

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:27-32

I'm going to run with the assumption that I do not need to convince you that we live in a sex-obsessed world. While the subject of sex amongst Christians can be fraught with landmines, I think a question worth asking might be something like, "*Does Jesus have anything to say about this?*"

As has been mentioned before, the Sermon on the Mount addresses and answers Four Great Questions:

1. What is reality?
2. Who is well-off?/Or, What is the "good life"?
3. Who is a truly good person?
4. How do I/we become a truly good person/people?

Do you think it is possible to answer these questions and not deal with the subject of sex? Or, do we really think that on the subject of sex Jesus would say something like, "*I don't really have anything to say on that matter. Y'all just figure it out or do whatever you want.*"? A truly good person, a righteous person, MUST reckon with how to handle desires of all kinds, which of course includes sexual desires.

Now, at the risk of you getting sick of hearing me say this, I want to remind us that there are TWO things we need to keep in view as we study the Sermon on the Mount. First, the present reality of the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of heaven as Matthew prefers to say it). This Sermon, and really all of Jesus' teaching, is predicated on this reality—The Kingdom is here, now, open, available, and accessible. Second, with the Kingdom as a backdrop, the focus of the Sermon is the condition of the human heart (both on an individual level and a collective level).

With that in mind we're ready to look at the second "case study" Jesus brings up...

"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." (Matt. 5:27-28, emphasis added)

Do not commit adultery is one of the Ten Commandments (#7 to be exact...see Exodus 20:14 & Deuteronomy 5:18). A truly good person will not cheat on their spouse. But does simply not cheating on their spouse make a person good (righteous)? According to Jesus, nope. As we should probably expect by now, Jesus understands (and wants us to understand) that there is always something going on below the surface, underneath the external outward behavior, that needs to be paid attention to...in this case lust, or "*epithumia*" in Greek.

Jesus seems to be connecting Commandment #7 to Commandment # 10, "*Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21) In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (aka the Septuagint) "covet" is translated

“*epithumia*”. Interestingly, of all the Ten Commandments, coveting would be the most difficult to know if someone was violating it. How do you see someone’s inner desires?

Again, Jesus is taking the conversation deeper...to the level of the heart...where desire resides. Jesus is saying that a truly good/righteous person will not be ruled by their disordered desires and unhealed passions. (He also seems to be indicating that given the present reality of the Kingdom of God, we have the resources necessary for our passions to be healed and our desires to be ordered properly.) Whereas the Pharisees and teachers of the law were concerned with outward behavior, Jesus was/is concerned with the condition of the heart. If the heart is right, right behavior will follow. Or to put it another way, righteousness is a matter of the heart, not a matter of behavior management. (While behavior can be an indicator of the condition of one’s heart, behavior can also be used as a facade to hide the condition of one’s heart—we’ll see more about that when we get to chapter 6. This is also a major theme of Matthew’s gospel.)

In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, to lust/covet is to fix desire upon another person, to intentionally objectify another person for the sake of one’s own gratification. A truly good person will not degrade another person from being an image-bearer of God to a fantasized indulgence. Why is lust/coveting so bad? Isn’t it just something that takes place in the imagination...what’s the harm? Who does it hurt?

It hurts/harms the person lusting, the person being lusted for, as well as the community at large. Allow me to explain.

How does it affect the person lusting/coveting? First of all we need to recognize how powerful desires are. Desire, along with fear, are our primary motivators as humans. And sexual desire, specifically, is exponentially more powerful because sex is a good and natural thing. Dallas Willard points out, “*The two main errors in the area of human sexuality are these: (1) assuming that all sexual desire is good, and (2) believing that all sexual desire is evil.*” These are the two dominant false narratives. But, of course, Jesus and His Kingdom offer a better way.

I suppose I should also add needs, along with desires/wants and fears, to our list of primary motivators/drivers as humans. How do we differentiate between a want and a need? That’s actually pretty simple. We will die (literally) if our needs aren’t met (think: water, food, air, etc.). We can live without our desires/wants being met. And when it comes to sex, believe it or not my friends, we can live without it. Sadly, the (false) narrative of our culture tries to elevate sex to the level of need. And while our instincts and impulses for sex can be strong, especially when we’re bombarded with tempting, tantalizing, and titillating messages and images almost constantly, we are not animals. We can, and are expected to, rise above our instincts and impulses. God created humans to rule and reign alongside Him over His creation. We can’t do that very well, as history so clearly demonstrates, if we allow our desires to rule over us. When our desires are not properly ordered, when our passions are not healed, we become malformed. Spiritual formation, then, is all about becoming properly formed. So when objectifying and fantasizing about another person is habitualized, the luster/covetor becomes something less than they were meant to be. (All the underlining is to connect this to our theme of the year.)

Now, to be clear, there's nothing wrong with finding someone attractive, or even desirable. Rather, it's when we devalue, demean, dehumanize, and thereby dishonor them by making them an object, a thing, a piece of eye candy, for our delight that it's problematic.

But if it's internal, just in our own minds/imaginings, how does it negatively affect the person being objectified or anyone else? Well, let me ask you this...how does it affect a culture and society if/when people's value, worth, and significance is based upon their physical appearance, attractiveness, and desirability? To be fair, we can ask the same question of value, worth, and significance being based on wealth, or skill/talent, or position, or productivity, or accomplishments/achievements, or gender, or education, etc. Whenever value, worth, and significance is based on anything other than the sheer fact that God values humans, a stratification is created where some people are valued more than others that then opens the door for all varieties of injustice.

So to say that lust, or sex, is simply a private, personal, individual matter is simply not true. Even secular sources are beginning to take notice that our hyper-sexualized culture is reaping negative results. For example, as I'm sure you're aware, with easy access to the internet, the use of pornography is on the rise. What you may not be aware of (in this case, it's good that you're not aware) violence in pornography is on the rise as well. Now, imagine when people, particularly young people, think that what they view in pornography is "normal". How will that affect their relationships? The problem with the "*whatever happens in the privacy of your own home...*" attitude is that it doesn't, in fact, stay in the home. How we view other people may be formed in the home, but it goes with us into our wider engagement with society. Do you really want your daughter going on a date with someone whose primary understanding of how relationships work has been formed/shaped by pornography? (We probably don't even need to go as extreme as pornography. Just consider what passes as "normal" within relationships portrayed in TV and movies.)

Now I mentioned last week that we want to take Jesus SERIOUSLY but not LITERALLY.

"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. 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." (Matthew 5:29-30)

I mean, you can take Jesus literally if you want to, though I would not recommend it...and you'd likely end up in a psych ward due to self-harm. Jesus here is employing a logic/rhetoric device known as "*reductio de absurdum*". He is reducing the argument down to the absurd. If sin could be managed simply by cutting off the offending part of the body, then do so. But, since the problem actually resides in the heart, self-mutilation won't actually fix the problem of a wicked heart. Dallas Willard puts it better than I can...

"Jesus is saying that if you think that laws can eliminate being wrong you would, to be consistent, cut off your hand or gouge out your eye so that you could not possibly do the acts the law forbids...And if you sufficiently dismember yourself, you will not be able to do any wrong action. This is the logic by which Jesus reduces the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees to the absurd....The deeper question always concerns who you are, not what you did

do or can do. What would you do if you could? Eliminating bodily parts will not change that.” In other words, sin is a deeper issue than behavior management/modification...it resides in the heart.

Likely Jesus had in mind the “bleeding” or “bruised” Pharisees. These guys would not even look at women, nor engage in conversation with them, other than their wives or family members. In so doing, they would literally trip and stumble and run into things (thus bleeding and bruised) and would wear their cuts, scrapes, and bruises as a badge of honor and righteousness. But making women objects to be avoided is nevertheless objectifying. It’s not honoring them as fellow image-bearers of God. Plus, again, it doesn’t really address the root of disordered desires (the heart).

(FYI...the Pharisees were a more diverse group than we often realize. Here’s a brief synopsis I found—abbreviating the work of commentator William Barclay)

<http://randomresponses.blogspot.com/2006/08/jesus-and-pharisees.html>)

So rather than squelching desire, the goal is to desire the right thing. As James Bryan Smith says, *“Epithumia allows me to feel a very strong and good sensation. But like the Turkish Delight candy in The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe, it does not satisfy but leaves us wanting more. The desire is so strong that we are prepared to do anything to have it. How does living in the Kingdom of God help? When we are properly connected to God and His Kingdom we find the void is filled.”*

Before moving on, please allow me to share some of Richard Foster’s thoughts, *“One of the real tragedies in Christian history has been the divorce of sexuality from spirituality. This fact is all the more lamentable since the Bible holds such a high celebrative view of human sexuality...Jesus had a high view of sex. The scribes and Pharisees taught that as long as you stayed away from adultery you were okay. But Jesus saw beyond the externalities of the law to the internal spirit in which people live...Lust produces bad sex, because it denies relationship. Lust turns the other person into an object, a thing, a nonperson. Jesus condemns lust because it cheapened sex, it made sex less than it was created to be. For Jesus, sex was too good, too high, too holy, to be thrown away by cheap thoughts.”*

It is only reasonable, and should probably even be expected, that after commenting on adultery, and equating lust/desire to adultery, that the subject of divorce would need to be discussed. This is now the third “case study” Jesus explores...

“It has been said, ‘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 become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:31-22)

It should be noted that while the topic of divorce is covered within the 613 laws of the Old Covenant (Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 24:1) this is NOT one of the Ten Commandments. And for context, the topic of divorce was a hotly contested issue amongst Jewish rabbis, with two primary schools of thought on the matter. The topic of divorce will come

up again in Matthew 19:1-12, where Jesus is squarely asked to weigh in on the matter and offer His interpretation. It is probably worth reading that passage, actually I strongly recommend it, and have it in view with Jesus' comments here in the Sermon on the Mount.

Approximately 50 years before Jesus arrived on the scene there were two great Jewish scholars/rabbis, Shammai and Hillel, who were essentially rivals as they vigorously debated various issues of theology, ethics, and religious practice. They and their schools were instrumental in the formation of the Mishnah, the collection of Jewish Oral Law. On the matter of divorce, Shammai interpreted Deuteronomy 24 as divorce only being allowable for "moral" reasons (like adultery), while Hillel interpreted it more loosely, "...for any and every reason", which is how the question was framed for Jesus in Matthew 19. Given Jesus' comments here in Matthew 5 and also in Matthew 19, it is clear that Jesus sided with Shammai...at least on this issue (in general posture, Jesus seems more inline with Hillel...but remember, unlike other rabbis, Jesus didn't appeal to any other school of thought but was authoritative on His own...much to the chagrin of some and the fascination of others).

This does make one wonder what Jesus would think/feel about our contemporary "no fault divorce" policies. Of course, it makes no sense to discuss divorce without first having established a solid understanding of God's vision and purpose of marriage. And it really makes no sense to discuss the vision and purpose of marriage without first establishing a solid understanding of God's vision and purpose for humanity in general.

God's vision and purpose for humanity is for us to rule and reign WITH Him, reflecting His character to and for His creation. This requires that we are like God, that we are godly. God is always at work, pre and post Fall, to make us like Himself. Marriage, therefore, is meant to help us become like Him. (For the record, singleness is also meant to make us more like God. Two different vocations working toward the same goal.) Or in other words, the purpose of marriage is to make us holy. Unfortunately, the false narrative surrounding marriage is that its purpose is to make us happy. Happiness is a byproduct, not the main purpose of marriage.

Jesus is abundantly clear that, ideally, marriage is meant to be permanent. Divorce is allowable, as an accommodation/concession, due to the reality of sin and the hardness of human hearts. As Dallas Willard says, "...it is the hardness of the human heart that Jesus cites as grounds for permitting divorce...In other words, the ultimate grounds for divorce is human meanness...Hard hearts may make divorce necessary to avoid greater harm, and hence make it permissible. But kingdom hearts are not hard, and they together can find ways to bear with each other, to speak truth in love, to change—often through times of great pain and distress—until the tender intimacy of mutual, covenant-framed love finds a way for the two lives to remain one, beautifully and increasingly." Remember, what is Jesus focused on? The condition of the human heart.

With that in mind, Willard continues, "...the main point of the teaching is...just the fact that a man (or woman) has given a the woman (or man) a 'pink slip' and 'done everything legally' does not mean he or she has done right or has been a good person with regard to relationship...this is not to forbid divorce, but it is to make clear what its effects are."

Have you had enough Dallas Willard yet? No. Good. Here's some more...

“It is not an accident that Jesus deals with divorce after having dealt with anger, contempt, and obsessive desire. Just ask yourself how many divorces would occur, and in how many cases the question of divorce would never have arisen, if anger, contempt, and obsessive fantasized desire were eliminated.”

You probably noticed that this section of the Sermon seems more directly aimed at men. That is an accurate observation. The power dynamic of the day between men and women was very imbalanced, with men having the upper hand. Jesus' comments on divorce recognize that imbalance and are meant to protect women. As you're probably aware, today things are not as imbalanced, but still not perfectly balanced or equal. But if we, especially men, deeply consider what Jesus is doing here in the Sermon, focusing on the condition of the heart and inviting us to examine how we view and value other humans, it will go a long way towards fixing the problem.

But just to illustrate that we still have a ways to go towards equality, in most English Bibles the phrase in verse 32 is translated, *“...causes her to become an adulteress...”* A better translation would be, *“...makes her a victim of adultery...”* In other words, if men divorce their wives for a reason other than her unfaithfulness, then he's a cheater...i.e. not good/righteous. (Sadly even the translation of Scripture can have some prejudice and reflect power imbalances.)

I highly recommend the video from our friends at the Bible Project to round out our study of this passage...

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/wisdom-underneath-laws/>

As we begin to wrap up, I want to acknowledge that divorce is a sensitive subject. It has touched all of us in some way. Personally, I am a child of divorce. I never knew my birth father. Thankfully, I knew my adoptive dad since about as early as I can remember. On both sides of my family my grandparents were divorced and remarried (before I was born)...so I had four sets of grandparents growing up...then a fifth set when one set divorced and remarried. Most of my aunts and uncles have divorced and either remarried or have given up on the institution of marriage. (It sure made holidays...um, interesting and unpredictable.) I share all this because I have seen firsthand the pain and scars of divorce, and the formational (perhaps malformational) impact it can have.

I also recognize that many reading this, and many in our Table Groups, have also experienced divorce—their parents, their own, etc. This is a topic that can bring up a lot of pain and/or shame. And, sadly, historically, the Church (Big C church) has often contributed to that pain and shame. This is why it is VERY important to understand what Jesus is doing (and not doing) in His Sermon. He is NOT devaluing people who have experienced divorce. (Remember this is but one piece of a larger sermon. Later in the sermon Jesus will say, **“Do not judge...”**)

To summarize, what's one of the main questions Jesus is answering/addressing in this Sermon? Who is a truly good/righteous person? A truly good/righteous person has a HIGH view and value of other people; has their desires properly ordered; is committed to their marriage partner

even when things get challenging (and they will get challenging). A truly good/righteous person is trying to emulate God. With God's help, we can do so. And remember, the Kingdom of God is at hand, and its resources are available.

P.S I must admit that this passage had me quite overwhelmed and frustrated. Why? Because these are topics that deserve far more attention than we're going to be able to give it. There is SO MUCH MORE to be said on these subjects. The Church MUST talk about sex/sexuality, marriage, holiness/formation much more...AND...we must do so in helpful and healthy ways. If we avoid these topics, then we allow other voices/narratives to form people. If we engage these topics poorly, we run the risk of reinforcing shame/guilt/fear-based or legalistic narratives. But it does no one any good to not talk about them. The Church is a spiritual family. As such, we need to have open, honest, Christ-centered conversations on important topics.

Possible Discussion Questions

- Do you agree with the premise that we live in a hyper-sexualized/sex-obsessed society? If so, what evidence would you offer to support that, and/or what problems do you see arising from that? (If you do not agree with the premise, or see any problems/issues, please support your stance.)
- Is there such a thing as a distinctly Christian sexual ethic? If so, what is it? Can you articulate it?
- In light of the Love & Lordship of Jesus (His goodness, wisdom, and authority), how are we to understand and express our sexuality?
- In your experience, how have you seen the Church address the topics of sex, marriage, divorce, etc. well, and how have you seen these topics addressed poorly? Do you feel you have been adequately educated and equipped in these areas?
- How have you experienced the Kingdom of God shaping your desires? How have you experienced the world shaping your desires? Or, how is your faith, your relationship with Jesus, ordering your desires and healing your passions? Or, describe how you have experienced change at a heart level due to your faith?
- For those of you who are married, or have been married, why did you get married? For those of you who are single, is marriage something you desire? If so, why? If not, why?
- In light of the Love & Lordship of Jesus, how are we to understand and engage in marriage?
- In light of the Love & Lordship of Jesus, how are we to understand and engage in singleness?

- Would you say your understanding and attitude toward sex and relationships (or desires in general) has been more formed by culture or theology? What role do you think the Church has in forming people's understanding on sex and relationships?
- What is your practice of identifying, examining, and evaluating your desires?
- If you are willing to share, how have you been touched/affected by divorce? (**Table Group Leaders, please be extra sensitive with this one.)
- Do you think/feel that the church needs to discuss matters like this more openly and frequently? What questions, specifically, would you like discussed? (Shameless plug: Perhaps you could bring those questions to a Big Ask Dinner 😊)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Fasting

The time-tested spiritual discipline that Christians have employed for centuries to aid in the ordering of desires is fasting. Fasting is depriving ourselves of something we want, perhaps even need, so that we can attend to what is most important/essential...which is God. Fasting is not meant to be a “grit your teeth and bear it” sort of exercise, but rather a way to turn our attention to deeper things.

So the invitation this week is to try one of these options...

- Fast from food for 24 hours. Drink plenty of water. Use the time you would have spent in meal prep and eating to spend extra time with God. With Him, spend time specifically considering the various desires/wants you experience and submit those to Him for proper ordering of them.
- Fast from media and screens/devices for 3 days (or longer). One of the main ways false narratives are conveyed is through TV, news, social media, etc. Take a break from that and give time to immersing yourself in the true narrative of Jesus and His Kingdom.

When we deprive ourselves of wants/desires we begin to see how much of a grip they really have on our lives, and how they are really affecting us.