

## **Apprenticed to Jesus: Sexuality**

### **Matthew 5:27-30**

This morning we are going to consider Jesus' teaching on sexuality found 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 you know, we live in a culture that is incredibly permissive sexually. Almost any sexual activity between consenting adults is considered acceptable. And so Jesus' teaching here is radically counter-cultural in our day. He talks about "adultery of the heart" – something that most people only joke about. But as apprentices of Jesus, we take His teaching here very seriously. And we assume that Jesus knows what He's talking about here; we assume that He has our best interests in mind when He gives this teaching; we assume that He's describing the type of purity of heart that is actually possible in the kingdom of God.

We all bring our brokenness and pain to this topic. Perhaps some of you here today are in the midst of a great battle in relation to your sexuality. This issue dominates your life and your walk with God; you wonder if you'll ever experience obedience in your life. You may be dealing with addictions or habits that nobody else here today knows about – promiscuity or pornography or other something else. Or perhaps this issue doesn't dominate your life. Your condition (as it has been described) is more like a low-grade fever that never goes away. It's something that slows you down and distracts you from seeking God.

In a gathering this size, I am sure that for others of you, when I mention "sexual sins" you don't think of your own struggles. You think of how you have been sinned against. Perhaps a spouse or someone else close to you has been involved in sexual sins that have violated your relationship. No doubt some here have been the victim of sexual abuse or some other sexual crime. This topic may stir up within you anxiety or even anger over another's actions.

I mention this to acknowledge that this is a tough subject and that Jesus' teaching will hit different ones of us in different ways. But I trust that ALL of us can hear Jesus' teaching as "good news" – as a way of life that brings healing to our souls and allows us to experience God more fully.

What I plan to do today is to give a rather straightforward explanation of this passage and then discuss how we can actually pursue the type of purity in heart that Jesus describes here.

***"Surpassing Righteousness" in relation to Sexuality*** (Matthew 5:27-30) Jesus teaches "a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees" when He says:

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.

The seventh of the Ten Commandments given to Moses was, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Technically speaking, adultery is when a married person has sexual relations with someone other than his/her spouse. (There are other terms – such as fornication – that denote other types of sexual immorality.) We can imagine someone saying, "I'm righteous in my sexuality because I don't commit adultery." Jesus is here teaching a type of heart-righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees when He said, "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."

It's not the case that the Old Testament didn't address looking at a woman "with lust for her." The tenth commandment (Exodus 20:17) prohibited coveting your neighbor's wife:

17 "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."

"Coveting your neighbor's wife" is analogous to Jesus' statement about a man "looking at a woman with lust for her." The term lust simply means "strong desire." Jesus explains the depth of this sin when He says that "everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Some people might say, "What's the big deal? It's not like you're actually committing adultery with the other person." Well, it's obviously true that committing adultery is more destructive to relationships and to society than lust. Committing adultery has consequences that sometimes cannot be undone. In the passage we'll consider next week, Jesus will say that such unfaithfulness makes divorce permissible.

But for the person apprenticed to Jesus, avoiding lust is just as important as avoiding adultery because it is a sin of the heart. The heart is the command and control center of the person. The heart is an overarching term that includes the mind, the will, and the spirit. We think with our hearts, we speak from that which fills the heart; we *live* from our hearts. Apprentices of Jesus seek to love God with all their heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5). And so adultery of the heart compromises that larger commitment to loving God. It's not an isolated, peripheral sin that can be tolerated because a pure heart is so critical in our apprenticeship.

Dallas Willard's explanation of adultery "in the heart" is insightful:

. . . all the elements of a genuine act of adultery other than the overt movements of the body are present in such a case. The heart elements are there. Usually the only thing lacking for overt action is the occasion. When the heart is ready, the action will occur as occasion offers. Just as the thief is the person who would steal if circumstances were right, so the adulterer is the one who would have wrongful sex if the circumstances were right. Usually that means if he or she could be sure it would not be found out. This is

what Jesus calls “adultery in the heart.” In it, the person is not caring for, but using, the other. The condition is wrong even though sexual relations do not occur.

*(Divine Conspiracy, p. 161)*

As apprentices of Jesus, it’s not enough to avoid adultery. Jesus says that we should avoid adultery of the heart. Jesus isn’t being “meaner than Moses” as they say; He’s not trying to lay upon us a burden that we could never bear. He is explaining what can actually be the case when God reigns in our lives. The goal is never merely to stop sinning. The goal is to experience God more deeply and help others do the same. And so we avoid adultery of the heart so that we can experience God and love God in deeper, more satisfying ways.

Jesus’ logic in verses 29 and 30 is important for us to understand. He puts forth a couple of hypothetical scenarios that illustrate the radical approach His disciples must take toward sexual sin.

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.

Most people would agree that it’s better to enter heaven with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown bodily into hell. Therefore, if your right eye (considered a person’s best eye) causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.

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.

Again, most would also agree that it’s better to enter heaven with only one hand than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Some people, of course, have taken Jesus’ teaching here quite literally. There are reports that Origen, the third century theologian, actually castrated himself in order to “make himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom” (see Matthew 19:12) in order to avoid sexual sins; but he found – much to his own chagrin, I’m sure –that he still had sexual desires (see Bazyn, p. 121). Amputating an offending body part isn’t the solution to sexual sins. That’s not Jesus’ point. Jesus is using hyperbole to illustrate how radically we need to deal with sexual sins, which are really sins of the heart. (Jesus used this same imagery in other contexts – see Matthew 18:1-10.) We’ll discuss the application of this in a few minutes.

But I would summarize Jesus’ teaching by saying that as Jesus’ apprentices we should have a type of righteousness in which we not only don’t commit adultery with our bodies; we also avoid adultery in our hearts so that we can experience God in deeper and deeper ways.

In light of this understanding, let’s now consider how we might “learn to obey what Jesus has commanded” in relation to sexuality.

***First, apprentice yourself to Jesus in relation to your sexuality.*** If you are apprenticed to Jesus in relation to your sexuality you seek to learn from Him how to conduct yourself sexually. You remain teachable before Jesus in relation to your sexuality.

Our normal approach to dealing with sexual sins is very different. There is so much shame and guilt when it comes to sexual sins that sincere believers often respond by vowing, “God, I promise I’ll never sin again . . .” And we mean it at the time. The problem is that when we do that we’re just like Peter who told Jesus, “I will never betray you.” He meant it, but he promptly went out and betrayed Jesus three times. That approach focuses on our willpower, our efforts.

The approach we’re advocating in this sermon series is to apprentice ourselves to Jesus in order to learn from Him how to live out our sexuality in ways that please Him. The emphasis is upon our relationship with Jesus, the Shepherd of our souls, the One who died to set us free from sexual sins. Discipleship puts the emphasis upon the fact that Jesus, our Teacher/Rabbi, is willing and able to teach us to obey what He’s commanded.

And so the place to start is to intentionally apprentice yourself to Jesus in relation to your sexuality. You commit yourself to seeking Him and listening to Him both when you’re obedient *and* when you’re disobedient. If you’re apprenticed to Jesus, you don’t run *from* God when you sin; no, you run *to* God and seek to learn what He wants to teach you.

Apprenticing yourself to Jesus in relation to your sexuality may be a great step of faith for you. You may have believed the lie that you will never change and/or that you are too far gone in order to be healed. You may have bought into the mindset, “I’ll never really be obedient in this area of my life, so I’ll just try to manage my sin and not mess up too badly.” Let me say as plainly as possible: Jesus didn’t die on the cross so that we could manage our own sins the best we can. He died on the cross to *deliver* us from sexual sins. Jesus died to bring us life and wholeness. And that certainly includes wholeness in relation to our sexuality.

If you have never entered into a relationship with Jesus by accepting His death on the cross as payment for your sins, that’s the place to start. You accept His sacrifice by faith. And then you live as an apprentice – allowing Him to teach you in this area of your life.

***Second, deal with sexual sins in biblical terms.*** There is a certain power in naming our sins using biblical terminology. It’s one thing to say to God (or a trusted friend), “I’m struggling in my thought life.” It’s quite another to say, “I have committed adultery in my heart.” Consider confessing your sin to God (and possibly to another person) that specifically and that honestly.

As you read the Scriptures, you may find that you have a whole cluster of sins surrounding adultery of the heart. For example, you may read Psalm 73 and realize, “I have been just like Asaph who was envious of people who indulged every passion that they had.” That’s worth talking with God about. (“God, why would I possibly be envious of a lifestyle that Jesus died to save me *from*, that would only bring me heartache?”) Or maybe you read Proverbs 6 and the “seven things God hates.” One of them is “feet that run rapidly to evil.” Maybe you realize that your feet run (either figuratively or literally) toward sexual sins. You can confess that eagerness to sin and ask God to replace it with an eagerness to obey.

The point is not to heap condemnation upon yourself; that really has no lasting benefit. The point is to identify our sins so that Jesus can bring healing and wholeness. ***Where there is sin there is hope*** because Jesus died to deliver us from the guilt and the power of sin. If you’re apprenticed to Jesus, bringing sin out into the light robs it of its power. There is glorious

freedom from sin when we bring it out into the light. I think you'll find power in dealing with sexual sins in biblical terms.

***Third, adopt Jesus' radical approach to avoiding sexual sin.*** Remember that Jesus gave the scenario, "If your right eye makes you stumble. . ." and "If your right hand makes you stumble. . ." He was allowing that different things cause different people to stumble. Jesus says that when it comes to sexual sins, you need to know yourself and the things that lead you into sin. And then you need to take radical measures to avoid such sins.

There may be places that you need to avoid because of past associations with sexual sins. Some people need to avoid the bar scene completely because it is so thoroughly associated with a past life of promiscuity. Your friends may make fun of you and call you a prude, but that's okay. You may decide, "I really shouldn't have internet access because I simply can't resist pornography." Or at the very least you might get some accountability software. Here at Faith all of our pastors use Covenant Eyes. The name comes from Job 31 where Job said that he made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully upon women. This software records and rates every web site visited and sends a weekly report to an accountability partner. We've listed the Covenant Eyes web site in the sermon outline.

If you're in a dating relationship, you need to be very honest about the situations that make you stumble. I like to use the illustration of a road that leads to the edge of a cliff. If you want to avoid cars from driving off the cliff, you don't put a fence 2 feet from the edge of the cliff. Somebody might try to slam on the brakes but not be able to stop in time and might crash through the fence. It's much better to build the fence 50 feet from the edge of the cliff so you'll have plenty of room to stop. In order to avoid stumbling, couples that are dating need to put the fence at least 50 feet from the cliff. That will mean agreeing not to be together alone in certain places and at certain times. It will mean setting wise boundaries on physical contact in general.

I want to stress that this radical approach to avoiding sexual sin isn't some burdensome regulation that others impose upon you. This approach flows from the heart of an apprentice who loves Jesus and wants to experience more of Him.

***Fourth, seek satisfaction in God Himself that sensuality can never provide.*** Ultimately God doesn't merely want us to quit sinning sexually. God wants us to put away sexual sins because they are a cheap substitute for deeper pleasures that are found only in Him.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God." We all have a longing to be united to an "other" – someone who will satisfy our loneliness, take away our pain, and make us feel alive. The man standing on the porch of a brothel knocking on the door probably doesn't realize it, but ultimately only God can satisfy his loneliness and take away his pain and give him life.

It would be a terrible mistake to become preoccupied with avoiding our sin. We should become preoccupied with God. When we find satisfaction/pleasure in God Himself, we can put our sexuality into its proper context. We can then understand that the body is good. Our bodies are not our greatest liability; we can present the members of our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness and we can glorify God in our bodies – whether single or married. And we can

now look at other without lust; we can look through eyes of love and actually see their God-given beauty.

And so as we are apprenticed to Jesus in relation to our sexuality, as we deal with sexual sins in biblical terms, and as we adopt Jesus' radical approach to avoiding sexual sins, we can experience satisfaction in God that sensuality was never meant to provide.

Before we pray, I wanted to highlight a resource that some of you might want to consider – especially if this is a life-dominating issue for you. There is a course offered here in Manhattan called “Living Waters.” We’ve included a description of this course in the bulletin: “Living Waters is a Christ-centered, in-depth program for people seeking healing in the areas of sexual and relational brokenness. Living Waters applies to everyone, but is particularly relevant to those struggling with sexual promiscuity or addiction, the effects of sexual abuse, codependency, homosexuality, self-hatred, or the inability to love others well. . . . The goal of Living Waters is to lay a biblical foundation for sexual and relational wholeness in our lives.” Many have found healing through this course; this may be something that God might use in your life. The start date of this course has been postponed until November 2<sup>nd</sup>. [The program will meet Monday nights from 7:00-10:00 p.m. at Westview. There are 25 lessons in this series and the group involves worship, teaching, and small group times. For further information contact Anita Peterman at 776-8533 or [anitakpeterman@yahoo.com](mailto:anitakpeterman@yahoo.com) or go to [www.westviewcommunity.com](http://www.westviewcommunity.com) (click on recovery).]