

# ADULTERY AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

## MATTHEW 5:27-30

This morning we return to Matthew 5 to continue in the Sermon on the Mount. Let's read Matthew 5:27-30.

**Matthew 5:27-30 (ESV) – 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.

If you have children listening to this message, I want you give you fair warning that Jesus speaks about adultery and lust, and I will be addressing those issues clearly. Nothing will be explicit, but I leave it to parents to prepare to answer questions or perhaps distract your children if you feel they are too young for this topic.

We begin with the foundational statement of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:20:

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

How much does our righteousness have to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?

**Matthew 5:48 (ESV) – 48** You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The scribes and Pharisees followed a particular method of earning righteousness. They focused on the letter of the Law. They edited and amended the Law to make it doable. They minimized the holiness of God. They elevated the ability of man.

Their method was doomed to fail, because mankind is totally depraved. Total depravity doesn't mean that we are as sinful as we could be; this is not because we are good, but because God restrains our sin. Total depravity means that nothing that we do is holy before God, because nothing we do is free of the stain of sin.

## THE LETTER OF THE LAW

**Matthew 5:27 (ESV) – 27** “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’”

As we've seen already, the scribes and Pharisees focused on the letter of the Law, and created their own traditions above and beyond the Law of God. We see this in the phrase Jesus uses throughout Matthew 5: **You have heard that it was said.**

In this passage Jesus uses the example of adultery. In the Scriptures this word means sexual relations between two people who are not married, with at least one of them being marriage to another person. Another word, fornication, simply describes sexual relationship between two people who are not married to one another. Both men and women are described as adulterers and adulteresses.

The tradition of the scribes and Pharisees prohibited the physical act alone. Their tradition strongly focused on the woman, and tended to ignore the man. We see this in John 8 they dragged a woman before Jesus, and claimed to have caught her in the very act of adultery. No mention is made of the man at all. We also see it historically in the oral traditions of the rabbis were eventually written in a book called the Mishnah. The word “adultery” appears in the Mishnah 16 times; every time it refers to the woman alone.

**But Exodus 20:14 applies to men and women alike:**

**Exodus 20:14 (ESV) – 14** “You shall not commit adultery.”

**Leviticus 20:10 calls for punishment for men and women alike:**

**Leviticus 20:10 (ESV) – 10** “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.”

**Proverbs 6:32 speaks strongly about men who commit adultery:**

**Proverbs 6:32 (ESV) – 32** **He** who commits adultery lacks sense; **he** who does it destroys himself.

**TRANSITION:** It was clearly God’s intent that men and women alike are prohibited from committing adultery; both husbands and wives were required to protect the sanctity of marriage. But the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees only addressed the physical act; what does the spirit of the Law tell us?

## THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

**Matthew 5:28 (ESV) – 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 word translated “lustful intent” describes a very strong desire. It is also translated covet, desire, longing. Here is it clearly a strong, sinful, sexual longing for a person who is not your spouse. We can see that the spirit of the Law applies to everyone – **everyone who looks**.

Notice that the heart-adultery comes first: **has ALREADY committed adultery**. The lustful look does not lead to adultery in the heart; adultery in the heart leads to the lustful look. The desire arises, and then looks for an object with which to satisfy itself.

All of this takes place **in the heart**. It doesn't ever have to leave the heart.

### **James 1:13-15 describes the process for us:**

**James 1:13-15 (ESV) – 13** Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. **14** But each person is tempted when he is [FIRST] lured and enticed by his own desire. **15** [SECOND] Then desire when it has conceived [THIRD] gives birth to sin, and [FOURTH] sin when it is fully grown [FIFTH] brings forth death.

We are lured and enticed by our own desire. Desire conceives sin. Desire gives birth to sin. Sin grows to maturity. Sin brings forth death – **our death**. And all of this can happen in the heart. How can this be?

### **Jeremiah 17:9 says it's because of the heart itself:**

**Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV) – 9** The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

In 1991 I underwent cancer surgery, but the cancer didn't begin with the surgery. Before the surgery I was diagnosed, but the cancer didn't begin with the diagnosis. Before the diagnosis I found a lump, but the cancer didn't begin with the lump. Before the lump I felt a pain, but the cancer didn't begin with the pain. My cancer began when one of my own cells went rogue. It was in my body, growing, before I ever knew that it was there.

**TRANSITION:** By the time we become aware of lust in our hearts, it's too late; it's already there. This is why sin and lust are so deadly. They are not the result of something that we do, but the cause of what we do. In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus tells us just how deadly they are.

## THE DEADLINESS OF LUST

**Matthew 5:29-30 (ESV) – 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.

This is usually where pastors or teachers will give Five Ways To Avoid Lust, some practical suggestions for dealing with lust and sinful desire. That's like giving a seminar on "How Not To Have Cancer." We have a sin nature. That sin nature is going to covet. Sometimes that coveting involves sexual desire. Sinful sexual desire begins before there is an object of desire.

Still, some people want practical suggestions, so let's think about what Jesus tells us.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away ... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

Is it practical? Yes, absolutely. Anyone of us could reach up right now, dig a finger into an eye socket, drag the eye out, and tear it loose – please don't, by the way. Anyone of us could, with a sharp knife, cut off a hand. It's very practical, in the sense that we could actually do either of both of these actions.

But Jesus has already said that the problem is not the eye or the hand, but the heart. Your heart is not that first-sized muscle thumping away in your chest, but the core of who you are: your will, your affections, your intellect, your personhood, your entire self.

Notice that He says that we ought to **throw away** the offending part. That's because the offending part can't be fixed. When a cancerous lung is removed, they don't clean out the cancer and put it back. It can't be fixed. Your heart can't be fixed. This is why the New Covenant doesn't promise a restored heart, or a remodeled heart, or a refurbished heart, but a new heart. Jesus says **throw it away**, just as Colossians 3:5 says **put it to death**.

**TRANSITION:** How can you and I do what Jesus requires? How can we destroy our own sinful flesh, without destroying ourselves in the process? We can't. But God can, and that is the hope of the Gospel.

## THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL

The Gospel tells us that Jesus accomplished for us what we could never accomplish for ourselves. The holiness of God requires that our sin natures be put to death. You can't do that for yourself; I can't do that for myself.

But Jesus did it for all whom the Father gave Him. Jesus bore our sins in His own body. He satisfied the wrath of God toward sinners. He paid the debt we owed because of our sin. His blood removed the stain of our sin. His life within us invigorates us to holiness and righteousness. His Spirit within us empowers us to live increasingly Christ-like lives. All of this is by God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. Jesus broke the power of sin. As long as this mortal life endures we will bear the miserable weight of sin in our flesh, but when these physical bodies die, the presence of sin will be eradicated. When we are raised in the resurrection, we will be free of the presence of sin, the power of sin, and there will be no fear of the penalty of sin.

## WHAT IS OUR PROTECTION AGAINST LUST?

We can't eradicate lust in our hearts; that doesn't mean that we are to just give in to it. There is a passage in First Corinthians that summarizes how we are to live regarding sexual desire. Let's turn to First Corinthians 6:18.

### First, RUN!

First Corinthians 6:18-20 says,

**1 Corinthians 6:18-20 (ESV) – 18 Flee from sexual immorality.** Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. **19** Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, **20** for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Fleeing lust obviously will not prevent lust, but it does seek to rob it of its final outcome. As soon as we are aware that lust is rising in our hearts, we hate it, confess it, starve it, and run away from it and toward the Lord.

### Second, MARRY!

First Corinthians 7:2-5 says,

**1 Corinthians 7:2-5 (ESV) – 2** But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own **wife** and each woman her own **husband**. **3** The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. **4** For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. **5** Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer;

but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

It's not my purpose this morning to study these verses in detail. But they pretty much speak for themselves.

- We are to flee lust.
- If sexual desire is overwhelming, then we should be married.
- All sexual conduct outside of marriage is sin.
- Marriage itself is a sexual relationship, by God's design.
- There is no room in marriage for celibacy.
- Each spouse is obligated to meet the sexual needs of the other.
- It is sinful to deny one's spouse sexual intimacy, apart from a brief, mutually agreed upon time of prayer.

But let's be clear – fleeing lust and sexual intimacy in marriage are only temporary answers to the problem of lust within our hearts. Lust can and will arise time and time again even when we do flee it, even when there is an outlet for sexual intimacy. Our hope is in the promise of redemption, justification, forgiveness, sanctification, resurrection, and glorification, and that promise is only found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **BRINGING IT HOME**

Let's bring this home with a little review and then an exhortation.

Our problem is not that someone else is tempting us, but that our hearts are self-destructive; we are lured and enticed by our own desires. It might be possible to gouge out an eye or hack off a hand, but it isn't possible to tear out the presence of sin within our flesh without utterly destroying ourselves in the process.

The letter of the Law brings stronger rules and better habits, but they won't help; we need righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, righteousness which is perfect as God Himself. The spirit of the Law confirms our own total depravity; our ultimate problem is not the adulterous woman but our own adulterous heart.

God made man in His image for His glory. He created us male and female, intending that through the one flesh relationship of marriage His image would be fully expressed. Sexual immorality – whether it's the physical act of adultery, the putrid imaginations of lust, or the insistence on a celibate marriage – always involves a denial of that one flesh marital relationship, and denies God His rightful glory. It demeans the image of God in mankind, which is not simply individual, but marital. It demeans the wisdom of God, who created us by His wisdom. It demeans the kind intention of the will of God, who created us in a specific way to need and enjoy a specific sexual relationship.

Our hope is not in our ability or character, but in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is to the Gospel that I urge you to run. Confess every sin you see in your heart. Hate it. Loath it. Call upon the Lord to restrain it until He is pleased to remove it. And Christian, know that, before you even turn to Him, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Know that He has favored you because of His grace alone, not because of anything within you, or because of something you might become. Know that your sole response to the grace of God is faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith is God's gift to you. Know that God hates the sin in your flesh infinitely more than you do, and that He has designed all things so that at the moment of your death, your sin will be perfectly and complete eradicated. Know that in your resurrection and glorification sin will have no place in you.

Do you know the Savior? The Bible says that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved, so I urge you to call upon the name of Jesus Christ. Call upon His grace and mercy, and trust Him with all of your life. Turn away from your sin, and turn toward the Savior.