

Jesus on the Law

PART 3: ADULTERY VS. LUST • MATTHEW 5:27-30

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Madison, Wisconsin
July 25, 2021



It is good to be together today! As usual, I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then John/Noah will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss [for class].

As we begin today, we want to make sure we clearly communicate God's plan of salvation. We know that we sinned; that's the bad news. The good news is, God could see this coming, and he sent his only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus lived a perfect life, he was crucified, he was buried, but he was also raised up on the third day. We respond to this good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family, and the Christian life begins.

And once again, we have some good news this morning! This one comes to us from the Torch Hill congregation near Columbus, Georgia, and they want us to know that Will was baptized into Christ last Saturday. So, we rejoice with Will and the Torch Hill congregation this week. And we share this by way of encouragement: What Will did about a week ago, you can do today. Pull me aside after worship, give me or one of our other shepherds a call or text during the week, and we would be more than happy to study together.

Several weeks ago, we started to look at what Jesus has to say about the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. We looked at whether the Law was completely "obsolete" in every way, and we learned from Jesus (in Matthew 5:17-20) that he came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. As Scripture, we learned that it will always be with us), and there is a sense in which the Law must be kept and taught (obviously, interpreted properly, in light of the New Covenant), and we also learned that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

We then started looking at a series of statements, ***"You have heard that it was said...but I say to you."*** And the first example Jesus gives is God's command against murder. Apparently, some of the religious leaders were thinking that you could do whatever you wanted to do to another person, as long as it came just short of actual murder. Jesus, though, raises the bar, and he has some rather strong warnings, not only against murder, but also against anger and calling people names.

This morning, we continue with the next example, and the passage we'll be looking at today is Matthew 5:27-30. And once again, Jesus will quote from the Law, he will clarify the Old as he introduces the New (as he raises the bar), and then he will apply what he has said; this time, rather graphically.

So, with this as background, let's look at what Jesus has to say in Matthew 5:27-30

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 lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

As we learn from what Jesus says here, I want us to look at what Jesus says they had HEARD, I want us to pay special attention to what JESUS has to say, and then I want us to learn something from how he ILLUSTRATES this.

I. We start, then, with what these people had HEARD about the Law.

And once again, what they had "**heard**" was accurate, "**You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.'**" This is the seventh commandment, one of the "Big Ten." And the word Jesus uses here refers to sexual relations between two people who are not married to each other, with at least one of them being married to somebody else. According to the Law, the penalty was death. In the Law, both men and women are described as committing the sin of adultery; however, oral tradition (passed down by people like the Pharisees) strongly focused on the woman and usually ignored the man's role in this sin. In the time of Jesus, for example, we think about the Pharisees coming to Jesus (in John 8) and wanting to know what they should do with this woman "**caught in adultery, in the very act.**" All kinds of questions come to mind: How did these men catch this woman "**in the very act**"? And also: If they caught the woman, how were they not able to catch the man? And so, that whole situation is messed up, to say the least. But yes, the Law said, "**You shall not commit adultery.**"

And the Law itself, was good. It was there for a reason. Going back to Genesis, we find that God created us with a strong desire to be intimate with another person, but along with the desire, he also gave us some guidance, some rules. We might compare it to driving a car. Driving a car is an awesome privilege, but with privilege comes responsibility. And so, we have speed limits, we have a minimum age, there's a test and a license involved, we have rules as to what side of the road we can drive on, we have laws concerning who goes first when we get to an intersection. In the same way, God made us the way we are, but with great power comes great responsibility, and so the Law says, "**You shall not commit adultery.**"

Unfortunately, by the time Jesus shows up, the Law was being applied unfairly – women were being brought up on charges, the men were allowed to get away with it, while other men (religious leaders) were apparently peeping in bedroom windows, watching the adultery with their own eyes. They are okay with this, but Jesus is not...

II. **...and this brings us to what Jesus says in verse 28: The Law says, “You shall not commit adultery,” BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT EVERYONE WHO LOOKS AT A WOMAN WITH LUST FOR HER HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY WITH HER IN HIS HEART.**

The problem here, is a *“lustful look,”* as some translations put it. The ESV refers to *“lustful intent.”* One translation refers to *“leering,”* and so it’s the idea of “staring” or “continuing to look.” So, it’s not just a passing glance and noticing somebody is good-looking, but it’s the idea of “locking on” and taking it in, “coveting,” we might say. In fact, as I understand it, when scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek roughly 250 years before Christ (in the translation known as the Septuagint, the translation Jesus used), when they got to the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17, they used the exact same word for *“covet”* as Jesus uses here (the word we translate as *“lust”*). We might refer to this, then, as a “coveting stare,” the “I really, really wish I had that” kind of stare. And I say “that” (instead of “her”) for a reason: It’s the kind of look that treats someone not as a person (made in the image of God), but as an object. It’s the idea of using this person in our mind, looking with the idea of wanting to have them or possess them, very selfishly using some other person to meet our needs. This is one of the very real dangers of pornography, we start to see people not as people but as things, forgetting that this image on the screen is actually a human being, somebody’s daughter, somebody’s son, made in the image of God.

Beyond just the definition of the word, I should also point out that it is not necessarily a sin to notice that another person is good looking! And I say this for several reasons. First of all, a temptation is not necessarily a sin. We can be tempted, and we can turn away from the temptation without actually sinning. If we weren’t attracted, it wouldn’t be a temptation. The sin, here, is in the heart. Notice the order here, *“...but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* We might think it starts with the look, but it doesn’t. Jesus actually says that the adultery in the heart comes first. It is this adulterous heart that commits the sin of the *“lustful look.”* It’s not the look that results in heart adultery, but it’s the heart adultery that leads to the “stare.” Besides, Hebrews tells us that Jesus (as our high priest), *“...has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”* Was Jesus tempted in this way? Hebrews says that he was. Did he sin? No, he did not. It is possible, then, to notice without sinning, to notice without the *“look.”*

There’s another reason why it’s not necessarily a sin to notice that another person is good looking, and that is, the Bible describes certain people as being good looking! Sarah and Rebekah are both described as being *“beautiful.”* In Genesis 39:6, we are told that *“...Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.”* We have something similar about Absalom in 2 Samuel 14:25, *“Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him.”* Scripture specifically mentions that certain people are good looking. It must not be a sin to notice this. And yet, when we notice that another human being is good looking, instead of staring, how about this: In our own minds, we say, “Thank you God for this person,” we look away, and we move along. The alternative is that we 1.) Deny reality, or 2.) Walk around with our eyes squinted shut to the point where everything is so blurry that we can’t even recognize people as being people, or 3.) We immediately cover our eyes and run away screaming, but that gets rather awkward for everybody. So again, “Thank you, Lord, for making this person in your image,” and we move along.

There’s another reason why it’s not necessarily a sin to notice that another person is good looking, and it goes back to the command not to covet (as I referred to just a bit ago). Back in Exodus 20:17, God said, *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”* Think about some of the examples

here: I can notice that my neighbor has a nice house, and a nice yard, and a nice vegetable garden out back without actually “coveting” those things. They have some good-looking zucchini out back, but I will never have some evil desire to sneak over and steal my neighbor’s zucchini. We have to say that the same is true of his wife.

The problem is when we have an adulterous heart, then we notice (that may be the temptation for us), and then we continue that look in an inappropriate way (this is the sin). And by the way, as Jesus explains here, the “look” is sin regardless of whether it leads to the actual act of adultery. We cannot say, “I can look as much as I want as long as I don’t commit the actual act.” This is perhaps what the Pharisees were doing. This is the problem.

If you are wondering where the line is, I would suggest asking yourself next time (if you catch yourself looking or admiring), ask yourself: What I did right there, if that was not a **“lustful look,”** then what was it? Often, that can be an eye-opening question, and hopefully we can answer it with an honest heart.

Before we get to the Lord’s application, I want us to notice an example of this **“lustful look”** gone wrong. Think for just a moment about David and Bathsheba. In 2 Samuel 11:2-5, the Bible says,

² Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. ³ So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” ⁴ David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house.

What happened here? David **“saw a woman bathing.”** Seeing this was not necessarily a sin (it might have been if he had been up there for the purpose of looking, but we aren’t told this). What we do know is that when David sees, he acts on what he sees. He has his people figure out who she is, and then he sends messengers to bring her back to the palace, where he gets her pregnant. We could talk about this all day, but one thing I notice in all of this is that as far as I can tell, Bathsheba is never condemned for bathing; Bathsheba is never condemned for being lust-worthy. I’ve heard people say that Bathsheba should have covered up, Bathsheba should have had better curtains, Bathsheba shouldn’t have been such a temptress. No, the problem here is that King David gives in to temptation. He could have looked away, and this could have been the end of it, but this was not the end of it. As most of us know from personal experience, the real struggle is in the heart. David’s struggle is our struggle.

And it is a real struggle, especially today. We are surrounded by temptation. In fact, the world seems to be pushing this on us. It is a constant struggle. As long as we live in this world, we cannot completely avoid temptation, so as God’s people, we need to keep on struggling. We don’t give in to it, but we keep on doing the best we can to push back, to keep our hearts pure...

III. **...and this leads us to what is basically the SO WHAT? section, this is where Jesus comes out and tells us what this really means, and his conclusion is that we (as his disciples) need to do WHATEVER IT TAKES.**

And the example he gives here is rather extreme, isn’t it? I would just start by having us notice what’s at stake here. The danger of the lingering look is that we are in danger of being **“thrown into hell.”** We mentioned **“hell”**

last week, and we noted that “gentle, loving” Jesus says more about hell than just about anybody else in the Bible, and much of it is right here in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most famous sermons ever preached. And the word he uses is a reference to Gehenna, that always-burning garbage dump on the southwest side of Jerusalem. So, this is what’s at stake here. And with this in mind, we have a choice to make, don’t we?

It’s a bit like those salamanders that give up their tails as a defense mechanism. If you grab them by the tail, they just leave it behind. It’s not worth it! Their tail gets caught by a predator, it’s not even a choice – the tail is gone. Or we might think of the hiker who got his arm caught under a boulder in a slot canyon out in Utah a number of years ago, out in the middle of nowhere, and nobody knew where he was going. With no hope of rescue, after several days, he broke the bones in his own arm, used a shoelace as a tourniquet, and cut off his own arm with a pocketknife before hiking back to civilization. What a choice to make! I can die here, or I can do something almost impossible to even imagine. But isn’t that what Jesus is suggesting here? We have a choice to make: When it comes to the heart, we can do what comes naturally and be thrown into hell, or we can follow Jesus here and we can do whatever it takes to keep ourselves pure. And it is a tough choice.

The obvious question many will ask at this point is: Is Jesus being literal here? Maybe we could try to imagine this. We have a guy who struggles, so he reaches up and gouges his own eye out. He’s still struggling, so he uses his left hand to chop his right hand off. But now he realizes that he still has a problem in this area, so he uses his left hand to gouge out his left eye. He is still sending inappropriate messages on his phone, so now he needs help getting rid of his left hand. Or maybe he has trouble lying, so he cuts his tongue out. He’s tempted by what he hears, so he cuts his ears off. And before long, all that’s left is a bloody torso. We might think of the Black Knight in Monty Python, “...’tis but a scratch.” But even without arms, and legs, and eyes, I’m guessing we might still have a heart problem, because it’s not really the eye that’s causing us to sin. Jesus, then, is not suggesting that we have saws and tongs available for those who would like to solve their lust problem, but he’s making the point: Do whatever it takes! If that means whacking cable TV, if it means getting rid of a smart phone and going with a flip phone, if it means quitting a job or taking a new route to work, if it means not seeing this movie, if it means avoiding the beach or not watching the Olympics, if it means breaking up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend, whatever it takes. Yes, it would be hard to live without a smartphone, it would be hard to sell your house and move, or whatever, but Jesus seems to be suggesting here that it beats the alternative.

In fact, Jesus seems to be saying here what Paul would go on to say later in Colossians 3:5-6 when he said, ***“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.”*** If necessary, we take extreme measures. This doesn’t mean we will always win, but the Lord is calling us to struggle. As soon as we sense this temptation rising up in our hearts, we hate it, we confess it, we turn away from it, and we turn our hearts back to the Lord, knowing that our souls are at stake.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I’d like to give two brief reminders...

1. ...and the first is a suggestion that whenever we look at people, we see souls. Instead of focusing on the outward appearance, we think of this person as a human being, made in the image of God. I’m thinking of that passage in Luke 7, where the sinful woman washes Jesus’ feet with her tears before wiping his feet with her hair. Simon the Pharisee was disgusted that Jesus would allow this woman, a sinner, to touch him like that. Jesus, though responds and he says, ***“Do you see this woman?”*** Of course, he sees

the woman! But that's not really what Jesus is asking. Jesus is trying to get Simon to see the woman, not as an object, not as a *"sinner,"* but as a soul. That's the way Jesus was looking at that woman. It's the way all of us need to be looking at each other. And it seems this is a good reminder for us. When we are tempted by what we see, let's remember: We are looking at a soul, made in the image of God.

2. The second reminder here at the end is that God forgives. And I know, it is easy to forget this, but all sin can be forgiven, if we will turn to God and repent, if we will do what God has commanded us to do. After all, this is why Jesus is preaching this sermon! From the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus' message was, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"*** (Matthew 4:17). The good news of the kingdom is that God forgives. Repentance might be difficult, but forgiveness is available.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for the warning you have given to us this morning. We pray that we would always take sin seriously. We confess that we fail to live up to your perfect example, and we ask for your forgiveness. We pray that we would always have the courage to do whatever it takes to keep our hearts pure, and we ask for your grace and mercy when we fall short.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com