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Sermon Summary #26

Be Killing Sin or Sin will be Killing You Mark 9:42-50

Introduction: Dealing with the difficulty of our Lord's words . . .

Jesus isn't saying that you must be entirely free from sin to enter heaven. No one ever is. Jesus is saying that you must be **committed to fighting** sin. Jesus is not saying that you or anyone in this life will ever reach perfection or always succeed in resisting temptation. What he is saying is *that if our faith is a saving faith, if our faith is a justifying faith, it is also necessarily a sanctifying faith, a faith that fights sin, a faith that pursues at all costs purity of life even though we know that we will never perfectly attain to it.*

Jesus says in no uncertain terms: "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off" (v. 43); "if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off" (v. 45); "if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell" (v. 47). **Is Jesus recommending self-mutilation?**

A closer look at **the context in Matthew's gospel** (5:21-22b, 27-30) where this same statement appears will lead us to what Jesus really meant. There it appears in the context of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is calling upon his disciples to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.

The religious leaders believed that the Law of Moses could only **legislate against the outward act**. Jesus, however, expands, intensifies, and heightens Moses by prohibiting the inward thought and intent of the heart of which the outward act is but an expression. Thus he countered and corrected the Pharisaic distortion of the Law, namely, their belief that morality or "righteousness" consisted simply of external conformity irrespective of internal attitudes.

Jesus was primarily concerned with those who thought **their moral obligation was only skin-deep**. Take **murder**, for example. As long as they refrained from literally spilling blood, they believed they had behaved righteously. They ignored the anger and malicious hatred of the heart which are the source of murderous deeds. The same was true of **adultery**. Lust, so they thought, was irrelevant. It was a matter of the heart over which the court of Moses had no jurisdiction. Again, so long as the sexual **act** was avoided, the sexual **attitude** was irrelevant. But Jesus says otherwise. In Matthew 5:21-26 he pointed out that the prohibition of murder includes the angry thought and the insulting word. Then in 5:27-30 he extends this principle to adultery: not just the physical act but the lustful look and the covetous heart must be curbed.

Jesus is *not* forbidding men to "look" at women or women to "look" at men. Rather, he forbids them looking *in order to lust*. **It isn't his purpose to condemn the normal attraction that exists between men and women**. We admire beauty in God's creation wherever it appears, even in the human body. To recognize, acknowledge and compliment beauty is no sin (it may even be a duty).

But to look upon another human being with the express purpose of *fantasizing illicit sexual activity or mentally and emotionally gratifying a sexual desire* is out of biblical bounds. As Dallas Willard put it, Jesus has in mind using a woman's "visual presence as a means of savoring the fantasized act" (161). He's focusing on the look which longs to possess for expressly sexual purposes. It would appear, then, that our Lord has deepened the 7th commandment, the prohibition of adultery, in terms of the 10th, the prohibition of covetousness.

The word used for "lust" here is *epithumeo*. It is used in the LXX of Ex. 20:17 and Dt. 5:21 to translate the Hebrew of the 10th commandment: "You shall not *covet* your neighbor's wife." The word "lust" in English connotes sensual and sexual overtones but lacks the thought of *possessing* inherent in the prohibition. This may be why Jesus refers to the "hand" in v. 30 in connection with "lust," i.e., to lust after another's wife is in a real sense to *steal*. Adultery, either in act or attitude is *theft: it is taking to yourself, either physically or emotionally, a person who has not been given to you in marriage.*

One more point: **The distinction between “looking” and “lusting” is not a great chasm but a razor’s edge!**

Let us not miss *the connection our Lord draws between sight and sin*. This isn’t to deny that our other senses can be turned into instruments of sin. We must carefully monitor what we hear as much as what we see. But there can be little doubt, as Stott has said, that “deeds of shame are preceded by fantasies of shame, and the inflaming of the imagination by the indiscipline of the eyes” (88). Very little sin makes its way into external action without having passed first through the eyes of the sinner. **Very little, if any, sin comes out of your heart that didn’t first enter through your eyes.**

The point of Jesus in using this graphic and extreme language is that **we must deal drastically and radically with sin**. “We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling a little of it around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out” (DAC, 44). In the case of adulterous lust, if your eye leads you astray, “tear it out.”

So how do we know that Jesus does *not* mean literal mutilation?

Consider John and his relationship with Mary, his administrative assistant. John has always been stirred by Mary’s beauty, but recently his gaze has turned to lust. There is no sin in merely looking. In fact, to acknowledge and compliment natural beauty is good. But looking to lust, looking to fantasize an affair, looking to mentally gratify a sexual urge is another thing altogether.

Taking Jesus’ words literally, John proceeds to cut out his right eye. Thinking that the problem is solved, he returns to work after a period of rehabilitation only to find that now his *left* eye has lusted as well! So he cuts it out too. He now comes to work with a seeing-eye dog. He’s not as efficient at his job, but he’s convinced that he’s been obedient to Christ and is beyond lusting after Mary. But then he hears her voice and illicit desire rages yet again in his heart. So he lops off both his ears! He again returns to work, not a pretty sight, to say the least. Confident that it won’t happen again, he walks by her desk . . . and smells her perfume! Lust rages once more. So he cuts off his nose. Not even that solves his problem, for as he gropes through the office in his self-inflicted blindness, his hands accidentally brush up against Mary’s body and his flesh is stirred yet again. So he (somehow?) cuts off his hands. Perhaps if he could cut off his feet he wouldn’t be able to walk near her and thus greatly reduce the possibility of any physical contact whatsoever. It is only then that John realizes **he still has a mind** and Mary’s **memory** lingers vividly.

I know it’s a silly story. But it makes the point. The problem is not with our body parts or our physical senses. The problem is with a corrupt and deceitful heart. **Our external members are but the instruments we employ to gratify the lust that emerges from within**. What our Lord was advocating, therefore, “was not a literal physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation but mortification is the path of holiness he taught” (Stott, 89).

How, then, are we to respond to the sexually seductive and stimulating things we encounter in the world, in the media, at work? We are to act and live “**as if**” we were blind. Says Stott, “behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away, and were now blind and so *could* not see the objects which previously caused you to sin. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is: don’t do it! Don’t go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so *could* not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin” (Stott, 89).

I shared with you several months ago a story that first appeared in The Minneapolis (MN) *Star Tribune*, July 22, 1993. It reported on the story of Donald Wyman who, two days earlier, suffered a terrible accident. While clearing land a tree rolled onto his leg, crushing the bone and pinning him to the ground. He cried loudly and for a long time, but no one was near to hear or help. He concluded that the only way he would survive was to amputate his leg. He made a tourniquet from a shoe string and tightened it with a wrench. He then took his pocket knife and cut off the injured leg just below the knee! He crawled to a bull-dozer, drove another quarter mile to his truck, then somehow maneuvered it a mile and a half down the road to a farm house, from which he was then rushed to the hospital. He lost his leg . . . but he saved his life. Radical sacrifice indeed!

If need be, *run away!* But merely turning away from sin and saying no to temptation will never, in and of itself, suffice to give you the strength you need to face it the next time around. As you run away, as you take whatever radical steps you must in order to distance yourself from sin, **fix your mind on things above. Focus your heart on the promise of a superior pleasure in Christ. Ponder the joy of that river of delights that never runs dry. Turn to God's Word and feed your soul and your spirit and your mind and your heart with the promises of the gospel. Fill your thoughts with the person and work of Christ. Meditate on the glorious truths of what God has done and will do for you.**

John Stott has some excellent advice for us in this matter. He recognizes that it is not his, or anyone else's, place to lay down laws or man-made rules in an attempt to enforce Jesus' words. Nevertheless, he writes:

"To obey this command of Jesus will involve for many of us a certain 'maiming'. We shall have to eliminate from our lives certain things which (though some may be innocent in themselves) either are, or could easily become, sources of temptation. In his own metaphorical language we may find ourselves without eyes, hands or feet. That is, we shall deliberately decline to read certain literature, see certain films, visit certain exhibitions. If we do this, we shall be regarded by some of our contemporaries as narrow-minded, untaught Philistines. 'What?' they will say to us incredulously, 'you've not read such and such a book? You've not seen such and such a film? Why, you're not educated, man!' They may be right. We may have had to become culturally 'maimed' in order to preserve our purity of mind. The only question is whether, for the sake of this gain, we are willing to bear that loss and endure that ridicule.

Jesus was quite clear about it. It is better to lose one member and enter life maimed, he said, than to retain our whole body and go to hell. That is to say, it is better to forgo some experiences this life offers in order to enter the life which is life indeed; it is better to accept some cultural amputation in this world than risk final destruction in the next. Of course this teaching runs clean counter to modern standards of permissiveness. It is based on the principle that eternity is more important than time and purity than culture, and that any sacrifice is worthwhile in this life if it is necessary to ensure our entry into the next. We have to decide, quite simply, whether to live for this world or the next, whether to follow the crowd or Jesus Christ" (91).

Note the emphasis in Matthew that is placed on the "right" eye and the "right" hand. Why? In view of the fact that most people are right-handed, Jesus may be calling for the sacrifice of that which is *most valuable and most precious* to us. The sacrifice you make for purity may well be your most prized and cherished possession or privilege or activity. "A lizard, when you grasp it, if it suspects nefarious design in you, will unhesitatingly leave its tail in your hand, and bolt out of sight --- 'better to lose my tail than my life,' it seems to say" (Guy King, 48).

Often times we find ourselves in situations where enjoyable and important things in this life must be subordinated to the interests of the next life. Nothing in this life is so important or so valuable as to justify putting at risk our entrance into and enjoyment of the next life.

So, in conclusion, let me get real down and dirty with you. Let's get practical. And here is where my **earlier warning** to you comes into play. Here is the place where some of you will be tempted to think I've abandoned spiritual freedom and the principle of grace and have fallen into trap of legalism and works righteousness. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

What I am about to recommend to you does not lead to a morbid religious spirit or a legalistic and sour spirituality. What I am going to recommend is the most effective pathway to experience true and genuine and lasting joy. These are steps to a satisfaction and delight that no earthly or temporal pleasure can match. These are ways to open your heart and your soul to experience the glorious depths of a spiritual grand canyon instead of wallowing in some pothole in the street!

Not all the struggles and sins and temptations that I'm about to mention are equal in terms of the danger they pose to our souls. So be wise and discerning in how you hear me.

- If you find that as soon as money comes into your possession you squander it on meaningless spending, then put yourself under the oversight of a wise and prudent friend who can monitor your

income and spending. If you struggle with out-of-control credit card debt, cut the cards in half, tear them up, throw them away, and use only a debit card.

- If you find the allure of the casino lights and the sound of the slot machines more powerful than your will to resist, don't go there! "But Sam, it's so much fun. My friends and I really have a good time at the restaurants and the concerts." Yes, I know. But what is more important to you: the momentary thrill that gambling brings or the joy of eternal fellowship in the presence of Christ? For some, that is never a choice. They are not tempted as you are. They are able to participate in moderation. They have the strength to know when to walk away. But if your presence in a casino or at Remington Park threatens your resolve to walk in financial responsibility, better to forego a temporal pleasure than expose yourself to eternal pain.
- How do you handle movies today that consistently cross the line of moral propriety? Do you find your resolve to control your speech undermined by the incessant flow of profanity you hear at the movies? Then don't go! It's really just that easy.
- Do you find that your mind is easily stimulated with sexual fantasies that lead to improper sexual behavior, whether lust or masturbation or fornication or adultery? Then put an end to watching movies or TV shows that promote nudity and sexual content.
- Do you have an addictive personality? I have a friend who knows himself extremely well. He knows that if he were to drink anything at all, he would empty the bottle or finish off a six pack. That isn't the case for most of you, but if you are among those who once you start you find it almost impossible to stop, then don't start. Don't expose yourself to temptations that you can't resist. Decline the invitation to the office party. Say no to the after-the-ballgame visit to a bar.
- If you are married or in a committed relationship, do you find yourself becoming emotionally engaged with someone else, especially if they are married? Don't let yourself be caught in situations where you are the only two in a room. Protect yourself with the presence of others.
- Do you find yourself spending excessive amounts of time on Facebook, so much so that you can't provide for your employer the work for which you are being paid? If you are married and you find that you are tempted to reconnect with a former girlfriend or boyfriend, especially one from high school or college, and you can't resist the temptation to return again and again to communication with them, **terminate your account.**
- Are you finding it impossible to resist sending sexually suggestive text messages?
- Are you drawn to internet pornography, not simply hardcore but softcore material? Sign up for Covenant Eyes or some other program that establishes accountability with others. Give them the authority to speak into your life and to challenge your conduct.
- Are you incapable of resisting the temptation to purchase sexually explicit movies on Pay-Per-View or On-Demand or whatever other services are available on TV. Then cancel cable!
- Do you find that watching daytime soap operas or reality TV shows fuels feelings of dissatisfaction with your life and with your spouse, take whatever steps necessary to terminate the flow of that stuff into your house.
- What happens to your thought life and your daydreams and your fantasies when you read romance novels or publications like National Enquirer or even something so seemingly innocuous as People magazine? If you sense that your mind is wandering more frequently into inappropriate areas or that you are subject to increasingly powerful impulses, stop purchasing them!

Conclusion: