paid to do that, but really, we love to see people gaining freedom from sin in their lives.

Okay, we made it. I said what I think the Lord wanted me to say. And if you were listening you heard those words. In closing, to all you folks out there who are guilty of sexual sin in your thoughts or actions, I simply say, as Jesus did, “I don’t condemn you, go and sin no more.