

**DEALING WITH SEXUAL AND MARITAL SIN**  
**Christ's Keys for Successful Living**  
**Matthew 5:27-32**  
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We continue in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. *“If your eye causes you to sin, gauge it out. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 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. It has been said that anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness causes her to commit adultery and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery.”*

This fragile china cup I hold represents some of you in terms of the wholesomeness of your sexuality. You may be single or you may be married but you have not sinned sexual nor are you even bothered by sexually impure thoughts. Others of you look like this cup but on closer examination there's a chip or a nick or hairline crack in the cup. There have been moments when you have expressed sexuality in a wrongful manner or have thought impurely. But the cup is basically in good condition. Few flaws. Some of us in this room our sexuality looks very much like a cup that has been dropped, broken into a number of pieces and then carefully put back together again with glue. Maybe from a distance we look like we are whole but on closer examination there are major fault lines in our life, major imperfections and failures, which we are keenly aware of. Somehow we've got the pieces back together again but it isn't the same as it was before. The original innocence and purity is gone. There's still others in this room that feel no longer as a cup which is whole. You are shattered and torn apart by the wrongful use of sexuality. You wonder if you could ever be whole again and even if God himself could ever put the pieces back together. You have lost control of yourself with sexual impurity and sexual immorality and even though you may have tried to put yourself back together it seems like whatever you've tried has only been akin to putting more gasoline on the flames.

As we look at this message today I want you to focus in on what kind of cup you are. Others may not have a cup that is like yours. Some are very broken in their sexuality and some are very whole. Let those who are whole not take an attitude toward those who are broken as somehow those people are despicable. Obviously if you are whole in the area of sexuality you have been tested in other areas. Each of us needs to come to a subject such as this by carefully examining before the Lord where we are. Neither being defeated if we are cast down but looking to the grace of God to pick us up nor being elevated with pride if we are in a condition of wholesomeness.

As we look at a text as I have read today I think we need first of all to focus upon the things the Lord is not saying about sexual sin. Often it is the case when we look at a passage that if we prematurely jump into it without sufficiently looking at its overall context we may gain wrong impressions, even make wrongful doctrinal conclusions and bring thereby false guilt into our lives. I want to lay out some parameters. Some things this scripture is not saying to us about sexual temptation.

One is this: Jesus is not saying that sexual temptation equals sexual sin. Unfortunately there are some who feel to be tempted is to be sinful and that is not the case. Temptation has four different levels to it.

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The first level of temptation is suggestion. We ponder the question, “Is this something I would like to do?” Then suggestion moves into consideration. “Should I do this?” The third level is consent. “I have inwardly agreed to do it.” The fourth level is commission, “I do it.”

The first two levels of temptation do not involve sin. If they involve sin then temptation couldn't even come to us. Temptation, in order to be temptation, must suggest itself and it must meet with initial preliminary consideration. Even the Lord himself was tempted. The suggestion was given to him and he had to consider it as an option. If the Lord didn't have temptation in that manner and if sin is located on the temptation level then the Lord couldn't have been without sin. So the first two levels of the temptation process are not of themselves sin. If you are tempted to look lustfully, the suggestion and the consideration are not of themselves sin.

The Old Testament located sin as occurring on the fourth level. The commission. The act itself. The deed. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is taking things into the third level. He is saying that sin occurs when you consent in your mind and say, I will do it. Even if you don't physically carry it out. The consent of agreement is what is there, “*Whoever looks at a woman lustfully...*” it should be noted that this is not a passing glance kind of a look. The verb action is in the present tense which in the Greek has the force of present, continuing action and should be literally translated something like this: Whoever goes on looking lustfully... Whoever persistently looks lustfully... has committed adultery in his heart.

First of all distinguishing between temptation and sin.

Secondly, we need to make a distinction between impurity and immorality. Impurity is the matter of the thought life. Immorality is that which involves our body in sin with someone else.

From the Lord's words here we may be tempted to say, “If sexual sin is located on the consent level it makes no difference whether I meditate the sin or commit the sin. If God holds both as equally guilty why not go do immorality as well as think impurely?” Such a twisting of what the Lord is saying would not do justice to his teaching. The difference between sexual thoughtful sins and sexual immorality is that sinful thought life corrupt one's own self. But immorality necessarily involves someone else in the sin. Therefore the one is internal and private and the other brings someone else in. The other has social ramifications.

When we sin through actual fornication or adultery we necessarily require the participation of someone else in the sin. Whereas impurity does not have that focus.

A third thing that Jesus is not saying is that sexual sin is worse than all other sin. Sometimes in the church we have been guilty of sometimes communicating through nuances that sexual sin is the worst level of sin. As you look at Matthew 5:17-48 you see Jesus dealing with 6 different illustrations of human sinfulness. Only two out of the 6 have to deal with sexuality. Jesus isn't saying these two are worst. All sin is sin and all forms of sin hurt us and hurt other people.

Fourth in this passage Jesus is not teaching that bodily mutilation is the antidote to lust. “*If your hand offend you, cut it off... if your eye offend you gauge it out.*” Jesus is not intended to be taken literally on that score. He is not saying go get some instrument and force your eyeball out. Nor is he saying get a hatchet and chop off your hand. It's very clear that he's not saying this

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from two perspectives. One, a literary perspective that Jesus is employing hyperbole. That is, an overstatement, an exaggerated statement intended for effect. Much like he says of the Pharisees, You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. Hyperbole, exaggerated language designed to arrest attention and make a point.

But the second way we know that the Lord is not being literal is that none of his followers took him literally. None of the apostles took him literally. None of the first century Christians took him literally. Otherwise what might have happened is that some of the witnesses to the gospel would have been mutilated messengers. Persons with eyes gouged out and hands chopped off. Unattractive witnesses for the Lord.

Fifth, Jesus is not teaching us that divorce is the unforgivable sin. He is teaching about divorce in verses 31-32. Too often the church has failed to help persons going through the hell of divorce because of judgmentalism. I'm as much against divorce as anyone but Jesus never identifies divorce as the unforgivable sin.

On the other hand having the compassion of Jesus does not mean that we relax the teaching of Jesus. Nor does it mean that forgiveness always restores a person to the same standing in the body of Christ, which they had before an affair, a divorce and remarriage. God completely forgives the penitent. But 1 Timothy 3 indicates that a person in the place of spiritual leadership should be the husband or the wife of one spouse. Can God forgive a Christian leader who sins, who divorces and remarries as the result of his or her own sinfulness? Of course God can forgive such a person. But God in forgiving may also declare the office, which they held as a vacant office not to be reoccupied by them.

He does this with David when David wants to build the temple and the Lord says no. David was a forgiven man but there were certain things he could not do because of what was in the background of his life as a model for godliness.

Sixth, we must realize that in this passage Jesus is not giving us a complete theology of sexuality, divorce, remarriage and the like. We ought to be careful not to put more weight on the scripture than it can bear.

For example in 1 Corinthians 7 we find Paul giving us an additional exception for divorce and remarriage that Jesus does not here give. He talks about if a believing spouse is married to an unbeliever who refused to live with that believer and insists that they lay aside their Christian faith in order to save the marriage. Paul says in such a case that person is no longer bound. We're careful not to put more teaching weight on this scripture than it will allow.

Having looked at some of the limitations let's see how the Lord's teaching here is a help to us. The positive.

The teaching is not meant as a condemnation. Our consciousness already condemn us enough. Jesus has come to heal our hurts and what Jesus says in these two paragraphs of scripture are an immense help to us. They're a help in several ways.

First we must note the connection between anger and immorality. We've already looked at the Sermon on the Mount in two previous messages. We noted that in the first 16 verses Jesus is

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talking about the character that he wants in his people. Then verse 17 through the end of chapter 5 he talks about behavior characteristics. How our righteousness but exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

The first example that he gives of this righteousness is the example related to the subject of anger. The second is the example related to lust. Note the order. It is very precise. Anger and lust in that order. Subtly Jesus is telling us there is a connection between the two. When we are hurt by someone it is a natural human tendency to be angry. And when we have been jilted or dumped or dumped on in a marriage or a love relationship we can become very angry. Many times that anger is lived out by a rebound – “I need love right now! I hurt so bad. I am so angry. I’ll show you I can get somebody! I’ll prove that I am lovable! If I can’t get you to love me I’ll get somebody to love me and I’ll find my miracle.”

So many affairs really result from anger. The husband is mad at his wife for her nagging, her neglect in him, her disinterest in sex or maybe it’s the wife that’s angry with her husband and she says, “What’s the use? If you’re going to treat me like that, I’ll find somebody else.” Sure enough, wonder of wonders, just at that moment that “somebody else” always seems to be there. And it seems perfect. At last you’ve found from another person what your loved one would not give you. But it’s only a matter of time till you realize that the fruit has a bitter taste and the new relationship can’t work either. It can’t work of two reasons. It cannot work because God’s laws when they are violated, they’re going to have consequences. It cannot work for sound psychological reasons because whenever a relationship is based upon anger it cannot really succeed until that anger has been dealt with and laid aside.

Jesus is sending us a message. Deal with the anger in your life. Deal with the anger in your marriage and your sexuality less suddenly you find yourself dealing with infidelity, enormous hurt and damage.

The second way Jesus helps us is that he openly talks about sexual sin and marital infidelity. Too often we who minister the gospel have avoided the subject of sexuality. Someone has said that the world never likes to talk about death and the church never likes to talk about sex. But we should. God talks about sex. His word talks about sexuality and tells us that it is an aspect of being made in his image.

One of the great antidotes to sexual sin is honest talk, honest teaching and honest confession.

Our young people could be greatly freed up I’m convinced if they could more readily talk with, confess with, pray with older persons in the faith, especially their parents. Our teenage boys often have a terrible time knowing what is going on inside of them as changes take place. It’d be a wonderful thing if we as fathers could provide the kind of loving, caring, understanding and support where our sons could talk to us freely about what was happening in them. I’m convinced that many a young person has dropped out of the Christian faith because they have had sexually impure thoughts and have perceived that they were the only ones to have these thoughts, that they can’t get free of them. Instead of seeing them as a means that God has placed in their life of driving them ultimately toward marriage and continuation of the human race, they see themselves locked up in a prison of isolation, condemnation and guilt and because there is no one with whom they can share with, no one whom they can be honest with, no one who can be supportive to them they begin to feel that God is down on them. They become down on

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themselves and loaded with guilt they walk off from the Christian faith because they've never had a chance to openly and honestly talk with, pray with, have accountability to and gain victory over sexually impure thoughts. If that's true for young people it's true for married couples as well. God wants us as married people to have a supportive and sufficiently authentic relationship that we can share openly with one another what we are struggling with and what we are facing.

When we openly confess to God and to one another our temptations and even our sins we begin a freeing process. The devil loves to isolate us and make us feel that we're dirty, lowdown, rotten and that nothing can ever help us and we're forever condemned to the prison of our own guilt. Confessing it and having someone else begin to pray for us and to hold us accountable is a means of God's freeing work in our lives.

A third thing Jesus here is teaching is to plan in advance how we are going to respond to sexual temptation. He says, Pluck out your eye and cut off your hand. That's a way of indicating that 99% of sexual temptation has to do with sight and touch. He's saying take inventory of what you allow to sexually stimulate you visually and tactilely and remove unwholesome and impure influences from your life in advance. Young people need, for example, to determine touch limits before they go out on a date rather than in the middle of a date. Christian adults need to set touch limits on their relationship with members of the opposite sex. Even sometimes members of the same sex. There are certain movies and television shows and literature and magazines that we are to avoid because of their sinful eroticism.

We need a disposition I think like Joseph's in the Old Testament. He knew in advance how he was going to deal with Mrs. Potipher. Ultimately he says to her, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God." He like Daniel had made a predisposition of his heart that there were certain things he would not do. That's basically what Jesus is saying here. You'll help yourself if in advance you'll determine where the limits are.

Fourth, Jesus helps us by giving us a boundary to stay within. Here I'm speaking especially about the law of divorce and remarriage, verses 31-32. Jesus is not here saying that he wants to impose something he wants to impose suffering on people who are in a marriage that isn't working. His law though against divorce and remarriage is meant as a protective barrier for that marriage to stay within the marriage and work through the problems and the difficulties.

Picture an illustration that I think will help you see the Lord's teaching a little bit better. Picture a beautiful green pasture. Beautiful split rail painted white fences around the pasture. The pasture is empty except for a young married couple right in the middle of the pasture – embracing, holding one another, kissing. Let the real fence stand for the law of divorce. The law, which says, "Thou shalt not jump over the fence. Thou shalt not get a divorce and remarry." They're in the middle of the pasture and they're oblivious to the law. Why? Because they're madly in love. It isn't the fence that's keeping them in the pasture. It's one another keeping them in the pasture and right in the center of the pasture. But when a couple begins to drift apart they start moving closer to the limits of the law. Moving to the outer edges. Getting close the rail. What the Lord is saying here is "Don't get past that fence. I have my law here as a protective barrier to keep you within in the closure so that you can work through your problems within the enclosure rather than jumping outside. If you jump outside then the whole task of reconciliation and the like might not only be difficult. It might very well be impossible."

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The Lord's law is given as a means of helping us stay inside our problem and working through it from that context.

The fifth way the Lord helps us is his teaching makes us even more dependent upon his grace. The Lord is teaching about an exceeding righteousness. A righteousness that goes past the externalities of the scribes and Pharisees. When you isolate sin as occurring only on the commission level it become relatively easy to keep. All the Pharisee had to do was say I haven't done the deed. But the Lord reads the heart. And the Lord therefore drives his teaching to the heart. When you get done with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 we are convicted by the Lord. If the Old Testament law convicted us and made us aware of God's justice and God's moral requirements, when Jesus gets done with us we are nailed to the wall! That's one of the purposes of Jesus' teaching here. To make us realize again that our salvation and our relationship with God does not depend upon performance levels but that the Sermon on the Mount begins as an act of God's grace. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.*" Blessed are those who realize that they haven't got it all together. Blessed are those who are in need of God's healing help. Blessed are those who have struggled on their own. Blessed are they because they recognize that only God can give them his grace if they are to ever have the kingdom.

Jesus' teaching here makes us even more dependent upon his grace. As you read the New Testament you will find Jesus making changes in our lives when we come to him. Immediately when we come to Christ, immoral activity ends. Jesus insists upon this. The person who is fornicating and committing adultery that external activity must cease. Immediately. And Jesus gives us the power to do that.

Interesting enough and perplexingly enough often the mental state that has gone with that – the state of impurity – does not end just like that but requires a process and maybe even the totality of the Christian life working through it and growing in grace. One of our members said, "For years I learned to sin and the Lord has been teaching me that I must unlearn to sin. Learn to do righteously."

Think of the cup again that we began with. Are you free of sexual temptation and is your life in the sexual sense beautiful and pure. Then today you can really give praise to God. And thank him. But don't look down on someone with a broken cup. Jesus demonstrated nothing but compassion toward people whose sexuality had been broken. Are you chipped, damaged, glued back together? Catch a new vision of what the Lord can do in your life. You must catch a vision of what he can do. He's capable of putting your, life back together to make it a beautiful vessel again. I think the Lord's grace is so special that he can even put a glaze over the cracks and chips of your life and when he's done with it out will emerge a cup in which there is no flaw.

When God forgives you he has forgiven you. You must learn to forgive yourself. God has forgiven you. He has buried your sin in the deepest sea. Don't go hunting for it with a submarine. He knows it's gone and he tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17 "*If anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creature. The old has passed away and the new has come.*" Jesus says to us, behold I make all things new.

Our gracious Father we come now to the conclusion of this service and we realize that because of what we have been talking about that this is probably not a time for asking public

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response. We're all sensitive and sensible people. In an audience this size there are going to be people who feel very broken and marred in their sexuality. Others who feel very damaged. You're wanting to do a work of healing in their life today. You're wanting to put your word right into their heart, moving it past the letter of the scripture into the living letter of the heart. That word which says behold, I make all things new. I ask today for those persons who especially in this area of their life feel condemned and guilty before you. Lord if it's false guilt give understanding. Where there is real guilt, once we have repented, once we have laid it before you, you forgive us. You heal us from all our sins and all our diseases. Lord would you give your restoration today to people in need. Will you restore marriages and those not married. Would you do a work in their lives. For their sake and for your sake come under your teaching that their lives might be pure. And that they might be free from sin. Lord, for all of us, if there are persons here who have not struggled in this area at all and don't have the foggiest idea of what I'm talking about today, there may be other areas of their lives they've experienced wounds and hurts. You are the God who restores our soul. We ask your healing presence in our lives. Do a new thing in us Lord. We pay this in your name. Amen.