

Understanding Lust
Matthew 5:27-30
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-7:29)
 - A. The Incarnation of Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - B. The Preparation of Christ (3:1-4:11)
 - C. The Beginning of Christ's Ministry (4:12-25)
 - D. The Beginning of Christ's Teaching (5:1-7:29)

Matthew 5:21 begins a series of six specific examples that contrast the traditional teaching by the scribes and Pharisees with the teaching of Jesus. Each of the six examples follow the same pattern:

- 1. Traditionally understood teaching (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43)
- 2. Jesus teaching - "but I say to you" (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)
- 3. Application of Jesus teaching (5:23-26, 29-30, 34-37, 39-42, 45-48)

Not only are there six sections in the remainder of chapter 5 that follow this same pattern but the first three sections form a set and the second three sections form a set. 5:21-32 is the first unit and 5:33-48 is the second unit. This can be observed by the repetitive phrasing of the beginning of each of the two sets that include the same "you have heard that the ancients were told" (5:21 and 5:33). These units build toward a more and more developed understanding of what it means to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The traditional teaching (5:27)

The statement "you have heard that it was said" is a reference to the oral teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus quotes the seventh of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18) "you shall not commit adultery."

This commandment to not commit adultery was expanded upon often in the Old Testament. The penalty under the Law for adultery was death (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). This penalty was commanded to be applied to both the man and the woman.

However, there is little evidence this was actively pursued in the Jewish judicial system. One reason was the Roman government did not permit those it had conquered to practice capital punishment.

Furthermore, it was viewed as much as a property crime as a sexual crime in Judaism. Indeed, Judaism understands adultery to be voluntary sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her husband. The prohibition against adultery is only considered to be the responsibility of the woman.

From the Jewish Encyclopedia: "Sexual intercourse of a married woman with any man other than her husband. The crime can be committed only by and with a married woman; for the unlawful intercourse of a married man with an unmarried woman is not technically Adultery in the Jewish law."

This punishment was a part of the story of the adulterous women of John 8:1-11. While there is good evidence that this story was a later addition to John's Gospel, it nevertheless provides a perspective of how the Law was practiced in first century Judaism.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" (John 8:3-5).

It is quite apparent that the purpose of this was not to question Jesus about the issue of adultery but rather about the punishment regarding the issue of adultery. They pressed Jesus to answer whether He advocated obedience to the commandments of Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 in spite of their apparent severe nature and its lack of practice. Would Jesus defend the Law or offend the sensibilities of those at the temple? Jesus upheld the Law but pressed them on their own hypocrisy when He said to them, *"he who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*

This provides a glimpse into the unwillingness of the Jews to practice neither the punishments of the Law but nor even the commandment to not commit adultery. They only brought the woman yet they obviously knew who the man was since she was "caught in adultery, in the very act" since they only viewed the woman as one guilty of adultery. Neither righteousness or justice was their intent as their hypocrisy was evident (John 8:9).

The conclusion we can draw from this story is that adultery was practiced among the scribes and Pharisees and the Jewish judicial system did not enforce the Old Testament mandate for capital punishment much less remove these men from leadership. Adultery was tolerated among the Jews.

The teaching of Jesus (5:28)

Jesus gave strong correctives to the traditional understanding that the Jews had about adultery with the statement “but I say to you.” The first corrective involves the specific sinfulness on the part of the man. In response to the Jewish understanding of adultery placing the charge of adultery on the woman, Jesus makes it clear that the man is definitely at fault.

Because the statement by Jesus includes “everyone” not just the women, men are included. But more specifically, Matthew 5:28 is directed at men. A woman is the object of the lustful sin and the pronouns address men. This not only charges the lustful man with adultery in his heart but also leads to the clarification that adultery is something a man can do. If a man can commit adultery in his heart with a woman he can certainly commit adulterous acts with a woman also.

The second corrective involves the internal attitude and not just the outward manifestation. Like anger is the underlying sin for all murder, lust is the root cause of all adultery. There is no desire to engage in adultery apart from an internal sexually sinful desire. External conformity to a moral code is insufficient to fulfill righteousness since *“God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”* (1 Samuel 16:7).

The internal sin is described as occurring when one “looks at a woman with lust for her.” This looking with lust is then not simply looking. There is the internal attitude of lust that must be present in order for this verse to be applicable.

Therefore, an understanding of what is meant by the word “lust” is essential to understanding Matthew 5:28. Lust (EPITHUMIA in Greek) refers to simply a strong desire without a necessary sexual overtone. In fact, this strong desire may even be a positive, depending upon the context. There are three cases of this in the New Testament:

*“And He said to them, “I have earnestly **desired** to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”* (Luke 22:15).

*“But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the **desire** to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (Philippians 1:23).*

“But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great **desire** to see your face” (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

Other cases of this word are clearly in a bad sense but not specifically sexual (Romans 6:12) or including a sexual sense but more than that (Ephesians 2:3; Galatians 5:24). However, most of the usages in the New Testament are of a sexual nature, consistent with the usage in Matthew 5:28.

The conclusion that we must draw is that having a strong desire is not inherently evil, depending upon what is being desired. When our desires are out of the will of God then they are evil. Once again, it is not only the act that is sinful but the underlying desires that produced the act that is sinful.

God has endowed man with the capacity to have strong desires and these could be for good or evil. The appropriate place for strong sexual desire is in the context of marriage. We can even see this is true with those not yet married (1 Corinthians 7:9, *“if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion”*).

Once we understand that it is sinful to desire something outside of God’s will then we can examine how we are able to no longer do such a thing. Since this depends first upon whether what is desired is outside God’s will, then we can conclude that how we no longer desire what is wrong will be the same regardless of what the specific evil is. In other words, there is not a special solution for specific sins but rather a common solution for all evil desires.

There are at least two significant ways that people mistakenly seek to solve their problems of the evil desire for women who are not their wife. The first mistake is to blame the woman rather than the man. Clearly, Jesus put the entire responsibility for lust in this passage upon the man alone.

This error has fueled the modern teaching of many conservatives on modesty. Teaching about what clothing is appropriate or inappropriate abounds. Ironically, the prooftexts provided to support this teaching are 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4, which say nothing about lust or even about sensual clothing.

“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.” (1 Timothy 2:9-10).

“Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.” (1 Peter 3:3-4).

Both of these texts speak of wearing attire that draws attention to oneself. The essential meaning of being modest is humility. The outward manifestation of failing to be modest is described in economic terms. The use of economic means to attract attention is the direct biblical application of improper external adornment.

The primary reason that is given for a confused understanding of these two passages is in order to protect men from lust. The assumption is that if women cover themselves appropriately, men will not lust. This not only involves the woman in the solution to the sin (contra Matthew 5:27-30), it is obviously untrue. If it were true then lust and the adultery that lust can produce would be non-existent in cultures that cover up women completely.

Also, what is considered appropriate attire is entirely culturally based. This can be seen in how women dress in different parts of the world today and it can also be seen in how women dress during different eras of American history. What is advanced as appropriate attire for women today by those seeking to get men to not lust would be seen as quite inappropriate in centuries past.

Indeed, the attire advanced today by modern modesty advocates would not only appear immodest and showy in other cultures (and possibly even alluring), it can even make a person stand out rather than fitting it. The very point that people seek to make by wearing supposed modest attire can make them attract attention. So in the hopeless attempt to stop lust by addressing attire, we can actually violate the very Scripture that people misuse to build their case.

The second means that is very common to solve the problem of man’s lust is by using accountability groups. This is not only common for seeking to solve the problem of lust but of many other difficulties, such as alcohol and drug abuse, gambling issues, and various other types of recovery groups.

The meaning of accountability groups is specific to people meeting to correct a specific practice using worldly methodology to produce change. Obviously the Lord has established the Church, which in its local assembly is a group of people meeting, which is God's will (Hebrews 10:24-25). When we narrow the scope of continual meetings limited to a specific issue it is no longer church, and when we adopt tactics to solicit change that are fleeting it is not the ministry of the word.

These can seem to be helpful in that people can learn to refrain from bad habits in the context of such groups. If we place certain external pressure upon people they can alter behavior. But this approach requires the continuation of external pressure. This is not so much of a solution as it is issue management.

The design of this accountability structure is to provide people a sense of reporting about their progress with their problem. This necessarily lends itself to the motivation of conformity due to the desire to provide a good report. This would be fine if the goal was behavioral change, since it can accomplish this. But in sanctification, our goal is not simply outward conformity but a change of our internal desires. When we create external pressure to conform people to certain behavioral goals this is the essence of what Jesus condemned the Pharisees for (cf. Matthew 23:25-28) as biblical change comes from the heart first.

Also, such focus on one singular life issue misunderstands the nature of sin. All sin arises from our personal desire to please ourselves. To do our desires rather than God's desires. It does not manifest itself in only one area. Yet when we or others observe certain types of selfish desires, attention is brought to that issue. Because of the external nature of behavioral change, this at best results in reformation, not repentance (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:9-10).

So how does a person "flee youthful lusts" (2 Timothy 2:22)? In the same way that we deal with any sin, for all sin is a matter of our heart. We inform our heart through the truth of the Scripture (Psalm 119:11). This begins with our full commitment to the Lord before we can begin to understand the truth correctly. If we are unwilling to commit ourselves fully to Christ, sanctification becomes simple personal development.

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24).

“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” (Galatians 2:20).

“Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:24-25).

If we are willing to no longer live for ourselves but to live for Christ, then we can begin to *“walk by faith, not by sight”* (2 Corinthians 5:7) since *“without faith it is impossible to please Him”* (Hebrews 11:6). If we truly believe in Jesus Christ, we will be valuing His teaching by faith. The process of this transformation can be found in Romans 12:1-2.

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2).

This transformation is preceded by our commitment of worship and rather than be conformed to the world God will transform us through the renewing of our minds. The word transformation is a passive imperative, meaning that this transformation is what God does to us, not what we do to ourselves. This is why obedience is a work of faith. It is our true faith that God uses to transform us. This faith is shaped by believing His word, which is the process of renewing our minds.

This is why the epistles begin with a long teaching about truth before moving to the application of the truth. Before Paul instructs the Colossians to *“consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed”* he instructs them to set their minds on the things above–

“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4).

If we do not think in accordance with God's will, our desires will not be in accordance with God's will and we will not act in accordance with God's will. This is why all sin, including the sin of lust, is essentially a matter of our faith. If we actually believe that something is bad and if we *"consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 6:11), then we will *"not let sin reign in our mortal body so that you obey its lusts"* (Romans 6:12).

The reason that this will free us from the bondage it is given in Romans 6:14, *"sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."* This is the reason why attempts to solve the lust problem fail, because our methods seek to impose law rather than emphasize grace. It is the grace of God that delivers us from bondage to sin and if we seek to be delivered by the rules of man we nullify the grace of God and the death of Christ for sin.

"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." (Galatians 2:21).

Just three verses afterward Paul writes, *"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"* (Galatians 3:3). It is foolish to seek to accomplish by our human effort what God's Spirit alone can bring through faith. This is why so many try and fail to overcome their lustful desires, because they are seeking to be perfected in the flesh.

Certainly this does not preclude the encouragement of the body of Christ (Hebrews 3:13). From James 5:16 this involves the ministry prayer in accordance with the Scripture..

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." (James 5:16).

The context of James 5:14-15 is spiritual weakness that moves one to call the elders of the church to pray. The role of the elders also includes the ministry of exhortation of the word of God (Titus 1:9). Through prayer and instruction, God will deliver us to spiritual health. The prayers of our fellow believers and their faithfulness to the ministry of the word are part of the process of overcoming sin and putting on righteousness. This is therefore not something we do only by ourselves alone but includes the prayers of our fellow believers.

The application of Jesus' teaching (5:29-30)

As with the previous issue of anger that included two illustrations to apply the teaching of Jesus (5:23-26), here there are two illustrations as well. Yet these are very different scenarios in that Matthew 5:29-30 speaks of two obvious hypotheticals. The first involves the eye (5:29) and the second involves the hand (5:30).

The reference to the eye is understandable in Matthew 5:29 since the issue of Matthew 5:28 involves looking at a woman with lust for her. Looking involves the eye. It is better to lose an eye than to lose an entire body.

The second reference to the hand in Matthew 5:30 is less clear. One possibility is that it is a euphemism for the male sex organ. Supporting this possibility is Isaiah 57:8 that uses the hand as such a euphemism. Counter to this would be the specificity of the "right" hand, which would be the dominant hand.

An alternative explanation of the use of the hand is to view lust as a type of theft. Jewish thought considered adultery as taking of what belonged to another. According to *Issues in Jewish Ethics*, *"The extramarital intercourse of a married man is not per se a crime in biblical or later Jewish law. This distinction stems from the economic aspect of Israelite marriage: the wife was the husband's possession, and adultery constituted a violation of the husband's exclusive right to her; the wife, as the husband's possession, had no such right to him."* However, because Jesus later uses the same analogy of the hand and the eye in Matthew 18:8-9 for what is not a sexual matter, it is unlikely this is meant in this fashion. Regardless, the point remains that it is better to lose a part of the body than the entire body.

The point of these two verses is that this issue must be taken seriously. Teaching regarding the sensuality of sexual desires abounds in the New Testament,

"Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever." (1 John 2:15-17).

"Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." (Romans 13:13-14).

“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Galatians 5:19-21).

The New Testament clearly states that it is not only the physical act of immorality that must be put away but also the sensuality that drives this sin. This is the manifestation of the flesh, not the Spirit. It is essential to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” in order to make no provision for the flesh (Romans 13:14).

Conclusion

As the heart attitude of anger is the root cause of murder, so the heart attitude of lust is the root cause of adultery. Both heart attitudes render a person guilty. Both heart attitudes demonstrate the standard required to be for our righteousness to surpass the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), which is to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

This impossible standard to meet leads us to the grace of God in forgiveness. Those who understand and appreciate the degree of God’s grace of forgiveness by faith (cf. Romans 3:22-24, Colossians 1:14) will respond in love of God.

“For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7:47).

Thankfulness for the glorious grace of God will move us toward loving God and if we love God we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). This is something we can joyfully want to do, not by law or restriction but by eagerness from the heart. This is the essence of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3).