



Being Freed from Lust and Divorce

Matthew 5:27-32

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God is telling us of how much he values us, and hence, how much we are to value each other...

We are God's children, and Jesus commands us to treat each other as brothers and sisters – never as property or an object to be consumed.

Scripture

Matthew 5:27-32

27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Sermon

I found out about my skin allergy when I started using a new deodorant (for a sermon on lust this is actually a less graphic illustration than there could have been...). The rash first appeared around my armpit but then, according to my dermatologist, it got into my system. By the time that I did go see my dermatologist, it had spread all over

my body and the pain was very real and the treatment was a shot, and I hate shots!

The illustration fits for what Jesus preaches on here this morning – the topic of lust. I am so glad that Jesus speaks to this issue. There is this popular notion of Jesus in which he is so otherworldly, so spiritual, so moony. We can have this vision of Jesus sitting on a hillside with children on his knees, or Jesus whispering ethereal spiritual mantras to disciples. All that imagery ignores the truth that Jesus lived in the world – he is the incarnate Son of God, “Emmanuel,” God with us; all that means that Jesus knows and speaks to the very real, everyday issues of our lives. Jesus is practical. He loves us so much that he deals honestly with the real issues in our lives. With his grace and truth, I want us to honor Jesus today by dealing honestly with these two issues as well.

Lust is a universal issue. But it seems to me that it is an issue that has become even greater in our world, in our current culture. Lust is something that if we do not aggressively deal with it, if we do not take it head on, if we do not consistently seek the grace of Christ to remove it from our lives, then it becomes part of our system, it invades our souls and our bodies like my skin rash – spreading from one part of who we are to all parts of who we are.

In the time and culture of Jesus, women were considered objects and, in some significant ways, property. A woman was to be possessed. And the lust that Jesus describes is just that, it is the possession of a woman as only a sexual being, only an object, and a tool for a man’s gratification. Jesus, in this passage, and consistently through the gospels, radically elevates the position of women. Women, to Jesus, are not objects. Women, to Jesus – and to his followers, are human beings created, just as much as men, in the image of God.

We have been saying consistently in this series on the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is establishing the radical and wonderful values of the kingdom that he, as the King, has brought to us. The whole of the sermon reorients our thinking about each other. God is telling us of how much he values us, and hence, how much we are to value each other. Human beings are never objects in the Kingdom of God. Human beings are always to be valued and nurtured by other human beings. We are God’s children, and Jesus commands us to treat each other as brothers and sisters – never as property or an object to be consumed.

If we believe this and act out on that belief, we see the need that Jesus identifies to do away with lustful actions – and with lustful thoughts. If we think of another human being in a way that is merely sexual, inherently we have made that person into an object, and our intention for them is to consume them, just as we would consume any other commodity. Men, do not turn women into objects; women, men are not possessions to be consumed. Those are not the values of the Kingdom that Jesus brings. Radically, Jesus is commanding us to see each other as God sees us, as deeply loved and redeemed people, bought by the blood of Christ and elevated to sonship and daughtership in the eternal Kingdom.

In the culture that you and I live in, this elevation of people as truly people, created in the image of God, may be the most counter-cultural claim that we can make. Our culture has been captured by consumerism. If we see anything that we want, we buy it or take it, consume it at our pleasure, and discard it when we have consumed it entirely or have grown tired of it. This consumerism is our sad answer to the great needs in our life. We possess things instead of work on relationships. We take things instead of nurture meaningful friendships. And the secular world encourages this and has created an atmosphere where that seems normative. All around us, we are bombarded by images that have objectified human beings, images on billboards, in magazines, on the big screen, the television screen, and the computer screen that have turned men and women into romanticized and sexualized images that have very little to do with reality and are the antithesis of the real and wonderful human beings that we truly are and that God created us to be. For women, men are falsely idealized in every Rom-Com movie and TV show to be McDreamys and commitment-phobes who are turned around by a kind of love that is thin and is based so much on emotion that it could never pass the test of time. For men, women are physically idealized with airbrush and plastic surgery to represent something no more human than any other commodity that is for sale.

Jesus tells us here to cut this out. Literally. He tells us to stop our consuming others, to quit being seduced by the false image and to reorient it ourselves with his grace. In the pornographic culture that we live in, these words challenge as much as anything that Jesus has to say to us. Pornography, and particularly internet pornography, is a huge challenge for so many people. And, let's don't kid ourselves: that is as true for Christians as it is for non-Christians. Recent statistics have shown that fifty percent of Christian men are viewers of pornography. And we are here this morning. It is no longer necessary to go to the peep show or the seedy book store; pornography is just a click away. And that click to that site is aggressively pushed at us; the only way to avoid it is to take the equally aggressive actions of Jesus to keep it out of our lives.

I believe that the people in this congregation that are most tempted into the pervasive sin of lust are those that are not nurturing healthy relationships. If you are not practicing a living relationship with God through prayer and time in the Word, you are setting yourselves up to replace that most important relationship with shallow imitators. I also know that there are many men here in this church who do not have good relationships outside of their marriage, Christian fellowship with other men. You do not have quality relationships with others – isn't it obvious that you will seek something out to take that place? Loneliness and lust are close kin.

If you are in a marriage relationship in this church and you are not prayerfully cultivating that relationship, you are creating a void where destructive habits can break in. The truth is that a major reason for consuming internet porn is that it is easy and we are lazy. Laziness and lust are close kin. And marriage is hard work. Isn't that the truth? Marriage takes an investment on our parts that is necessary everyday of our lives. We must communicate with our marriage partner – and that takes work. We must seek common vision with our spouse – and that takes work. We must be physically, spiritually and emotionally intimate and vulnerable with our husband or our wife – and that, my friends, takes work. But aren't all the things that God has given to us that are the best gifts things that must be worked on? God gave marriage to his created people as a gift, God gave sexual union as a gift to be enthusiastically practiced between a man and a woman in a marriage relationship. God created intimacy for us and he wants us to relish that intimacy.

It is not a coincidence here that right after speaking on lust, Jesus speaks next on marriage and divorce. The first thing we must notice about what Jesus says here, before we deal with divorce, is that he is lifting up marriage. Jesus and his Father love marriage. They created us male and female for the purpose of having the two become one. For most of us – not all of us (and this includes Jesus himself who was single) – marriage is the normative lifetime relationship we have been given as a great gift. Jesus, here and elsewhere, offers up the gift of marriage as something to be treasured. So, before we talk about the sad topic of divorce, let us join with Jesus in celebrating marriage.

But divorce is a reality. The unhappy truth is that divorce happens as much in Christian marriages as it does in non-Christian marriages, or so the poll-takers tell us. Let me reiterate; if you are married, work on it! Spend time together, spend time together with God. Cultivate friendships outside of the marriage; be intentional about your intimacy. Don't take your marriage for granted!

However, we are broken human beings which mean that divorces take place. Jesus loves us too much to let that slide. He tells us that in his Kingdom, divorce should never be taken lightly. Divorce comes with consequences. In the time of Jesus, women were particularly harmed by divorce, as they had no recourse in the proceedings, and were placed at the mercy of their families coming out of the divorce, and if their families would not take them back they were left to begging or prostitution in order to survive. That is not the case in our society, or not often, but let's gain be truthful: divorce comes with incredible consequences. Families are damaged, children left with physical wounds that can and do last a lifetime. Trust is destroyed and the residual effects are again of such a depth that they can last a lifetime. And the gift of marriage that God has given has been returned and the divorced couple will never know the joy that God had intended in that relationship. If you are married, and if that marriage is in trouble, do not give up. Unless the marriage has been rent asunder by adultery (and even then I know Christian marriages that have used the grace of Christ to overcome that wound) or unless there is a pattern of physical abuse in the marriage (our Lord does not

want to see you physically endangered and a spouse that is abusing their spouse is operating completely outside of the values of Christ's Kingdom), keep working on your marriage.

And for those of you who have been divorced, know that grace abounds. The grace of Christ is greater than our sin. The redemption of Christ is greater than our brokenness.