

“Kingdom Living – Radical Purity”

Matthew 5:27-30

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She was in the University library when she first felt his eyes.

She hadn't noticed him when she sat down.

But as she began to read she had the sense that someone was looking at her – it was as if she could feel it.

She glanced up to see an average looking guy sitting one table to her right and when she did he looked away.

She looked back to her book but soon she felt it again.

This time she tried to look without looking by using her peripheral vision, and sure enough he was looking.

It felt so uncomfortable that she moved but before long she felt it again and turning to her left, there he was again – just looking – this time more boldly.

As his eyes traced the lines of her body, she felt absolutely violated.

It was insulting, dehumanizing, and even threatening.

She gathered up her books and quickly left the library watching to see that she wasn't followed.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

At least among Christians, and even among most people, the physical act of adultery is thought of as wrong.

Most people don't have sufficient understanding of why it is wrong, how it is a violation of everything human and holy, but at least they still think it is wrong.

But how about the second part of what Jesus said?

Do we think he was serious?

Do we really believe what he said?

We don't want to.

We want to think he was exaggerating.

We want to think that if we avoid the physical act of adultery we are okay.

Jesus' words fly in the face of the lies of the world and the lies of our own desires.

We call it freedom to be able to indulge our sexual desires and we call it prudery and repression to curb our sexual desires in any way.

Hedonism is its technical name – the philosophy that I have the right to pleasure.

If anything is not providing me pleasure then I have the right to change it because my pleasure (usually called “happiness”) is the highest value.

The appetite for sex is enormously out of proportion to its proper function partly because it is stimulated so much by our culture.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “The biological purpose of sex is children, just as the biological purpose of eating is to repair the body. Now if we eat whenever we feel inclined and just as much as we want, it is quite likely that most of us will eat too much: but not terrifically too much. One man may eat enough for two, but he does not eat enough for ten. The appetite goes a little beyond its biological purpose, but not enormously. But if a healthy young man indulged his sexual appetite whenever he felt inclined, and if each act produced a baby, then in ten years he might easily populate a small village. This appetite is in ludicrous and preposterous excess of its function.

“Or take it another way. You can get a large audience together for a ‘strip-tease’ act. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate onto the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a steak or a bit of bacon. Would you not think that in that country something had gone terribly wrong with the appetite for food? (Likewise) would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally odd about the state of the sex instinct among us?”

Isn't it at least interesting that the first two issues Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount are the very two issues that are so pervasive in our world and cause so much human suffering: violence and sex.

The first issue Jesus addresses is murder/anger and now the second one he addresses is the perversion, the misuse or abuse, of sex.

But before we continue with the theme, it is important to place it in its context.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing the lifestyle of citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is not just a reference to the place where believers go when they die.

It is the primary name Jesus gives to His and His Father's rule and authority.

When we speak of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia we think not only of the geography of the country but the supreme authority of the Saud family.

It is this latter sense in which Jesus is using the word "kingdom" – the sphere of His sovereign authority.

There is coming a day in "the age to come" when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

But in "this age" other authorities, powers and ideas appear to rule.

Jesus came announcing the good news that the "kingdom of heaven" – the "age to come" – God's presence and authority - had reached back into "this age".

The age to come and this age overlap.

And in this time, God, in Jesus, has entered the kingdom of this world, this age, and is calling people to be part of the kingdom of heaven, part of the age to come.

He is calling us to be citizens of his kingdom, living in his loving presence and under his benevolent authority.

As Paul said it, "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

"Eternal" meaning not only eternity long but also a quality of life – life we were originally created to enjoy.

And so the "gift of God" is a new kind of life – kingdom life.

Those who trust in Jesus Christ as saving-Lord are given a new citizenship – in the kingdom of heaven.

And in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes some of what life is like as a citizen of the kingdom.

As we saw last week, to show the contrast between the old way of living and the new way, Jesus illustrates with six situations.

<u>Situation</u>	<u>The Old way</u>	<u>The new way</u>
Situation # 1 – which we are looking at today: Irritation with others	no murder	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
Situation #2 Sexual attraction	no intercourse	Love instead of lust
Situation #3 Unhappy with marriage	divorce	no divorce
And you can see the rest: Wanting to be believed	make vow to convince	truth with integrity
Personally injured	retaliation	Help the one who injured you.
You have an enemy	hate	Love and bless them

And so the King, Jesus, calls his Kingdom people to a wholly different lifestyle.

Matthew 5:27-30

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus begins by quoting from Bible, specifically from the 7th commandment:

Exodus 20:14 “You shall not commit adultery.”

He and everyone listening to him knew full well what the biblical penalty was for adultery.

Deuteronomy 22:22 “If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel.”

People felt self-righteous on this 7th commandment as long as they had not had an overt physical affair.

They had kept the law.

But Jesus, the author of the Law, interprets the law significantly more broadly.

He says in the 28th verse, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

“Looks at a woman lustfully” means in order to desire having her sexually.

The word “lust” conveys the sensuality of the issue but not the idea of possession.

In this “look” there is total disregard for the person (either the woman or her husband) and a fixation only on a desire to have for one’s own sexual pleasure.

This look is not casual but persistent, the desire is not involuntary or momentary but cherished.” A. B. Bruce Expositor’s Greek Testament Vol 1 p108

This look is a “staring at a woman in order to lust after her” (Bruner 183)

It is “the leering look” (Gundry 88)

This “looking” not a passing glance but a thought-filled continuing “looking”.

Looking at a beautiful person is a natural drive built in at creation.

And in fact there is some element of desire built into that.

But staring or leering is a drive built in by the “fall” from creation.

This is a looking in order to, for the purpose of, lust.

In such staring “the other person is no longer really a unique human being; she or she is now simply kindling for our fire, a thing, a way for us to enjoy ourselves, to feel our power.

This “looking” goes beyond seeing like resentment goes beyond irritation or theft goes beyond admiration. (see Bruner 183)

Again, Jesus is not condemning “seeing” as if we can’t even see or imagine a naked body.

“The New Testament does not equate temptation with sin...sin begins at the point of consent, not with temptation itself and not first in the overt act.” F. Stagg in the Broadman Bible Commentary Vol 8 p109 on Matthew

Martin Luther wrote, “We should not make the bowstring too taut here, as if anyone who is tempted...would be damned for it... If an evil thought is involuntary it is not a mortal sin. It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: ‘I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair...’” Luther Sermon on the Mount 88

It is true that in the Law the specifics of adultery included a **married** person.

And so, yes, there were people who tried to rationalize by thinking “Since ‘adultery’ refers technically to a man’s affair with a married woman, does it mean that it is not adultery if the woman is single?”

Likewise with Jesus’ broader interpretation there might be some who would think, “Is it only men who can lust?”

Or “Is it not adultery if I’m not married?”

Is it not adultery if I don’t know the person I’m imagining or if it’s just a picture in a magazine, on the internet or in a movie?”

That is all called “casuistry”: Excessively subtle reasoning intended to rationalize or mislead.

Foolish is the single or married person who does not understand the implication for all sexuality – an implication that is stated explicitly in other NT passages such as I Corinthians 6.

“But I tell you that **anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**”

We are all adulterers by Jesus standard.

I think we respond to that in one of two ways:

We don’t like it, we don’t want to be considered as bad as those who actually commit physical adultery and so we just “flat-out” ignore his teaching.

But that won’t change the truth that we are guilty and stand condemned before a holy God as surely as the others.

The other way of responding is to acknowledge our sin, ask God’s forgiveness, and seek to live a kingdom lifestyle in this matter of sex.

So what are we to do to live a kingdom lifestyle?

How do avoid this pandemic and systemic affliction of lust?

Listen to Jesus in Matthew 5:29-30

“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

How’s that for strong language?

You can only imagine how those words have been abused through the years.

If Jesus meant that in a woodenly literal way, all God’s people would go to heaven as mutilated blobs.

Obviously, as I just did, so Jesus here is using hyperbole, exaggeration, to make his point.

But what is the point?

I think there are two equally important issues that Jesus here illustrates:

- One is how ruthless we must be in controlling ourselves.
- And the second is the absurdity of thinking we can control sin only by stronger and stronger methods of self-control.

At first glance those two appear contradictory.

We are to control ourselves but controlling ourselves is fruitless.

Given the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount and the rest of Scripture, which authorship is superintended by the same God, I think Jesus is pointing out both truths.

Let me explain.

It seems to me that Jesus quite clearly calls us to be ruthless in our efforts to stop our lustful/adulterous ways.

Decisive action is called for.

Don’t think you can break off a dangerous relationship slowly.
Don’t assume you can look at those videos, movies, magazines or read those books with no harm done to your soul.

1 Peter 2:11 “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

1 Timothy 4:7 “Train yourself to be godly.” NIV or as the NASB translation says it, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” NASB

1 Corinthians 6:18 “Flee from sexual immorality.”

2 Timothy 2:22 “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness...”

Not all people are tempted to sin in the same way or by the same things.

Thus any universal rule about what is appropriate for a believer to see is hopelessly inappropriate.

So each believer must ask him/herself “If my eye causes me to sin, don’t look. If my hand causes me to sin, don’t do it. If my foot causes me to sin, don’t go.”

Some of us may then need to deliberately stop reading certain literature, watching certain kinds of movies, going to certain places.

Drastic measures are called for.

I could go on to preach an entire sermon or many sermons about the things we should avoid as God’s kingdom people in order to live a kingdom lifestyle.

But you have heard those sermons before and those sermons won’t help you one bit if all you are doing is trying harder.

Men join accountability groups and make promises to avoid salacious literature, stay off porn sites on the internet, stop viewing titillating movies and whatever else might tempt them.

And for a while they control themselves by removing the obvious temptations.

But then opportunity comes along in the form of a woman at work who always stands just a little too close or a neighbor girl who isn’t careful about the way she dresses, or working in a convenience store with pornography readily available, and our minds imagine all kinds of things.

I have no idea what triggers it for women, but you women and older girls know.

And we find that for all the controls so carefully constructed around us, when opportunity came, our hearts haven't changed.

We **controlled** our evil hearts for a season but they hadn't **changed**.

Mark 7:21-23 "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man `unclean.'"

The issue is one of the heart – **what would you do if you could get away with it?**

- You can make it impossible to commit physical adultery by mutilating yourself or living as a hermit.
- You can make it less likely to commit mental adultery by never looking at the opposite sex in person or in pictures.
- Or like the Taliban we can cover women from head to toe in Burkas.
- Or maybe we can even demonize the opposite sex – learning to hate them so as not to be tempted.

But we can reduce the temptation without ever changing the heart.

Or to use Jesus' illustrations, it is absurd to think we can control sin by stronger and stronger methods of self-control.

We can gouge out our eyes and cut off our hands but it won't get at the root issue.

Kingdom people aren't just better at keeping the King's laws, they have the King's heart.

They don't just not lust, they learn to love.

We need God to change our hearts.

THIS IS WHERE THE SPIRIT COMES IN!

What we need is a whole new relationship between men and women.

The problem lies at the root of who we are – we need a transformation, a renewing of our minds by the Spirit.

Romans 12:2 "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

The Bible says in Romans 8:13,14 “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

I repeat: “By the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body...”

The prophets foretold a day when God would take up residence within his people empowering them to obey in a whole new way.

Ezekiel 36:27 “And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke excitedly of the transformation this presence of the Spirit would produce in his disciples.

Likewise the Apostle Paul wrote, “2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we...are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

One NT scholar commented: “The coming of the Spirit has brought the old to an end and has appropriated the work of Christ through whom the effects of the Fall have been radically reversed. Indeed, through Christ and by the Spirit we are being transformed so as to bear the likeness for which we were intended at the beginning. In the freedom that the Spirit provides, we have seen the glory of God himself – as it is made evident to us in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ – and we have come to experience that glory, and will do so in an ever-increasing way until we come to the final glory.” (Gordon Fee in God's Empowering Spirit 319)

Jesus has promised something way beyond a more disciplined self-help program when it comes to kingdom living.

I am not capable of adequately describing it, but God's promise is that he is supernaturally working within us.

And all the self-control in the world cannot by itself overcome a sinful heart.

But by the person of his Spirit Jesus will empower us not just to not lust but change us to love.

And so, I think, Jesus implies, through his “gouged eye” and “amputated hand” illustration, that kingdom living is a matter of the “Spirit’s” empowerment and “my” response.

It is a finely nuanced balance that must not be tipped too far in either direction.

It is not our unaided effort, which would be moralism or legalism.

Neither is it the Spirit’s work apart from our participation, which would be something of a passive “surrender,” or “letting go and letting God”.

Instead it is “dependent action”.

The Christian must say “yes” to the Spirit’s work in us.

There is a very relevant instruction given by the Apostle Paul to his younger protégé Timothy.

Knowing the power of sexual temptation, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:2 “Treat... older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”

In the light of Jesus’ teaching I imagined what Timothy would have done with that instruction.

His thinking and actions might have gone something like this:

- Starts with recognition that by grace he has been brought into the King’s kingdom – it is love that has wooed him and won him.
Love calls forth love. He desires to please his King.
- He understands that by grace God’s Spirit now resides within him to change him, transform him over time.
- He knows that his heart has not yet been totally transformed and so he consciously, actively depends on the Spirit to increasingly change his heart as evidenced by his frequent prayers to that end.
- He guards his heart both positively and negatively:

Positively by feeding on God's word and being in fellowship with those who want to be like the King.

Negatively by taking reasonable and practical steps to reduce the temptation – he doesn't spend inordinate time alone with women other than his wife, he is careful about what he looks at or reads.

- Knowing his dependence on the Spirit, he is relentless in immediately asking for the Spirit's help in not allowing an evil thought to spin out of control.
And when he fails, he immediately invites, and by faith receives, God's forgiveness and restoration.
- He invites the Spirit's help in aggressively thinking of each woman with whom he deals as a mother or sister whom he loves and desires only what is best for her.
- And Timothy expects the Spirit of God to transform his heart as he trusts and obeys.

Oh, how much I wish it were easier than that!

If God wants me to be different, why doesn't he just take all those evil desires away in one fell swoop?

Why doesn't he just give me a completely transformed heart right now?

The biggest part of the answer is "I don't know".

What I do know is that the Bible says God will use our lifetime to train us in righteousness, until we "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

That's what I want for you and for me.

Not just controlled sin but lively, exuberant good.

Not just repression but transformation.

Not just less lust but more love.

Kingdom people!