

### Kingdom Relationships Part Three: *Dealing with Lust*

\* **Elders Installation** - We are excited to announce that on **Sunday, Sept. 18th** we will be installing Walt Bieser and Jeff Perry as elders in GCC. There will be a cake and coffee reception after the service.

Let's turn to Matt. 5. If you're visiting us this morning we are working our way through Jesus' sermon on the mount, and this morning we happen to come to a rather difficult and sensitive topic, so let's jump right in and read vv. 27-30:

*"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. 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. (Matthew 5:27-30 ESV).*

There are whole websites devoted to the subject of awkwardness. What creates awkwardness and how to get out of awkward situations. One website observed that almost everyone can relate to feeling awkward in some situations and those few who don't have the capacity to feel awkward are probably making everyone else uncomfortable. So if you never, ever feel awkward in any situation, you're probably a carrier. Many of these websites offer suggestions about what to do if you're ever caught in an awkward situation and two that stood out to me were 1) pull out your cell phone and start talking on it as if you just got an important call, or 2) light yourself on fire.

This morning we have arrived at the part of Jesus' sermon where he talks about the dangers of lust and how to fight it, and let's face it, that has the potential for being an awkward thing to talk about in church, especially in a mixed group. But I want to ask, before you grab your cell phone or light yourself on fire, to consider two good reasons why we shouldn't be afraid or uncomfortable tackling this sensitive subject in church.

1. Jesus wasn't afraid to address it head on. Remember, this was a large crowd full of men, women, and children and yet he spoke, with tact and discretion, but directly and honestly about the dangers of lust and how to fight it.
2. The fact is, far more than in Jesus' day, we are being bombarded with sexual images and messages everywhere we go. Our kids, starting at an incredibly young age, are being hit with sexual images and messages on the internet, TV, movies, music, social media, billboards, and from their friends. It's all around us! We can't afford for the one place where this crucial issue isn't talked about honestly to be in the church. Jesus has a life-preserving message on the subject of sexuality that the world needs to hear, we need to hear. So let's pause and ask God's blessing on His word.

There is a natural progression in the message here: Jesus moves from the 6th commandment - *You shall not murder* - to the 7th commandment - *You shall not commit adultery* and once again he points out that true obedience to the commandment needs to come from the heart. It needs to be more than outward, it needs to be inward. But by doing that, Jesus takes a manageable commandment - don't commit adultery - and raises the bar to an impossible height: to even look at a woman lustfully (or women, to look at a man lustfully) is to be guilty of adultery in our hearts. Like all the rest of this sermon

about the values and principles of the kingdom of God, the bar is set way beyond our reach. If the righteousness needed to enter heaven is a standard far beyond our reach, how can we possibly reach it, and what do we do with this teaching?

The first thing we do, as we've said before and will say again, is assert that we can only be qualified for heaven by faith in Christ and his substitutionary death on the cross. In all of human history, only Jesus perfectly kept the sermon on the mount, only Jesus perfectly obeyed his Father in heaven, and on the cross he took our sins upon himself, so that, for all who trust in him, his perfect righteousness is credited to our account as if we also have lived perfectly obedient to God all our lives. What this means is that you and I, imperfect as we are, flawed as we are, are righteous in God's eyes and loved like crazy. That isn't something we've earned. That's grace.

But Jesus really does expect his followers to be able to live out this sermon far more truly than the professional religious leaders of the day because the religious leaders were experts at looking righteous outwardly, but full of sin and hypocrisy inside, but Jesus was going to give us a new power - the power of the Holy Spirit - and He would empower us to live righteously from the heart. The Spirit writes the law upon our hearts, causing our hearts to *want* to keep them. We won't keep them perfectly, and when we sin we have a mediator who pleads our cause, but we have the power of the Spirit living in us, and with His help, we can live for the kingdom of God, fighting against lust and for sexual purity. So with hope and faith in God's power at work in us, let's unpack our Lord's teaching in these verses.

*"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." Vv. 27-28*

### **1. The battle between righteousness and sin is fought in our longings**

In the English language, lust is almost always has sexual connotations, but the word Jesus uses doesn't carry sexual connotations, it just means a strong longing. Talk about awkward, even saying the word lust is kind of awkward in most contexts. If someone says, "I'm longing for a slice of pizza" most of us wouldn't think anything of it - and a lot of us would think, "me too." But if someone says, "I'm lusting for a slice of pizza", that's kinda weird. I'm not with that person.

But longing is exactly what the word here means. Later in the gospels Jesus will use the same word to describe how he has been longing to eat the last supper with his disciples before he suffers. The word just means a strong desire, a passionate longing. In itself it isn't bad or good. Sexual desire isn't wrong - it's from God. The devil didn't invent sex, God did! So Jesus isn't saying that it's wrong for men and women to be attracted to the opposite sex -that's normal and healthy.

The question is what we do at that point. Attraction isn't a sin, but it's a desire that the enemy can snag with hooks of temptation. Temptation works this way: it takes a natural desire or longing (we could say lust) and begins to bend our minds and hearts towards sinful intent. Jesus isn't saying that experiencing an impulse of desire is committing adultery in the heart, he is saying that allowing that impulse to morph into intent, whether that intent is to act on the desire, or that intent is to keep it in the heart and simply to look with lustful thoughts, either way because desire has turned into lustful intent, it is committing adultery in the heart.

James says a similar thing in 1:14-16: *14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. James 1:14-16*

The desire isn't necessarily wrong, but if it gets snagged by temptation then eventually it gives birth to sin and sin always leads to death. Jesus also warned about the destructive end of sin, using even stronger language: *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. (vv. 29-30)*

## 2. The direction of, and the ultimate destination of, unfought lust is hell

We'll get to what Jesus means by tearing out our eye and cutting off our hand in a minute, but Jesus gives us the incredibly strong warning that lust is potentially dangerous to our eternal destiny. Lust is dangerous. It's direction is dangerous. It's short term consequences are dangerous. And it's eternal consequences are massively dangerous.

### The most dangerous road in the world

There is a road on a mountain in Bolivia called "the most dangerous road in the world". On the top of that mountain is a biking company called the "Gravity-Assisted Mountain Biking" that takes thrill seekers to the top and give them bikes to ride down. Many bikers have died attempting to ride down this mountain. One woman who had been complaining of her brakes all morning, was trying to catch up with her group having fallen behind. Her group watched her ride off the road and down an 800 foot cliff.

Lust carries a similar danger. It offers thrills, and at first it might seem to be controllable and containable. But lust soon begins to gather speed and at some point it becomes out of control and can run a life right off the mountain. It can destroy lives, marriages, families, careers, reputations, and, ultimately Jesus says, our eternal souls.

This brings up a hard theological question for those who have professed Christ as their Savior. Is there an eternal danger for the Christian? I believe the answer is no...and yes. It is my belief that a true Christian cannot lose his or her salvation. We are saved by the work of Christ, and no one can snatch us away from him. When a person is saved, they are adopted into the family of God as a son or daughter of God, and I don't see anywhere where a child becomes unadopted. So the answer is no, a Christian cannot lose his or her salvation.

But some have used this biblical assertion to think that they don't have to worry about the Bible's warnings and threats no matter what they do or how they live. John Piper tells about confronting a man who professed to be a Christian who had left his wife and was living with another woman. As Piper pleaded with him to repent and return to his wife, he quoted this very verse that we're looking at and asserted that unless this man repented he would spend eternity in hell separated from God. The man looked at him in disbelief and said, "you mean you think a person can lose their salvation?"

John Piper writes: *there are many professing Christians who have a view of salvation that disconnects it from real life, and that nullifies the warnings of the Bible and puts the sinning person who claims to be a*

*Christian beyond the reach of biblical threats. And this doctrine is comforting thousands on the way to hell. Jesus said, if you don't fight lust, you won't go to heaven.*

The reason Piper can say this is because if we're a Christian, we have the Holy Spirit living within us and the Holy Spirit within us fights against lustful intent. Because of our weakness and sin, we don't always win every battle, at points we might feel like we're losing every battle, but if the Spirit resides in us, we're gonna fight. If someone gives themselves to lust and its direction, they might give an intellectual or emotional nod to Christ, but they have not experienced saving faith, which always includes the Spirit coming to dwell in us and change us from the inside out.

If you struggle with lust, or any other sinful desire, I don't want to discourage you or leave you hopeless, but neither do I want to lull you into a false security. Let that fear, let Jesus' strong warning, stir your soul to call upon God for strength to fight, and then, do the third point that we learn from these verses:

### **3. We need to take drastic measures to keep our longings from becoming sinful intent**

*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.*

I think we know instinctively that Jesus isn't really talking about physical mutilation. Even if all we were left with was a left eye and a left hand we could still sin. What Jesus is saying is, take drastic measures to guard against those desires being tempted and dragged away into sin, which leads to death. Jesus isn't saying "cripple yourself", he's saying "control yourself!". Take the steps, drastic though they need to be, to control your longings and keep them from becoming sinful intent.

Gouging out our eye is a way of saying, be careful what we allow into the gate of our eyes. Guard what we see, what we look at, what we gaze at. That counsel isn't limited to what we physically look at, but includes what we turn over and over in our hearts and minds. Lustful intent means intentionally turning lust over and over. Prov. 4:23 gives us the same counsel from a different direction:

*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Prov. 4:23*

The issue isn't what enters our eyes, it's that our eyes are the gateway to our hearts; our affections. So one way we guard our hearts is by guarding our eyes and guarding what we look at.

If our right eye represents what we consider and gaze at, our right hand represents what we do. Cutting off our hand means taking drastic steps not to do things that lead us to sin. If there's something we're doing that's tempting us to sin, somewhere we're going, someone we're hanging out with, cut it off. Don't do it, don't go there, don't hang out with that person, don't watch it. Tear it out and cut it off.

Let's apply this to an issue that holds many people, both non-Christian and Christian, in its power: the bondage of pornography. The internet has brought with it many good things that make our lives easier in so many ways. But it has also opened up the gates of hell in ways that couldn't have been imagined 30 years ago. Time was, if you wanted pornography you had to go into a store and buy a magazine. It was still huge, but for a lot of people, having to go into a store and take a magazine up to the counter where

people would see, possibly someone you know, was a deterrent. Now anyone who has the internet can go into a private room or basement and imbibe as much filth as they want.

Morgan Bennett published an article that makes this frightening claim about pornography: *Neurological research has revealed that the effect of internet pornography on the human brain is just as potent — if not more so — than addictive chemical substances such as cocaine or heroin.*

Bennett goes on to say that in the same way that hikers traveling the same paths over time create trails, exposure to pornographic images creates similar neural pathways that, over time, become more and more "well-paved" until that path becomes their default perspective toward sexual matters. Pornography not only dishonors the women who are exploited to create it, it not only dishonors the wife or husband of the one hooked by it, but pornography also destroys the soul and mind of the person addicted to it. It is far from a harmless or a victimless hang-up.

Elizabeth Smart, the young woman who at the age of 14 was abducted from her home and made to be the wife of a drifter, is now speaking out about how his addiction to pornography made her "living hell worse." The direction of porn is evil and eventually leads to running over a cliff.

Jesus, as the Son of God, is the designer of our eye and our heart and our mind, so he knows the damage that happens when we allow temptation to draw us into sinful intent. I have mentioned pornography, but Jesus warns us here against anything that creates a lustful intent. It can be a work relationship, it can be a particular place or a particular group. For women, something so seemingly innocuous as reading romance novels or watching romance movies can trigger sinful desires.

Jesus doesn't look at us as helpless victims here. We have options: we can tear out our eye and we can cut off our hand. In other words, with the empowering of the Spirit we can and do have the strength to cut the thing out of our lives. If pornography has bound your heart up, confess it to the Lord, ask for forgiveness, and then do something about it! Get a internet filter, keep your computer in a place where other people can see it, throw your computer or device away - whatever it takes - but don't be half-hearted. If there's someone at work that you've been flirting with and you know that you're heart is engaging in ways that head towards sinful intent, get off the bike! Cut it off, avoid that person, put in for a transfer, quit your job, really, whatever it takes. Jesus says take drastic measures to deal with sin.

But having said that we should take whatever steps we need to, I want to say that the ultimate answer can't be limited to filling our lives with blocks and protections and job transfers. Don't misunderstand, those things are good and helpful in breaking the grip that such things can have on our hearts. But if all there is are blocks and protections and fences we can and usually will find ways around them. God's plan is to free our hearts from the grip of sin and lust. Blocks and such are tools that God can use to free our heart, but the goal isn't a blocked heart, it's a freed heart. Freed from the grip of that sin, freed from the lies that it provides something you want and need. Freed from the chains that bind us to do its bidding. Freed from the downward, destructive direction of lustful intent.

I want to end on a hopeful note. Jesus spoke this to a crowd of ordinary men, women, and children. He didn't mean to discourage them but to call them to a better life, a Spirit filled, God glorifying life lived for things that will last and have value for eternity. Lust is a dead end street that ends with death and shame. Jesus has a better path. And it is available to you no matter where you are today. You can get there from

here. There's no sin Jesus didn't pay for or that God can't forgive. Be real with God and confess the sin. Resolve to cut off the thing that is causing you sin.

Close with a real life illustration. We all know about the exposing of thousands of Ashley Madison clients. Ashley Madison was supposedly a secret and private way for married men and women to have secret affairs. But journalist Annalee Newitz did an analysis of the data coming out of Ashley Madison and found that the supposed number of clients was 31 million men, and 5 million women subscribers. But what she found was the most of the women weren't real, they were static profiles created to make it look to the millions of men like there were millions of real women on the site. She writes: *"Ashley Madison is a site where tens of millions of men write mail, chat, and spend money for women who aren't there."*

Lust always promises things that it can't deliver. It's an illusion. It promises fulfillment, it delivers emptiness. It promises freedom, it delivers bondage. It promises an exciting life, it delivers a short term thrill ride and then a destroyed life.

The Spirit wants to help us reverse direction: instead of filling our eye with lustful images, to fill our eye with Christ and the glory of his eternal kingdom. Instead of putting our hand to sinful purposes, to put our hand to the work of the kingdom, to be busy serving the Lord with our lives. Leave here believing this: Jesus has the power to free you from the strongest chains. Jesus has the power to fill in the deepest ruts and get us off the most well-paved paths. Believe in Jesus' power this morning! Ask him to pour out his Spirit on you and set you free. Let's go to God together.