

Matthew 5:27 – 32

^{5:27} 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.

^{5:31} It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Cultural Background

- Jesus had just announced ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations. The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 16 Jesus was describing how his process of transforming people will have a certain kind of influence in the world. In this section, called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Mt.5:1 – 7:28), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart.

1. How does Jesus' teaching here compare with U.S. pop culture's views on sex?
 - a. Acknowledge that it's difficult to hear or take seriously. Jesus seems prudish and out of date. Etc.
 - b. Acknowledge that it may be difficult to talk about this subject because of past hurt, shame, and not feeling sure that we can trust the other people in the room. (Leader: Gauge how people respond first. Be prepared to share personally about this; the level at which you share will probably set the tone for the other people in the group.)
2. Why is Jesus concerned about what happens in our hearts?
 - a. **PHYSIOLOGY:** Now before I get into the spiritual implications of this, let me demonstrate how this is true in one particular way. Physiologically, your choices shape your desires. If you're a man (I'm not sure how this works out for women) and you take cocaine, play lots of video games, or watch pornography, which are all high intensity escapist fantasy activities, and withdrawal from reality types of activities, the same pathways in your brain get stimulated. What does that do? Then your body produces more testosterone, which causes the hemispheres of your brain to become more separated. What does that do? That hurts your capacity for deeper emotional life. That means you'll be drawn into the same fantasies as before, and more strongly so. So you have the same desires for love, and meaning, and relationship, but you have these addictions to falsehoods that never satisfy you. Your choices shape your desires. It's not just that your desires stay constant. Your desires change, and you can shape them. In particular, you can allow Jesus by his Spirit living in you, to shape them. God created us all through His Word/Son, Jesus, so Jesus knows us intimately. He knows the way we were made. (See William Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*)
 - b. **INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER:** If anger is the heart attitude that gives rise to murder, lust is the heart attitude that gives rise to adultery (and other forms of sexual sin). He wants to cut sin off at the root.
 - c. **RELATIONAL REALISM:** Lust deceives you into thinking that there exists a woman or man out there who exists solely to satisfy your needs. That 'person' is purely a figment of imagination. Then you get smacked upside the head with how difficult marriage and/or dating actually is.
 - i. Illus: 'Through the senses that bring us into contact with the world we are informed of the world and the world's beauty. But at the same time the senses express and make specific the irrational desires of biological individuality: the insatiable thirst of the senses for absolute pleasure is the rebellious tendency of physical individuality to be absolutized as an end in itself. Therefore the experience of the world and the world's beauty, which the senses provide us with, corresponds not to the truth of the world and its beauty, but to the senses' delectable object of the individual senses, serving individual self-containedness. The senses do not constitute and do not recognize the true beauty of the world; they constitute and recognize merely a "phantasm" of this beauty, the distorted image of a beauty subjected to individualistic demand."¹
 - d. **COMMUNITY:** Lust affects how we actually interact with members of the opposite sex and the same sex. An important analogy: In the military, adultery is forbidden because it affects the ability of men to fight side by side and trust each other, and increasingly, for women to fight and serve side by side and trust each other, too. Jesus is building a community of trust with a mission together. What would it be like to not have that trust? Among men? Among women?
 - e. **HONORING MARRIAGE:** What does this show about Jesus' view of marriage?
 - i. If possible, and if appropriate, discuss how important it is to keep your thoughts pure when you're married. And yet how difficult... What is the impact of disciplined vs. undisciplined thoughts?
 - ii. Notice that Jesus' teaching on divorce raises the bar on what marriage is in God's sight. Moses had given the procedure for divorce (Dt.24), which is what Jesus quotes (and rabbinical opinion in the 5th century BC held that wives could also divorce their husbands). However, by the first century, the impact of Greek male-centric culture caused Jewish rabbinical thought to deteriorate. For one, wives were denied the right of divorce. Second, rabbinical opinion was split on the circumstances in which husbands

¹ Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), translation by Norman Russell, p.84

could divorce their wives. Rabbi Hillel was more liberal, and on the side of men, that men could divorce their wives for cooking a bad meal or some such thing. Rabbi Shammai was stricter, teaching that divorce was only permitted on grounds of adultery. Jesus sided against the lenient view that gave men disproportionate power. Elsewhere, he also offhandedly affirmed that Dt.24 should be interpreted to mean that a wife could also divorce her husband, not in a lopsided way granting this right to husbands alone (Mk.10:12).

3. So what does it mean to take Jesus seriously as **people who struggle with lust**?
 - a. Although Jesus' speech is hyperbolic in v.28 – 30, we need to deal quickly and ruthlessly with the 'right eye' or 'right hand' or whatever part of us through which lust affects us.
 - i. PRACTICAL APPLICATION: St. Patrick of Ireland once wrote about baptizing a woman who was very attractive. He said, 'Praise the Lord' that God creates beautiful women. And then he moved on, without lust. That is probably the healthiest and most effective way to combat lust. It's to acknowledge God, and God's work! Right away, that puts our mind in touch with God and combats our tendency to think our own private thoughts.
 - b. MEN struggling with temptation: Temptation comes through the eye. It was somewhat common for men who struggle with lust to blame women for dressing provocatively. Now, there is some warrant for that in Proverbs 7:10, for example, where a woman's clothing matches her fidelity and honor. But in our culture of blame-passing, it is easy for men today to simply blame women for dressing skimpily, thus passing the blame. While acknowledging that modesty could be more helpful, what responsibility must we as men take nevertheless?
 - i. Consider this picture:



And then consider this correlation: The places where women are most physically insecure are precisely the places where their dress is the most regulated. Source: <http://www.womanstats.org/newmapspage.html>.

- ii. Jesus is paving the way for women to be leaders in the church. Later, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16 that both men and women are to pray and prophesy in church

worship services. By Roman law, at that time, women had to dress according to their moral standing in life. Respectable Roman women had to wear a veil, the Roman *palla*, along with the dress called the *stola*. Prostitutes, ex-prostitutes, and other dishonored women had to tie back their hair with ribbons and wear a *toga*, what men usually wore. So what should repentant prostitutes do in a Christian worship service? Paul said that their hair is sufficient as a head covering. Even though it might have been sexually provocative. *Paul seems to follow Jesus in saying that lust is fundamentally the man's mental problem.* See my notes on the passage if you'd like:
http://nagasawafamily.org/paul_1corinthians.11.02-16.sg.pdf

- c. WOMEN struggling with temptation: For women, temptation more often happens through the ear. Although temptation could also come through the eye, as it does with men, women tend to become emotionally and romantically attached to a man by the words he says to her: what he shares about his life, the interest he takes in hers, the questions he asks, the gratitude towards her that he shows, the flattering words he might say, etc. While acknowledging that men don't always know what they're doing, how can we deal faithfully with Jesus in relating to men?
- d. Have meaningful connections with people
- e. Get accountability with others
- f. Ask Jesus how he sees people; don't just see them through the lens of your need
4. What does it mean to take Jesus seriously **as people who are also agents of temptation**?
 - a. MEN: Healthy friendship with women is very important, but sometimes we create emotional intimacy with women when we don't know the consequences of that on them. How can we be more aware of what we're doing, and self-restrained? When do we know if we're really ready to be dating?
 - b. WOMEN: For men, temptation happens through the eye. Discuss this statement, 'Sex appeal is simply a way to play the game.' How do we faithfully follow Jesus in a culture where using sexual suggestion is okay?
5. (optional) When you leave this small group discussion and go back home, and your non-Christian friends ask you what you discussed, how will you talk about it?
 - a. For help, read my devotional on this subject, here:
http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew_dev_05_27-32a.htm

Other Points of Discussion

1. What is the relationship between lust and true love from Jesus' perspective?

For both men and women, lust involves an oversimplification of another person. Men simplify women into sexual objects that are the extension of his sexual desires. What do the female characters do in James Bond? Fall for James Bond and have sex with him! Even when they're supposed to kill him! The Bond women are de-personalized sex objects. They have no desire for trust, safety, long-lasting commitment, or children. And James Bond has so much machismo, they can't resist. What makes this especially strange is that Ian Fleming wrote during what era in British history? The end of British Imperialism, when the British Empire was breaking up. (Casino Royale was in 1953, and he wrote until his death in 1964.) British men were suffering the loss of their machismo and self-delusions of grandeur. Yet what becomes really popular is the James Bond character who can still conquer any villain and bed any woman. Women are de-personalized, fantasy women who only live to satisfy a man's ego and sex drive. That woman doesn't really exist either.

Women simplify men down to the emotional areas of life that matter to her, treating him as an extension of her emotional desire. Jane Austen's novels exemplify this tendency: What do the men in Jane Austen's novels do professionally? Nothing. They are wealthy and aristocratic and do nothing except play the relational intrigue and gossip that the women do. This is ironic given that, at the time Jane Austen was writing, the British Empire was on the ascendancy; British men were sailing all over the world in conquest and adventure. Yet Austen does not deal at all with the traditional tension between a man's desire for adventure versus a woman's desire for stability. Instead, she simplifies men down to how men matter to women. Thus, the remedy for lust is to see the whole person.

For a man, the intermediate step in dealing with lust is to resist the intake of images. He must release those images to the Lord.

For a woman, the intermediate step in dealing with lust is to resist the tendency to obsess about a man, define herself in relation to him, and treat him as an extension of herself. For women, discussing lust and passages like this ventures almost immediately into the topic of dating. This is typically because a woman's temptation to define herself and find identity in a man comes as a result of some interaction, friendship, and emotional intimacy.

2. Why does Jesus assume that only men can divorce their wives?

In Deuteronomy 24, the passage where Moses talks about divorce said 'a husband who divorces his wife...' Hebrew is a language that is gendered. It's like Spanish and unlike English where we have neuter words. In Spanish, one can say, 'ellos' to mean 'men' as well as to mean 'men and women,' for example. So the Deuteronomy passage uses the male third person Hebrew pronoun in a way that is inclusive of women, for space reasons. Rabbinical opinion recognized this and simultaneously applied Dt.24 to women being able to initiate divorce: 'a wife who divorces her husband...' This was held until the 5th century BC, where we have documentation of it. However, the impact of Greek culture on Jewish life reversed this at some point between the 5th century BC and the 1st century AD. Rabbis began to argue that only a man was permitted to initiate divorce. And Rabbi Hillel in particular held that a husband could divorce his wife for fairly trivial reasons. By the time of Jesus, in Jewish culture, a wife was very vulnerable and, in some parts of the Jewish community influenced by Hillel and others, at the whim and mercy of their husbands. A divorced woman was also vulnerable because social life was family-based, not individual-based. So a divorced woman would almost certainly have had to seek another man. Thus, the husband who casually divorces his wife (i.e. for any reason but her unfaithfulness) causes at least one adultery (hers), and usually two (also his own, if he remarries). The reasoning was, in Jesus' view, that the original marriage was not broken. The husband would also be failing Jesus' teaching in Mt.5:21 - 26 about reconciliation.

But the issue here is not only divorce, but who remarries, and when. It is assumed by the force and logic of Jesus' teaching that a man who remarries after a 'casual divorce' does in fact commit adultery. Jesus is forcing men to see the consequences of casual divorce on women. He is assuming that his audience understands that men who remarry under such conditions do in fact commit adultery, even though that case is not stated in the text itself.

One person also asked about the case where a woman was divorced against her will and suddenly finds herself unmarriageable because Jesus has denounced those who marry a divorced woman. It seems to me that Jesus is clearly sympathetic to the woman who is divorced against her will. His solution to that is to forbid divorces of that nature in the first place, and place a premium on reconciliation to preserve the marriage. Jesus was re-establishing the sanctity of marriage as God's ideal, and taking power away from husbands and giving it back to God. But apparently, he was not relaxing his standards on marriage, divorce and remarriage.

3. What about domestic abuse? Or by extension, other things like desertion, etc.?

Textually, we would have to think about passages beyond Matthew 5. God's ideal for marriage, most notably in Gen.1 - 2, would clearly not involve domestic abuse or desertion, etc. Genesis 1 - 4 taught Israel that women are co-image bearers of God with men, that the marriage unit is more central than the extended family unit, and that the source of polygamy was the violent family of Cain. The impact of Genesis 1 - 4 upon Israel's consciousness did have such an effect on them that domestic abuse was seen as a gross violation of Israel's covenant with God. Insofar as we know, domestic abuse only occurred in the worst periods of time of Israel's spiritual life: the time of the later judges in the Book of Judges. Although we might question whether the Old Testament authors, presumably being male, simply didn't acknowledge all the instances of (say) domestic abuse, we must also remember that the prophetic authors were prosecutors, presenting God's case against Israel before them, and they had every reason to expose every sin Israel was committing, especially against the foundational benchmark of Genesis 1 - 4.

Coming back to Matthew 5. Some people would extend the exception of 'unfaithfulness' to cases of domestic violence and not just 'sexual unfaithfulness'. I'm very sympathetic to that, and would generally agree. That, too, has biblical precedent. In the Jewish Law, when it came to actual crimes, physical punishment could be

administered in the household; but disproportionate or serious bodily harm was forbidden. Excessive bodily harm was grounds for the abuser to be punished equivalently (and eye for an eye), and for the injured person to be separated from the abuser even in cases of servanthood contract. It follows that physical domestic abuse, since it is not administered legitimately for a crime but illegitimately by sin, can be grounds for separation or divorce. But I think that those of us who do allow for that need to carefully think through this. There are also rare cases of wives inflicting physical abuse on husbands. And there are forms of prolonged verbal or emotional abuse that might merit expanding the category in that direction, too. And in reasoning this way, are we opening the door to 'permissive position' of Rabbi Hillel, in a way that may ultimately disadvantage women again? It may be wise to address domestic abuse as a serious problem *within marriage*, seeing it as a reason for physical separation with the hope of accountability, counseling, transformation, and restoration. After all, a Christian wife has immediate recourse to larger, and public, community action holding her husband accountable, according to Matthew 18:15ff. Jesus empowers others to intervene. A husband who ultimately does not leave physical abuse behind will almost certainly commit adultery because of the psychological power issues involved, freeing the wife to legitimately divorce him and remarry someone else with an absolutely clear conscience that she had done everything she could. So while I would personally grant it, I would also prefer to follow the process I just stated.

4. What are some other Scripture passages that are relevant to talking about issues of lust and sexuality?

- God's Original Intent For Our Sexuality Was Good:
 - Marriage of male and female was made in the image of God, and very good! (Genesis 1:27 – 28)
Our sexuality is 'very good' when we are in proper relation to God and living within His vision for us.
 - There was no sin, no shame of being naked (transparent) with each other (Genesis 2:22 – 25)
 - Jesus is restoring human beings to God's original creation order (Matthew 19:1 – 12) through union with himself
- God is Healing Us
 - God is healing human nature first in Jesus (Romans 8:3). God is so good that He already perfected a human response to Himself in the person of Jesus, who took to himself a fallen human nature, and lived among other fallen human beings, so he knows what it's like to be tempted (Hebrews 4:14 – 16).
 - God is now healing us by the Spirit of Jesus (Romans 8:9 – 11)
 - Jesus draws us gently but truthfully to himself, by helping us acknowledge our sexual brokenness (John 4:1 – 30)
- God's Forgiveness
 - When we believe in Jesus, our old self of sin is crucified with Christ, and we have his newness of resurrection life (Romans 6:5 – 7)
 - When we are joined to Jesus, God has no condemnation for us, because He has no condemnation for Jesus! (Romans 8:1; John 4:1 – 30)
- Our Identity in Christ
 - Our identity is in Christ, not in our moral failure, nor even in our moral successes (Romans 6:8 – 11)
- God is Sending Us in Mission
 - Jesus desires for us to worship him in his Spirit and in the truth of who we are, which involves sharing our story with others who need to hear it (John 4:31 – 42)