

# Matthew 5:27-30

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please take your seats and turn up Matthew 5, and we begin this evening at verse 27 for no other reason than it is the next section. As we go through, it follows where we were this morning, if you were with us. Let's pray as we come to God's Word. Our Father, we ask in these moments that you would speak and that we would listen, that we might be transformed more into the likeness of your Son.

We pray this in His name. Amen. Well, the tabloid media love to unearth a scandal. They love it when the scandal that they unearth is in the life of a public figure, and the bigger the profile, the more you can imagine the editor in his room just rubbing his hands or her hands. The bigger the scoop, the more it gets them going. We can imagine when the news about Hugh Edwards came out that there were people just rubbing their hands, or that salacious expose about Matt Hancock. Do you remember on the front of the Sun newspaper that awful image eighteen months, two years ago, whenever it was? And then because social media takes that information, that story, to the ends of the known world and does it immediately, the pressure then is on the individual, and it drives the whole story to a crescendo known as the public statement. And whatever disgraceful thing they've done, there's usually a sullen face and some platitudes that are really code for something like, this is really uncomfortable, and it's really unpleasant that I got caught. And then they'll often say something, but of course, this only involves their private life. There is, you see, as far as they're concerned, an area of life where they do the right thing and act in the right way, but there's also an area of their life where they set the rules.

And as far as the rest of us are concerned, that's none of our business. I'm not going to get into the details of all of that, and we could talk about that in other contexts, but as we saw this morning, that separation between the inner person, the inner private life, and the outside, the public, is not something that Jesus permits. As far as Jesus is concerned, He wants to make clear in the Sermon on the Mount that there is no such separation when it comes to the things of the kingdom of God. There isn't to be an outward self that keeps the rules and plays by the book, and an inner self that's our business, an inner self that we can do what we like, and that's not up to you. We aren't actors. Christians are not to be actors performing external obedience to God's commands while internally at the level of the heart, we're going our own way. We saw this morning how God cares about our inner life, and so Jesus is pressing the law, the letter and the Spirit of the law. He's pressing that into the corners of our hearts. He is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount a wholehearted, whole person, whole life righteousness that exceeds the performative religion of the scribes and the Pharisees. 5 verse 20, it's such an important verse in understanding this sermon. A righteousness that comes from the heart, a righteousness without which you cannot, Jesus says, enter the kingdom. Jesus is showing us what the intent of the Old Testament law was and always has been. It is that it is to address issues of the heart, and He's moving His point of attack from anger this morning to lust this evening, and He's making clear, as one ancient theologian said, it is not the fruit of adultery that He commands us to cast out, but it's seed. It's not the fruit, it is the seed. So, going to the heart of sexual sin, Jesus tells us, point number one, lust is really dangerous. Lust is really dangerous, verses 27 to 28.

[ 4 : 38 ] 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.

In the Old Testament, Exodus 20 verse 14, adultery was explicitly forbidden. And Leviticus 20 verse 10, the penalty was death. Adultery is the breaking of a marriage covenant, and the penalty for this is so severe in part because of the number of commandments that it breaks. Think about it for a moment. Taking another person's spouse involves at least, at least, theft, taking something that

doesn't belong to you.

And that theft started with coveting, desiring to have something, or in this case, someone that belongs to someone else. And you could definitely add lying all to that as well. It's always deceitful. It is a devastating sin. One theologian says, this is why adultery is so serious. It shatters people's lives, disrupts families, and despises God. It was therefore worthy of the death sentence. Such a sentence was intended to awaken God's people to the deadly nature of immorality. Jesus' hearers, as He preaches this sermon, would have known that adultery was serious. But by pressing it into the heart, as it were, pushing it back from the command back to the seed, not the fruit but the seed, He goes to the source of the problem and places lust on the same level. He makes the connection with the law's penalty explicit there in verses 29 and 30. If you leave this sin unaddressed, you will be, it's stark, He says, you will be thrown into hell. When you click or scroll or ogle or fantasize, this is the fire that you're playing with.

Now, as we saw this morning, the relationship between anger and murder, Jesus is not saying that lustful thoughts, the issue in view here is really specific. It is a married man looking at objectifying a woman other than his wife with sexual intent. He's not saying that doing that and actually the physical act of adultery are exactly the same thing. All sins, as I said this morning, are not equally serious in that sense. But again, He's saying that they share the same DNA because they both flow from a heart that takes what doesn't belong to it. And it does it for its own pleasure.

Because of this, it's obvious that Jesus is speaking to more than just married men. This applies to all of us. And let's be honest, has there ever been a time when this warning has been more relevant?

[ 7 : 38 ] Well, there might have been. But what I'm trying to say is, it's very relevant to us today. The desire for illicit sex has always been around, as has the objectification of the opposite sex. But lust and its associated behaviors has probably never been as positively encouraged and accepted as it is in our culture today. Hugh Hefner's Playboy was the catalyst in the 60s and 70s that paved the way for nudity to become more mainstream. We have the adverts on the billboards we have today in shopping centers, on the sides of buses. Everywhere you look, we have adverts that are there partly because of Hefner's influence.

But more devastating, I think, is the way that the pornography that he championed has become normalized. The objectification, the degradation, and dehumanization that porn involves, and that, let's not pretend, that is exactly what it does. That has become normal, and in some cases, almost respectable in some corners of our culture.

I have non-Christian friends who talk about it very openly like it's just a normal thing, like it's okay. It's just part of life. And this normalization in the culture, as always happens, as it is out there, it's inevitable that it will bleed into the church as well. It is becoming a growing problem for professing Christians. And I want to say, it's not just men.

In a blog entitled, quote, Women Use Porn Too, Rebecca Hanna, I don't know who she is, but this was her blog post, she talks about how widespread the problem is. She says, the moment a pastor addresses only men on a Sunday morning to confront their porn problem, he is unintentionally leaving women in the dark with their sin. I've counseled women with varying degrees of damage from sexual sin, and now, thanks to the cultural normalization of pornography and the availability of Wi-Fi and smartphones, statistics of porn users have not only soared, they've left no age group, demographic, or gender unharmed. Lust is at the root of so much that devastates marriages, families, churches, and society at large. The most devastating thing about it is that it might lead you to hell.

So as with anger, we have got to take it seriously. Don't be deceived by its promises. Don't believe the lie that it holds out to you. A moment's gratification can lead to a lifetime of torment.

[ 10 : 42 ] Okay, but this is the world we live in. It's a pornified world where our lusts are being constantly played upon, where apps like Tinder promise us no frills, thrills, and where the prevailing cultural narrative is telling us that we have the right to do whatever our desires need. So all of this makes getting lust under control an almost impossibly difficult task. It's like a perfect storm for the man or woman who wants to be, Sermon on the Mount, pure in heart, which is why Jesus then says what He does.

Verse 29 to 32, righteousness requires radical action. Jesus doesn't just tell us about the dangers. He follows up by telling us what we need to do in response. And again, He doesn't mess about.

Verse 29, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it's better for you to

lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 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 your whole body go into hell. These are vivid images to illustrate what is required in order to pursue righteousness. In short, Jesus is saying, do whatever it takes, whatever it takes to avoid judgment.

I want to highlight two clear principles here. First is this. He's saying, what He's saying here is, act at the actual point of sin. Act at the actual point of sin. When Jesus speaks of the right eye and the right hand, I don't think it's arbitrary. He's being very specific. And I think what He's trying to do is tie it to the point at which the sin is occurring. It is the point at which we are to address the sin that we struggle with.

See, when we are ensnared by a specific sin, particularly one that is pleasurable at the time, and most sins are like that. They promise joy and pleasure, and there is this momentary fleeting pleasure. Hebrew says that...I'll not go there, but the point is that it is attractive to us because it's pleasurable for a moment. When that's the case, we really don't want to give it up, and yet we feel guilty. We don't want to give it up, but we feel guilty, and so we try and make allowances for it. And those allowances might mean by being extra holy in other areas. So, we read our Bible more, and we pray more, and we're really fervent, and we give money to the church, and we live, as it were, a holy life in other areas. Or we're extra repentant when it comes to other sins. We're very open with other people about the fact that we've struggled with this particular sin, and we're really contrite about it and really repentant.

[13:47] We're not allowed to kid ourselves here. Confessing your anger or your laziness or your greed won't do the job. Whatever it is that is opening the door to draw the lust out of your heart, cut it out.

Act at the actual point of sin. Second principle, act decisively and immediately. Tear it out and throw it away. Doesn't leave much room for maneuver, does it? Tear it out and throw it away. Doesn't leave much room for maneuver. He's saying, do it now and do whatever it takes as soon as possible. It is painful to remove a limb. There is blood, and there is sweat, and there is probably tears as well. People who lose limbs in accidents often speak of withdrawal symptoms following the amputation. What Jesus is saying here sounds unbearable, but the drastic nature of the response is simply the gauge of the seriousness of the sin.

So, let's try and be practical here. What would it look like to act decisively and immediately in this area? Well, social media is the doorway. Delete it. Get a dumb phone. Don't have internet in your house. If you're on the tube and you can't take your eyes off the person on the other side of the carriage, get off the train at the next stop and wait for another train. Oh, but I might be late for work. Well, that's better. If you really fancy a work colleague and there's no way to avoid them, quit your job. If you're in a relationship and you can't keep your hands off each other, split up or get married as soon as you possibly can. It matters way more that you honor the Lord than whatever the reason you might give as to why you can't. Say, well, this is all really inconvenient.

It's not as inconvenient as a broken marriage. It's not. And I don't wish to sound flippant, but it's not as inconvenient as the judgment of God. Cut it off and throw it away requires us to sacrifice our comfort, our personal pleasure to put ourselves out for the sake of obedience.

Why? Why in this cultural moment where the pursuit of instant pleasure is pushed all the time, that message bombards us from the minute we open our eyes in the morning.

[16:31] why would anyone choose to inconvenience themselves? Because it might just save your soul. Righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees' righteousness is righteousness that goes to the heart, and it is really demanding.

You're inevitably tempted to think that you can't do what Jesus is calling you to do here. I know some of you are probably thinking this radical approach to purity just isn't realistic. If you act decisively, you think you'll be ruined. It'll mean that you'll have to bring the issue that you've been keeping hidden out into the open, and you'll be humiliated, and you'll never get back from that. Well, it may well be costly, but that is the cost of obedience. And to stay where you are, to stay put, to stay in the dark, as it were, is to believe the lie that you'll be better off in the darkness. And that lie is a lie. It's never true. It is never better to stay in the darkness than to come into the light. Jesus Christ died and rose again so that you could come into the light, and you could be free. I spoke to someone a number of years ago who had been ensnared in this kind of sin for a while. He got found out, and as a result, he lost his marriage and his reputation, and he had to leave his church. But he

said to me that being forced to admit it, being forced to confess, being forced to repent, to come into the light, was the most painful thing that he's ever done, and yet it brought a sense of freedom that he hadn't felt for years.

So gouge out your eye. Make the painful call now and save your life. It is always better, always better to limp in obedience than to walk or to run in sin, always.

Always. Jesus is calling those who will follow him to a purity of heart that requires us to set aside our own desires for the sake of what is right. This is also what lies behind the teaching on divorce that follows. 31, it was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. 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.

Again, back in Deuteronomy 24, Moses talked about certificates of divorce, and the scribes and Pharisees had adapted this teaching, and Jesus wants them to think again about what was being said there.

[ 19 : 24 ] What was happening was these religious leaders were allowing divorce for various trivial reasons. Divorce on demand. You might call it no-fault divorce. They were permitting that. And this kind of approach was putting women in difficult situations. Did you see how a man divorcing his wife causes her to commit adultery, Jesus says? Do you see that? This is because it would be almost impossible for a formerly married woman in first-century Judaism to survive economically and socially without being married, and thus the assumption is that they would remarry and therefore sin. Now, we say questions of divorce and remarriage are always difficult. Every situation has layers of complexity, and even where sin is clear and admitted, the outworking is never simple, and it's always painful.

Because I said this morning, there is much more to say on that issue than these verses cover. But the situation here is not complicated. It involves men who want to give up their wives because they desire because they lust after. They want someone else.

Sinclair Ferguson, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, says, According to some of the scribes, a man could divorce his wife if he grew cool towards her or if he didn't like her cooking. A law that was clearly intended to safeguard the women in Israel was turned into an escape clause for self-indulgent men.

That's why I've taken these two sections together. Jesus' point is that you can't just walk out of your marriage because you desire a change. You'll cause the wife that you leave to become an adulterer, and verse 32, you'll join her in that sin with whoever you move on to.

That other woman might be awesome. That other guy may get you like your boring and difficult husband never did. Both those things might be actually true.

[ 21 : 26 ] But marriage is a covenant, so it doesn't matter. And righteousness demands putting what you desire behind obedience to Christ every time. These are the radical demands of the kingdom.

But we mustn't, mustn't, mustn't lose sight of the fact that in embracing the self-sacrifice that He's calling us to here, we are simply following the path that Jesus Himself walked.

And that isn't to say that we simply look to His example and try and copy it. It isn't to say that His unswerving commitment to obey the law of God, His steely commitment to embrace the suffering of the cross, we look at that and we try and copy Him.

No, it is to say, though, that when we look to Christ, when we look to Christ and His death and His resurrection, the empty cross and the empty tomb that stand over the Christian life, they speak to us of a mighty victory over every sin and every temptation.

And Jesus has done this in our place, on our account. And when we turn in faith to Him, when we confess that sin and come into the light, He gives us His Holy Spirit to enable us to embrace the high demands of obedience that He is calling us to as citizens of His kingdom.

[ 22 : 54 ] We do not struggle through this on our own. His power is at work through us to bring the righteousness that He demands.

So, if you're married, resolve to stay that way. If these are good days for you in your marriage, settle it now that nothing will breach your marriage vows.

So that when temptation or tough times do come, you don't entertain ideas of giving up and wandering away. If these are hard days and things have grown cool between you, there's someone who has caught your eye, confess this now.

Confess it to a brother or a sister. Act decisively to gouge out that offending eye, whatever that requires. Speak to one of the elders here, and they will do whatever they can to help you. Look, at the cross, Jesus paid for every sin, every single one.

So, whatever you may have done, including adultery and divorce, there is forgiveness in Christ. There is grace in Christ. And that means that there is redemption and healing through repentance. [ 24 : 09 ] And whatever, however this word lands with you this evening, wherever it meets you in your circumstances, I want you to hear that. There is forgiveness and grace for every repentant sinner.

And it isn't too late to turn back from your sin and to trust Christ and to receive that forgiveness and that restoration. And if any of you are getting tangled up with someone who's married, it doesn't matter that he doesn't love her anymore or whatever the story that we've begun to convince ourselves of.

It doesn't matter one bit that, well, they're separated. It's an inevitability. No, get out. It may be that you're like Joseph with Potiphar's wife and you're being pursued.

It may be that you're the one encouraging it all. I don't know. It doesn't matter. Delete their number. Delete their social media. Delete them in every way possible that's legal. It is better, Sinclair Ferguson says, to lose a moment, a week, a month, a year of stolen pleasure than to lose all. Self, wife, family, grace, and finally be cast into hell for despising the word of the Lord. Remember how the Sermon on the Mount began, pointing us to the life of flourishing, of fullness.

[ 25 : 31 ] The life of purity is the life of flourishing. That's what Jesus is saying. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, is the good life.

Let's pray.