

Week 7 – Purity: A Core Concern – Matthew 5:27-30

Scripture Reading: Job 31:1-4

Introduction

This week we are continuing our Sermon on the Mount series and this is the second message in the section where Jesus uses six contrasts as he expands upon the Law and reveals that righteousness is more than external performance

For centuries, the Jewish religious leaders had taught the people a form of righteousness that had to do with conformity to a lengthy list of do's and don'ts

And the scribes and Pharisees were really good at establishing elaborate and narrowly focused guidelines to describe what they believed was necessary to please God

But, as we saw last week and will see this week, what they were teaching in these first two examples was taken straight from the Ten Commandments – last week it was the sixth commandment and this week he looks at the seventh

In fact, both of these first two examples Jesus says the people are being taught are direct, word-for-word quotes from the Greek version of the Old Testament “You shall not murder” and “You shall not commit adultery”

And as we saw last week, Jesus wasn't finding fault with the Old Testament Law in any way – he was finding fault with the way the scribes and Pharisees were interpreting the Law

Their interpretation was too narrow so that it allowed for a person to believe themselves to be innocent of violating the Law unless they had performed a very specific act

But along comes Jesus and he advances and expands the understanding of the Law to show that God requires not merely an external display of righteousness but righteousness of the heart

Last week we saw how Jesus enlarged the understanding of his hearers concerning the lawful prohibition against murder to also include unresolved, contemptuous anger toward one's fellow man

And this morning we are going to see how he does the same thing with the sin of adultery and how unrestrained desire for a sexual relationship that is off-limits is also sin

And just as we saw that it isn't just the actual, external act of murder that is wrong but also harboring the thoughts from which murder springs, we will see this week that God forbids mental and emotional adultery the same as he forbids actually consummating the adultery

God isn't only concerned with obedience to the letter of the law but also with fidelity to the spirit of the law and the intent of the law

So Jesus taught about how his followers are expected to not only avoid specific external acts but to honor God from their heart by having righteous thoughts, motives, and attitudes –

And how God's real concern is with the inner man or woman because it's from the inner person that external acts spring

So, although Jesus begins with the topic of adultery, which is a specific crime, his actual topic in this section of his sermon is purity – specifically sexual purity – and how a citizen of the kingdom must live in relation to the opposite sex

If you are taking notes, our Roman numeral one is **Legal Purity** where we will look at the actual prohibition against adultery as stated in the Law found in verse 27

Roman numeral two is **Reimagined Purity** where we will consider Jesus' expanded teaching in verse 28

And Roman numeral three is **Protected Purity** from verses 29-30 where Jesus describes the radical attitude one must have to maintain God's required standard of purity

If you haven't done so already, please open your Bible and join me in Matthew 5 so you can follow along as we begin by looking at the idea of legal purity

I. Legal Purity

Adultery, like murder, has historically been forbidden by law around the globe

But, while it remains technically illegal in many places, laws against adultery are being repealed around the world

And many people don't seem all that bothered by adultery and some even go so far as to legitimize it if "love" is involved – at least in our culture

Even self-proclaimed Christians and church leaders are prone to argue that God wants them to be happy so if sleeping with someone who isn't their spouse makes them happy who's to say it's really all that bad

After all, if they have fallen out of love with their spouse and someone else comes along and they fall in love with them what could possibly be wrong with that?

But one has to choose to ignore the plain language of Scripture to come to that conclusion

After all, the prohibition against adultery is the seventh of the Ten Commandments is found in **Exodus 20:14** and the language couldn't be more clear – *You shall not commit adultery.*

And the penalty for adultery which is spelled out in **Leviticus 20:10** serves to emphasize just how seriously God considers it to be – *If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

Various civil laws today define adultery in different ways but the Bible is consistently clear as to what adultery is

I want you to notice that that verse from Leviticus speaks of committing adultery with the wife of his neighbor

And that reveals an interesting fact that I was unaware of until just this week – adultery in the Bible is a very specific crime in that each and every time it is mentioned it involves a married woman

So, by definition adultery is illicit sex with another man's wife and whether the man involved was married or unmarried the act was considered to be adultery for both partners involved

That's not to say that a man, whether married or unmarried, having sex outside of marriage with an unmarried partner isn't a serious sin because it is – it's just called *fornication* in that instance and not adultery

It's important that we understand this distinction because by using the context of adultery, Jesus indicates that the "woman" in this illustration is the wife of another man and is therefore known to be off-limits to any other man

There are plenty of reasons adultery is such a serious sin

Adultery is a lie that promises happiness and fulfillment that it cannot deliver as it sows chaos and devastation

Because adultery is destructive; first to those who actually indulge in it and then to those who are only tangentially involved such as an innocent spouse and children but also society as a whole suffers from its corrosive effects

Adultery, according to its biblical definition, also destroys two marriages as one half of each marriage covenant breaks a promise made before witnesses to be faithful to the other – but in any event it destroys at least one marriage

But, more importantly, in the case of Christian marriage, it breaks a promise made before God thereby indicating a turning away from God himself

And yet as a society we seem to be moving rapidly away from viewing adultery as a serious sin as our national media celebrate sexual liberation and the view that everyone should do whatever makes them feel good in the moment

But as we move in the direction of minimizing adultery, Jesus moves in the other as he expands the act itself to include the heart attitude behind the act and he reimagines purity to be internal as well as external

II. Reimagined Purity

Look with me again at verses 27-28 so we can see both sides of the contrast Jesus makes together [Matthew 5:27-28]

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.

Once again we see the formula found throughout this section of the sermon – “You have heard” and then “But I say”
As Jesus reveals the inadequate understanding of the religious leaders then contrasts it with God’s intent behind the prohibition found in the Law

Let’s take a few moments and define some terms so that we can have a clear understanding of what Jesus is saying here
First, let’s consider the phrase “lustful intent” which is the ESV translation of a single Greek word *epithumeo* (ep-ee-thoo-meh'-o)

That Greek word basically means to desire something very much or to long for something and whether it is viewed negatively or positively depends on the object of the longing

Obviously in the passage before us it is meant in a negative sense so it is translated as “lustful intent”

But we see the same word used in a positive sense by the words in **Matthew 13:17** where he quotes Jesus as saying –
For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

In all, the Greek word *epithumeo* appears 16 times in the New Testament and one of the ways it is translated as a negative emotion in the ESV is “covet”

And that additional translation helps us to understand our next phrase that we want to define which is, “looks at”

That phrase carries with it the connotation of being arrested by or taking a keen interest in something

What it describes is more than a glance or passing notice – it means to linger in looking at or to gaze upon something

And it’s a present participle in the Greek which could perhaps be better translated as “keeps looking at”

We need to understand that sexual desire itself is not wrong – in fact, desire for the opposite sex is from God

God created sex and he created us to have strong sexual desires but he also provided us with the perfect context within which to indulge those desires and it’s called MARRIAGE

And to misuse this good gift from God in a way that he doesn’t intend for us to use it is what is wrong

We need to understand, though, that it’s not wrong to see an attractive woman and to notice that she is attractive and I would say that it’s not even wrong if that recognition causes a fleeting desire

We have to look at the entirety of what Jesus says here

Just as it’s not wrong to *feel* anger – because anger is typically an automatic response to a stimulus and is somewhat beyond our control – Jesus still says it’s wrong to harbor anger or to allow anger to cause you to behave in a contemptuous way

Likewise, it’s not the initial feeling of desire that is wrong – it’s not wrong to be tempted

But continuing to gaze at someone whom God forbids – and every married woman who is not your wife is off limits to you – and to allow the desire for her to grow unrestrained is sin

Scottish theologian A.B. Bruce [**Bruce**] put it this way:

“The look is not casual but persistent, the desire not involuntary or momentary, but cherished. It is not the first glance that is sin, but the second that swells with lust and feeds upon the subject.”

And Jesus says that lingering over and nurturing an illicit desire is to commit adultery with the object of your desire in your heart

Many men claim with a grin that their wives allow them to look all they want as long as they don't touch and that's a dangerous path to be on

Because it's the lingering look that creates the longing that God calls lust and says is adultery of the heart

And despite our best intentions, adultery of the heart can lead to physical adultery as King David – the man after God's own heart – discovered when he looked too long at Bathsheba as we read all about in 2Samuel 11

Jesus was talking to men so he used the example of a man lusting after a married woman but sexual sin isn't limited

So I believe we are safe in applying this teaching to men and women alike and that there is likely little harm in doing Scripture injustice by expanding "adultery of the heart" to include "fornication of the heart" since both are serious sins so long as we recognize that Jesus was specifically speaking of the particular sin of adultery

Just know that the language that Jesus uses describes an irreversible fact that has already occurred the moment the lust is conceived and that it exists at the very core of the violator's being – emotional and mental infidelity makes one guilty

So, what can we do to protect our purity? Jesus turns to that next in verses 29-30

III. Protected Purity

Look with me at **Matthew 5:29-30** –

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.

Just as Jesus introduced a radical way to view sexual sin he also prescribed a radical prophylactic

Because sexual desire is a powerful force and it requires strong measures to keep it within proper bounds

Now, we need to take what Jesus says here seriously – and what he says is literally true it *is* better to lose a member of your body than to go to hell

But Jesus isn't actually saying the cure for adultery of the heart is for a person to start hacking pieces off of themselves

Self-mutilation was associated in Scripture with pagan worship and demon possession and therefore prohibited for those who follow God

The saying Jesus uses here is actually a common Jewish expression of extreme discipline and is a form of hyperbole meant to get the attention of one's listeners

Still, some people over the years have taken Jesus' words here literally and harmed themselves unnecessarily

The early church father, **Origen** of Alexandria, who lived from AD 185-254, was one of them

Feeling beset by sensual desires and wishing to cure himself he first tried rolling naked over sharp briars and when that didn't work he took the drastic step of castrating himself

He later regretted having done so because that also didn't prevent his feelings and the Council of Nicaea later determined that self-mutilation was a sin

Jesus never meant to imply that removing one's right eye could cure lust because they would still have their left eye with which to gaze and even if both eyes were removed one could still lust with their mind's eye

Jesus' whole point was that sin is an internal matter of the heart and not an external physical act

Jesus is talking about taking drastic steps to get rid of temptation and if you are tempted by what you see – don't look!

Behave as if you had actually removed your eyes and thrown them away and do not let that which tempts you be within your vision

Don't look at what leads to temptation, don't go where temptation dwells, don't do the things that entice you to sin

To put it in modern terms – if the problem is the internet get rid of your computer and your smartphone; if the problem is TV sell it or put it by the curb; if your route to work causes you to see someone you lust after change your route or if it's a co-worker change your job

You get the idea – do the radical surgery necessary to rid yourself of the avenue to temptation to sin

Jesus says that anything that stands between us and him must be ruthlessly, even savagely, torn out or cut off and thrown away

We're always tempted to seek to do the minimum or to seek the middle ground but where sin is involved – and especially when sexual sin is involved – many an unfortunate person has discovered that half measures won't do

But also notice that these measures are quite personal – Jesus wasn't advocating for a different kind of legalism than the religious leaders were teaching – he says if *your* eye and if *your* hand are the source of temptation to remove them

He wasn't talking about anyone else's eyes and hands

We are all different and what one can safely tolerate might well tempt another so our response must be what works for us as an individual and not try to apply our safety measures to everyone

Conclusion

These are hard teachings and the standard that Jesus reveals in them show us just how guilty we are when it comes to what God requires of us

We need to remember that the Sermon on the Mount was the first sermon we have recorded for us as Jesus began his public ministry and Jesus wasn't at this point attacking the scribes and Pharisees

In this sermon, Jesus was only exposing the inaccuracy of their teaching and the re-orienting of thought that is the mark of a true citizen of the kingdom of heaven

And what Jesus said about righteousness could only result in two courses of action

A person could understand and accept the truth of what Jesus was revealing which leads inevitably to one being poor in spirit and hungering and thirsting for the righteousness that only God can supply

Or a person could choose to reject it and continue on in the false righteousness of religious symbolism and practice

And that remains the choice today

These are hard teachings without a doubt and we don't tend to like to hear things that reveal us as we truly are because it makes us uncomfortable

Ultimately, the majority of the religious leaders of Jesus' day rejected his message and sought to put Jesus to death because they didn't like what he revealed and they wanted to go back to the way things had always been

When one's willful conduct contradicts one's theology one or the other must change – it's impossible to live with that kind of dichotomy

So what we come to understand is that much of the sexual sin that we see all around us and even within us is a matter of a choice to live to please oneself rather than to please God and that all the contortions engaged in to justify it are products of the same bad hearts that caused the sin in the first place

When we looked at **Matthew 5:8** a few weeks ago in our study of the Beatitudes we saw that a pure heart is one that is unalloyed and focused on God and that this pure heart is a gift to those who accept his Son

But it's a gift that we can nurture and grow through focusing on the things of God found in his Word and by heeding the urging of the Holy Spirit

The siren song of the world is tempting and it has no greater weapon to cause God's people to stumble and fall into sin and disgrace than sexual enticement

I believe that's why the enemy has chosen to surround us with it and to cause us to want to reclassify it as not only an aberration or an illness but as actually being normal

True Christ-followers hunger and thirst for righteousness and that requires being as concerned with the inner person as they are with external actions

What Jesus has to say is revealing and convicting to those who have ears to hear

But the good news – actually the very best news – is that God has provided for our success

Christ died on the cross to provide us with the ability to live to please God and we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to assist us

But still, the choice is yours as to what standard you will live by and whom you will live to please

Let's pray