

## Lust and The Luminous Life

It's been a tragic week. I thought about addressing the death of George Floyd instead of continuing with *The Sermon on the Mount* this week. In the end, I decided against that. I didn't feel that I was the one to do that. I certainly didn't think that I had the words. But also I don't want us to be always reacting after the fact when things like this happen. You may not agree but I tend to believe when we consistently call people to *truly* follow Jesus and take to heart and be transformed by the things he teaches in *The Sermon on the Mount*, over time, we build patterns of thinking and being that can change the world. Take the beatitudes. How different would the world be if we lived by those words? Last week's message on anger, murder and caring for others applied.

For all the reasons I've mentioned, I am going to continue with our series on *The Sermon on the Mount* this morning. For while racism persists and cities burn, and the pandemic continues, people and marriages suffer from all the same old, very familiar, and very dangerous sins. Jesus, who, better than anyone, saw and cared for the suffering of the world in his day, also addressed these very personal and spiritual issues. He did so in a way that always underscored how radically different he calls us, as his follows, to be.

This morning we come to the place in *The Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus speaks about adultery and lust. I've titled this message *Lust and the Luminous Life* because Jesus had just said he called his followers to be the light of the world. So before you think about what he asks of you concerning sex, ask yourself, do I want to follow him?

Some time ago my son Alex, recommended a book titled: *Evangelism As Exiles*. The subtitle is *Life on Mission as Strangers in our Own Land*. The word Evangelism has to do with sharing the good news about Jesus. The author had been a missionary in an Islamic country. He says he learned that when you are clearly in a minority position, you don't try to water down what makes you different. You are unapologetically offering people something very different than what's found in the majority culture. The book encourages Christians in the United States to be bolder in conversations with people and clear about how undeniably different the Christian life is from the culture in which we live. It's not about becoming obnoxious.

It's about being compassionate but confident and clear that, when it comes to sex, Christ calls us to think very differently than the world at large. Of course, many people will reject Christian teaching. There were people in Jesus' day who, when they finally understood Jesus turned away from him. He said, you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and follow me.

*To be light in the darkness, you have to be very different.*

## **I. WHEN IT COMES TO SEX TO BE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS YOU HAVE TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF GOD'S PURPOSE.**

***When Jesus starts to talk about sex in Matthew 5:27-28, he quotes the seventh of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'***<sup>28</sup> ***But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Later, in Matthew 19:4,*** Jesus ties sex and marriage to creation. He says: ***"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,***<sup>5</sup> ***and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"*** What Jesus is doing is telling us to think about sex and lust in light of the larger story of the Bible and the purpose of God.

### **A. That means first of all that we should never think that God is against sex because sex is God's idea.**

***In the story of Creation, God speaks the world into existence with incredible artistry, and at each stage of creation, God says, "It was good."*** Genesis 2 says that the man and woman were naked and they felt no shame. But in **Genesis 3**, sin, disobedience to God, enters. We begin to see how sin wrecks havoc in human sexuality. Innocence is gone. Dysfunctions emerge. You read the stories and see oppression of women, manipulation of men, rape, incest, seduction, adultery, extramarital sex, and homosexuality. The garden grows thick with thorns and weeds, but even in a sinful world, the Bible sees sex itself as good.

***The Song of Solomon is a beautiful erotic love poem that is an important part of the Bible. Song of Solomon 1:2*** begins with a woman saying: ***Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth-- for your love is more delightful than wine*** It talks about sex in terms of pleasure, joy, communion, and celebration. The Bible never suggests, as our culture does, that sex is the most important thing. You can be a

single person practicing sexual discipline, and living a fulfilling, joyful life. The Bible doesn't say that sex is essential. It does celebrate sexual love in the context of marriage. *because sex is part of God's plan.*

*What is God's plan? How should we think of sex?*

**B. Sex is the God-given way, to say to another human being, "I belong completely, permanently and uniquely to you."**

When Jesus, in **Matthew 19**, quotes Genesis and says the *"the two shall become one flesh"* he referring to the truth that when a man and a woman have a life-long covenant relationship before God, the pleasures of their sexual intimacy sweetens and strengthen their bonds of their oneness, their commitment and affection with each other. If there is no God, no purpose, or design or revelation of it, we can make of sex and sexuality whatever we want. If there is a creator God who loves us and has revealed himself and his will to us, then to live in the light is to honor and uphold his purposes. Anything else is darkness.

I read an article on sex in ancient Greece once. It was not written by a Christian, but the author says the sexual history of ancient Greece paints the picture of a society in which there is a riot of sexual indulgence but little satisfaction. She writes: *"Neither men nor women seem to have had much basis for expecting or finding safe, loving, stable sexual partnerships with the opposite gender."* Then, almost as an act of faith, she writes, *"Tenderness, generosity, and love must have existed and been valued; however, they were hard to find."*<sup>1</sup> Like ours, the ancient world was a world of sexual indulgence, but their experience of sex was one of emptiness. The Christian view of sex is challenging but significant and fulfilling.

**Ephesians 4**, also uses the imagery of light and darkness Paul tells the Christians not to live like the world around them. In **verse 18**, he says, *They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.*<sup>19</sup> *They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*<sup>20</sup> *But that is not the way you learned Christ!* Look at the imagery— let it encourage you. God isn't just laying down some prudish legalism. It's about light and darkness. It's about clarity leading to purity, the clarity that understands the significance of sex in a God-centered life. In the next chapter, **Ephesians 5:8** Paul says *you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord, Walk as children of light.*

## II. TO WALK AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT SEXUALLY YOU WILL HAVE TO BE WILLING TO FIGHT.

In **Matthew 5:29-30** says if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off. You have to fight sexual sin inwardly and violently.

### A. One of the questions that comes up today is, "What exactly is sexual sin?"

***Jesus mentions adultery and lust, but if we only think of this as a list of two sins to avoid, we miss the point.*** In other places in the Bible, the words "sexual immorality" are used for any kind of sexual sin. It's the Greek word from which we get the word "pornography." This word has extensive use in the Bible. In **1 Corinthians 7**, Scripture uses this word when it tells unmarried Christians it is better to marry than to burn with passion. The logic of that passage is that abstinence outside of marriage or faithfulness in marriage are the only alternatives to sexual immorality. Sex outside of marriage is not an option. Why? Because sex was made *for* marriage. What God's purpose in creation intends, and God's word commands is that sex be the unifying expression of committed love between a man and woman in marriage.

### B. How should we fight sexual sin?

***Jesus says you have to fight sexual sin inwardly.*** He talks about looking with *lustful intent*. Lustful intent is not talking about merely noticing another person is attractive. It's talking about going beyond that to desire sex with that person. It's not about seeing what is real but wanting, desiring, imagining what doesn't belong to you. It can become habitual, compulsive, and addictive. It is easy to minimize it because no one sees it. You might think it doesn't matter, but it does. *Jesus takes it seriously. So we need to fight the battle inwardly.*

***Jesus says you have to fight sexual sin violently.*** Jesus is not speaking literally when he talks about plucking out your right eye or cutting off your right hand. The Bible is written in the literary forms of the ancient Middle East. It's designed to capture our attention and make an imprint on our hearts. This is a dramatic way of saying you've got to fight sexual sin and temptation with a kind of decisive spiritual violence. This means that you have to cut out of your life those things that lead you into sexual sin.

One illustration suggests you have to think of lust like an escalator down. Once you step on it, it is moving you down toward a destination. If you act quickly, you can get off fairly easily. If you don't, you find yourself arriving at someplace you do not want to be. Some people say, "As long as I don't step off the escalator onto the lower floor, (I don't actually have sex,) I'm good." But what it means is you come *this* close to hitting the bottom floor, and you turn around and try to get back up the elevator! Then if – if you make it - you say: "*Whew ... I'm glad I did the right thing*". It's very hard because once you get on the escalator, it's moving you toward something. The analogy may be imperfect, but do you see the point? You have to ask yourself: "If I am going to follow Jesus, why am I even getting on this escalator? Jesus isn't *just* giving us a list of two sins to avoid. That lets us off too easy. God wants you to evaluate the direction and purpose of your life. He wants you to look at your thoughts, relationships, entertainment, and habits: "*Is this moving me toward God-centered sexual clarity, or is this moving me toward immorality and impurity?*"

You've got to be willing to cut off a relationship that leads to sin. Or out of that relationship, the situations that lead to sin. It means you've got to cut off the internet connections that are occasions for sin. Pornography is a huge trap. Fighting it is such a need in our culture that Christians have developed several software apps to provide filters or accountability. You can easily search online for resources or contact the church for help and support in that fight.

***Look at how seriously Jesus speaks about these issues.*** In **Matthew 5:29-30**, it's in the context of sexual sins that Jesus talks about hell. Hell isn't some fantasy preachers made up to scare people. Hell is a horrible reality and Jesus, in love, is warning you about it. In Jesus Christ, God himself came into the world to save us from it. He lived the life of purity we have not lived, and he lived it for us. He went to the cross and died to pay the penalty for all the ways we fail and fall. Jesus rose from the dead because He finished the work of our salvation on the cross. The Bible never says, overcome your sins and clean up your life, and then God will save you. It says, admit your sin and come to Christ, trust in him as your Savior and Lord, and he will save you and begin to change you. *But if you claim to believe in Jesus but are unwilling to fight, your faith is a facade.* It's not that we are saved by faith plus works, but we are saved by a belief that works. *We are saved by a faith that fights. Fight to be the light.*

***And there is an intensely positive side to this fight.*** When Paul writes to his younger friend Timothy he says, *treat the younger women as sisters in all purity.* That is a beautifully positive mindset for a young man. It is easily applied to women as well. It's being the light in this world! The culture does not typically promote members of the opposite sex as human beings bearing the image of God much less as family members to be treasured in all purity and respected and loved for their own sake. To be the light of the world, Christians have to advocate, with compassion and humility, but with confidence and clarity for God's plan for sex and sexuality. We have to fight personally, not just so we can say "no" to sexual sins, but so we can say "yes" to God! Not just so we can say "no" to lust or adultery or anything else, but so we can say yes to the new self - the inner person who has experienced new birth, the truer and deeper self that will inherit the kingdom.

## CONCLUSION

Flannery O'Conner's story "*A Temple Of The Holy Ghost,*" tells about a bright little 12-year-old girl who girl overhears her older cousins making fun of a nun who has given them a formula for fending off fresh country boys in the back seats of cars. She told the teenagers to say: "*Stop, sir! I am a temple of the Holy Ghost!*" The cousins think that advice is hilarious. It is kind of funny and a little dramatic; "*Stop, sir! I am a temple of the Holy Ghost!*" But the sweet thing about the story is that when the little twelve-year-old hears this, She repeats the words to herself, and she feels like someone has given her a present.

In the Scriptures, who you are in Christ is not a phrase that you throw at other people to ward them off. It's a truth that you treasure in your own heart to strengthen in you a sense of your identity in Christ. The best way to fight lust is with love and light. It is to go after Christ with all that you have, love Him, love others, and pursue spiritual growth.

Jesus, who speaks so clearly against sexual sin, is the same one who died and rose again for our redemption. He wants us to turn to Him, to be reconciled to God to have our sins forgiven, to experience through faith in Him a love that is ultimate and eternal and trustworthy. A love that will not let you go even as you struggle and fight in your sexual brokenness. Let him be the true source and center of your life so that every aspect of your life is renewed and enriched and redeemed through his healing grace.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Ithyphallic Imagery and Sex In Ancient Athens* by Bestia Mortale