

## The Mortification of Sin

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Matthew 5:27-30

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### THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF MORALITY

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:28-32*

We living in a world where:

1. All values are on trial (Tolerance is the buzz word).
2. Relationships should only last as long as they are mutually fulfilling. (Example: Man that called me Thursday evening for marriage counseling)
3. Access to regular sexual satisfaction should be viewed as a basic human right. (Why can't I do what I want with my body? I'm not hurting anyone else... 1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Much of our media endorses this thinking. Most of our advertising incorporates some form of sexual stimulation to enhance desire for its products (Abercrombie and Fitch, Axe, Old Spice, Hot Pockets, Nissan, Carl Jr.'s, Dentyne, Nikon, Samsung, Burger King). Our music romanticizes infidelity. And thanks to the Internet and the plethora of handheld or mobile devices that can access it, all of this content is "conveniently" accessible from almost any spot on the globe.

Unfortunately the downward spiral of morality isn't only taking place outside the walls of the church. The lure of sensuality and the perversion of God's intended design for sexuality has quietly crept inside the church.

### THE TADITIONAL STANDARD OF SEXUAL PURITY

The Pharisees definition standard of sexual purity only dealt with the outward, physical act of adultery. In verse 27 Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" The Pharisees only applied the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment at its most basic level. They completely

disregarded the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment prohibited coveting of anything that belongs to your neighbor – including his wife (Exodus 20:17). Based on this narrow definition of physical adultery, it was easy for the Pharisees to become smug and conceited – they had kept the Law right? They may have obeyed the letter of the law (debatable based on the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment), but they certainly hadn't obeyed the spirit of the Law. That is what Jesus is drilling down to here in Matthew 5:27-30.

## **JESUS' STANDARD OF SEXUAL PURITY**

Look at verse 28. Jesus, in contrast to the narrow definition of the Pharisees, says, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

What does Jesus not mean here?

1. Jesus isn't saying that it is wrong to look at a woman admiringly.
2. Jesus isn't forbidding the natural, normal attraction that is a part of our humanity.

One pastor described what it means to look with lustful intent saying, "The look is not casual but persistent, the desire not involuntary or momentary, but cherished." If we are honest, few if any believers have not crossed the line from the casual look to the persistent and cherished look. By the Pharisees standard we may be okay, but by Jesus' standard we are all adulterers. Having realized this solemn truth, we ought to be very careful that we do not look down on a person who has fallen into adultery.

## **A PRINCIPLE WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND**

There is a very clear principle in Scripture that we need to remember. Sensual sins are preceded by sensual fantasies. In other words, all of our outward sins are first conceived and cherished in our hearts and in our minds. Think about King David for instance. He was taking an innocent stroll on the rooftop garden of the King's palace one sleepless night when his eye caught the alluring shadow of an unusually beautiful woman who was bathing. One look became two and it didn't take long before David began to covet what God had not given him. Look at 2 Samuel 11:2-4:

*It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.*

It's interesting to note that David wasn't unaware of the fact that his lustful interest was in another man's wife. His servant reminded him that Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David first let

his thoughts get away from him and then he acted on his thinking. The fantasy preceded the physical act. God has given each of us a mind. It is a wonderful gift from our maker. But as with every other faculty that God has graciously given us, it must be used in a way that honors and obeys Him. Jesus' words in verse 28 redefine our culture's definition of sexual purity. In one sweeping sentence Jesus reveals our hearts and points out the source of all our trouble. Last week we briefly looked at Mark 7 where Jesus tells us what defines a person. He says, "And he said, 'What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person'" Mark 7:20-23. How do we live this life of radical purity that Jesus teaches?

## **PURITY COMES AT A PRICE**

In verses 29-30 Jesus challenges us to make war with our sin. He says, "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. 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." Was Jesus speaking literally here? No – though some like Origen of Alexandria have mistakenly interpreted Him as such. Though Jesus wasn't speaking literally here, He certainly was speaking radically. We call this the mortification of sin.

Anything that stands between us and Jesus must be radically amputated. When gangrene starts to infect an area of a person's body, they don't treat it with Neosporin and a band aid. That is insufficient treatment for decay. Gangrene is treated by cutting the infection away. We must deal with our sin in the same radical way. If drastic measures are appropriate to treat the physical man, then drastic measures are certainly appropriate to protect and treat the spiritual man. We live in a culture that is satisfied neither being too extreme in one direction or another – find the middle road. But Jesus' counsel is to take extreme measures to pursue spiritual purity.

The specific mortification that Jesus is dealing with in our text for this morning is mortification of the eyes. This is wise counsel not only for men, but for women as well. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are not sins confined to a single gender. These are the root causes for all sin in both men and women. Wandering eyes can quickly become adulterous eyes. Job offers us some wise counsel in Job 31:1 when he says, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a woman." This principle should not only be applied to another person, but also to the television and movies that we watch, the books and magazines that we read. I know a young man in his 30's who used to attend our church that once altered his route to work because of a billboard. If we think that is too radical, then we have underestimated the enticing power of sin and misunderstood the brokenness, this side of eternity, of the human heart.

One of the problems with the sensual things we see is that we are too quickly desensitized or inoculated to its destructive power. Sensual sin typically doesn't happen over night. There is typically a process of entertaining a fantasy before there is any physical reality. I'm reminded of the lyrics to the Casting Crowns song "Slow Fade".

*Be careful little eyes what you see  
It's the second glance that ties your hands as darkness pulls the strings*

*The journey from your mind to your hands  
Is shorter than you're thinking  
Be careful if you think you stand  
You just might be sinking*

*It's a slow fade when you give yourself away  
It's a slow fade when black and white have turned to gray  
Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid  
When you give yourself away  
People never crumble in a day  
It's a slow fade, it's a slow fade*

## **HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO SENSUAL TEMPTATION**

We should deal with sin just like we would deal with a tiger if we encountered one in the wild. You don't try and pet it – you flee. The reason that too many people end up eaten alive by sensual sin is because they spent too much time petting the lion instead of intentionally fleeing in a safe direction. When David's eye caught Bathsheba as he was walking the Palace rooftop unable to sleep he should have immediately removed himself from the temptation. That's what Joseph did in Genesis 39:6-12:

*Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph (lust of the eyes is not confined to men) and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.*

We would do well to learn from Joseph's example and flee sensual temptation. As a matter of fact, there are a number of texts that encourage us to do just that. Twice in his New Testament Epistles Paul encourages us to flee from sin. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 he says, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." Again in 2 Timothy 2:22 he says, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Remember also that we said all sensual sin begins as a fantasy. It all starts with using the imagination that God gave us in a way that He doesn't desire that we use it. What comes into the eyes fills the imagination. Not only must we flee, but we must also cultivate God-honoring thinking. In Philippians 4:8 Paul tells us, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

## **WE CANNOT DO IT ON OUR OWN**

Our study of Matthew 5:27-30 would be woefully incomplete if all we did was state the reality that sin is a fearsome foe and we must guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23) and flee from it. This is true, but we must also understand that along with our guarding our hearts and fleeing there must be a humble abiding. Jesus tells us that it's as we abide in Him that we bear much fruit. Remember His words in John 15:4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." How do you make war on sin? You make war on sin by being consumed with a greater love. To the degree that we abide in Christ, our hearts will be growing in a desire to do that, think that, and say that, which pleases him. We fight sin more aggressively and deny our flesh the temporal pleasures of sin when we are consumed with an abiding passion for Christ. Remember what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15? He said, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

Jesus not only tells us to abide in Him, but he also reminds one verse later in John 15:5 that apart from Him we can do nothing. He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." We are in desperate need of the Holy Spirit's power to make war on our sin. Willpower alone is not a sufficient weapon. In Romans 8:13 Paul said, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

## **I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE...I HAVE AN ADULTEROUS HEART**

As we look at these verses, we are reminded that we are all guilty of having an adulterous heart. No one is exempt from the pervasive nature of sin in this world. As believers we have the power in

Christ to live lives that are worthy of the gospel by which we have been called (Philippians 1:27), but we are not exempt from the temptations that accompany every man living in human flesh. We must not become smug and self-righteous because we have not committed the physical act of adultery. One pastor said, "We must never let our piety and spiritual accomplishments dull us to our potential for sin." Recognizing our sinful hearts, we must mortify our flesh. If your eye causes you to sin, do whatever it takes to pursue purity. If your hand causes you to sin, do whatever it takes to pursue purity. It is better to become an amputee than to gratify the desires of your flesh at the expense of your life. It is better to be misunderstood and ridiculed for your convictions than to sacrifice eternity for the temporal pleasures of this world.

We need to recognize that we are guilty, understand our potential for sin, flee temptation, be consumed with an abiding love for Christ, depend on the power of the Holy Spirit, and have a do whatever it takes mentality to pursue radical spiritual purity. By God's grace we will one day see Him who said, "If you love me you will obey my commands!"