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DISCIPLESHIP FOUNDATIONS 1

The Sermon on the Mount – Session 2

A Different Kind of Righteousness – Part 1

March 8, 2017

Session 1 Review

In Session 1, the Sermon on the Mount was introduced, and we considered the character of followers of Christ contained in the Beatitudes. We also considered how followers of Christ are to function in the world. Jesus calls his followers salt and light.

Session 2 Overview

This evening in this second session, we come to a section of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus deals with the issue of righteousness. In simple terms, righteousness is about how we stand before God and relate to God. Before Jesus came, the way that the people of God related to God was by the law. God commanded them to keep the law, and the 10 commandments were the primary laws that God's people were called to keep.

However, God never intended for the law to be the basis by which people would be seen as righteous in his sight. This might sound quite surprising, but the bible bears it out. Think about it: If people could become righteous by keeping the law, then God was cruel to send his Son to die an unnecessary death to make them righteous.

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus explains his relationship to the law and declares that legalistic keeping of the law will never result in salvation (this is what it means to enter the kingdom of heaven). He says that not even the righteousness of Pharisees, who committed themselves to keeping all of God's laws, in addition to a host of additional laws they themselves created, would bring us salvation. This is a very startling statement. What does Jesus really mean by it?

Then, in verses 21-48, Jesus illustrates his point that a righteousness beyond legalistic righteousness is required for salvation. It's a different kind of righteousness. Jesus takes a look at anger, lust, divorce, taking oaths, retaliation, and loving our enemies. In this first session, we will consider the first two illustrations: anger and lust.

Let's intently and humbly hear afresh these words of Jesus regarding a different kind of righteousness that is necessary for salvation.

A New Pope

Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, also known as Pope Benedict the XVI, stunned the world when he unexpectedly renounced the Roman Catholic papacy on his own initiative and stepped down as Pope. Less than two weeks later, thirteen days to be exact, Pope Benedict was succeeded by an Argentinian Bishop by the name of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who chose Francis as his papal name.

Based on his somewhat controversial past in Argentina, where he was very outspoken on many public and social issues, many eagerly welcomed the papacy of Pope Francis because in him they saw the possibility for changes to many of the long held doctrinal and traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The media latched on to him and followed him virtually everywhere he went, hanging on to every word he spoke that they thought gave the slightest hint that he was willing to make changes to Roman Catholic teachings, like the Roman Catholic Church's opposition firm opposition to homosexual marriage.

After serving as pope less than 6 months, a member of the press asked Pope Francis a question on the topic of homosexuality, and as part of his response, Pope Francis said the following: "If a person is gay and seeks the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge that person?" That statement went viral and was latched onto by members of the press, and even some in the church, as evidence that Pope Francis was hinting at a softening of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality.

However, the only evidence the statement provided was to show that those who saw it as a softening of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality did not understand the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality. All Pope Francis was saying is that people who struggle with homosexuality and who are sincerely seeking the Lord need to receive our prayerful support and compassion, and not our prideful judgement and condemnation. And that's actually not just the Roman Catholic Church's teaching, it is virtually every church's teaching, because all people, whoever they are and whatever sins they struggle with, who are seeking God for victory over their sins are to receive the church's support. So Pope Francis was not changing the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality; he was actually upholding it.

A New Rabbi

In the same way that people in our day are looking for Pope Francis to change Roman Catholic Church teachings, people in Jesus' day were looking to him to change God's law. Jesus was essentially the new rabbi on the block, and he was creating a stir, and people had different opinions about him. Some thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jerimiah, or one of the prophets, and evidently some also felt that Jesus had come to make changes to the word of God. But Jesus cleared up the misunderstanding of those who thought that he had come to do away with God's word. He did so by uttering these words:

Matthew 5:17-20 ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will

be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

It is easy to pass over Matthew 5:17-20 because they are quite different from the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. However, these four verses not only introduce the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, but they also provide us with a mission statement from Jesus. In these four verses, Jesus tells us why he came. And if we quickly pass over them or don't understand them, we are likely to misunderstand both the Sermon on the Mount and the mission of Jesus. And the result is that we will most likely do what Jesus warns against in verse 20; we will become legalists who seek only to obey the letter of the law, believing that through such obedience we will gain eternal life.

We can summarize the point that Jesus makes in Matthew 5:17-20 in this way: *Being righteous before God requires more than a legalistic keeping God's law.*

The Law & the Prophets

In verse 17, Jesus says what he did not come to do – to destroy the Law or the Prophets – and what he came to do – to fulfill the law and the prophets. Then he underscores this point in verse 18 by saying that until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota (which is the Greek word for the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) or a dot (which is probably a tiny mark on some letters of the Hebrew alphabet that helped distinguish similar letters) will pass from the Law until all was accomplished.

Strictly speaking, the law refers to the first 5 books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and the part called “the prophets” refers to the rest, Joshua – Malachi. So together, the Law and the prophets refer to the entire Old Testament. Now even though Jesus only uses Law in verse 18 and not Law and the Prophets, as he did in verse 17, we should not think that in verse 18 he is only talking about the Law. Jesus is still talking about the whole Old Testament because the term “the Law” was also used to refer to the whole Old Testament. So what Jesus says is not a letter or even the smallest part of a letter will pass away until everything in the entire Old Testament has been accomplished.

All about Jesus

Imagine that you were a good Jew who had been taught the Old Testament Scriptures and you were seated at the feet of Jesus on that day when he uttered these words in Matthew 5:17-20. These words of Jesus would be considered to be radical because many of the Jews had lost hope that God would ever fulfill his promise, and now there is this new Rabbi saying something that is totally radical. He not only authoritatively promises that it will all be fulfilled and accomplished, but he says he himself came to fulfill and accomplish it. Now this is a profound statement by Jesus because by it he lifts the entirety of the Old Testament from being just the word of God to his people to it being all about himself. Jesus in essence is saying both the Law and the Prophets are about me, and I've come to fulfill them.

One Big Story

Now exactly what does Jesus mean by saying that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? Here's what he means. The entire Bible, the Old and New Testaments, is about one big story. It is a story of redemption. It is a story about how God created man, how man fell into sin and how God planned and fulfilled his plan to redeem man back to himself. The Old Testament contains the promise of the plan, and the New Testament contains the fulfillment of that plan.

In the Old Testament, there are things written about what the coming Messiah would do and what would be done to him. We find the earliest promise of this plan of redemption in Genesis 3:15, where God himself makes this promise, speaking to Satan who had seduced Adam and Eve into sin:

Genesis 3:15 ¹⁵ *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

Jesus fulfilled Genesis 3:15 when he died on the cross; He bruised Satan's head, in the sense that Satan was defeated, and Satan bruised his heel in the sense that Jesus suffered agony and death on the cross, but on the 3rd day Jesus rose again.

The Commandments

Those who are familiar with the Old Testament and its variety of genres sometimes wonder how Jesus fulfilled certain parts of it, like the 10 commandments and the related moral and ethical laws that were given to God's people to obey. Here's how Jesus fulfilled them. When God gave the 10 commandments and the related moral and ethical laws, he knew that sinful men and women in and of themselves could not and therefore would not fully obey them, no matter how hard they tried, because even if they were very, very good, they would not be good enough to satisfy the perfect righteous requirements of a holy God, because with God, anything less than perfect obedience falls short. We see this truth coming out more clearly in the writings of the prophets who were like prosecuting attorneys on God's behalf. The prophets reminded God's people of what God required of them and how they had fallen short, and the prophets called them into account for their disobedience. But the prophets did more than prosecute on God's behalf; they also promised redemption on God's behalf.

Ezekiel 36:22-27

A landmark example of how God through the prophets promised to redeem his people and to enable them to obey his laws is Ezekiel 36:22-27:

Ezekiel 36:22-27 ²² *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring*

you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

In verse 22, God says he was about to act. When did he act? When did God act to redeem his people from bondage, sprinkle clean water on them, and give them a new heart and a new spirit? When did he put his Spirit within them and cause them to obey his statutes and to be careful to obey his rules? And how did he act? God acted through his son, when he ascended Calvary's hill, became a substitute for sinners, and gave his life as a ransom for many. Through that act and because of that act, when Jesus ascended back to heaven, He and the Father sent the Holy Spirit to live in God's people to empower them and to enable them to obey God.

No More Debate

While it may have been debatable what Jesus meant when he first uttered these words that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets, it no longer is. We see this from Jesus' own words which Luke records for us in Luke 24:25-27. After his resurrection, Jesus was addressing two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were discouraged after the crucifixion because they did not believe his words about his resurrection:

***Luke 24:25-27** ²⁵ And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

In Luke 24:44-47, Luke records further words from Jesus spoken to the 11 disciples that further confirm that he had fulfilled the Law and the Prophets:

***Luke 24:44-47** ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*

So, from his own lips, at the end of his ministry, Jesus says he fulfilled all of the Law and the Prophets, just as he promised he would in Matthew 5:17-18.

The Main Point

Now as wonderful as it is to explore how Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, that's not the main point that Jesus was seeking to make in Matthew 5:17-20, and we better understand the point that Jesus was seeking to make by trying to hear his words in the way his initial followers heard him and the way he was addressing them.

This is a very important point, because after the death of Jesus, his disciples still did not understand why he came and what he did, so we can be sure that they did not understand at this early point in his ministry when he uttered these words in the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, the main point that Jesus was seeking to make in Matthew 5:17-20 is easy for us to miss.

The main point that Jesus seeks to make in verses 17-20 is not so much about his promised fulfillment of the Law but our required obedience to the law. And we see this as he introduces his main point in verse 19 with the word, “therefore.” In verse 19, Jesus connects what he just said about himself and his mission to what God requires of his people. Notice that in Matthew 5:19-20 Jesus is no longer talking about the Law and the Prophets, which he came to fulfill; he is now talking about God’s commandments that people are to obey. And he says that whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches others to do them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Immediately we should see that commandments don’t all have the same weight. But they all have the same importance, and all have the same required obedience.

Our Problem

Jesus is recognizing both the requirements of God’s law and the tendency of sinners like us (even we who are his disciples) to relax those requirements. We reason that God does not really mean what the commandments say, and we break God’s commandments and appease our consciences by relaxing the demands of God’s law.

Notice that Jesus links his disciples’ rank in the kingdom of heaven to their obedience and how they teach others to obey. Position in the kingdom is not based on knowledge of scripture and outward piety, but to obedience.

Our problem is really not with those parts of the Old Testament that prophesy about Jesus and predict his life, and suffering, and death. Our problem is with God’s commands and what he requires of us, and our tendency to relax them rather than obey them. We have a tendency to only obey them in an outward manner, but Jesus is saying that more is required of us.

More than Legalism

The Pharisees were the iconic examples of relaxing God’s commandments, so in verse 20 Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” This would have been a startling statement to Jesus’ disciples because they knew very well the meticulous approach of the Pharisees to keeping the law. But here, Jesus is making an earth shaking point: He is saying that the Pharisees, with all of their law keeping, will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Because if they could, his disciples did not need a righteous greater than theirs. This point should sink in deeply for us.

Deeper Obedience

So what is Jesus calling those who follow him to? Is he calling them to more obedience than the Pharisees? No, he is instead calling them to deeper obedience than the Pharisees, and in verses 21-48, he goes on to give 6 illustrative examples of how the Pharisees focused on external obedience, not the deeper obedience of the heart. In each illustration, he helps us to see that the issue is not a call for greater outward obedience but for deeper inward obedience – obedience from the heart.

Magnifying the Law: Anger

Now we come to verses 21-26 and how Jesus illustrates this teaching concerning anger. And what he says is that Christ's followers must not only refrain from the act of murder; they must also attitude of anger.

Now it is important to note that in these 6 illustrations, starting with this one on murder, contrary to what some people say, Jesus is not setting himself against Moses. Instead, he is standing with Moses, and he affirms the law as given by Moses by amplifying it. He is addressing an aspect of law keeping that the Pharisees in particular had no concern about, and that is obeying God's law from the heart. Here, Jesus is not arbitrarily expanding the law; he is bringing out its true intent from the very beginning.

You Have Heard

Although God wrote the 6th commandment with his own hand, just as he did the other 9 commandments, Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said,' because he was speaking to men who were part of an oral culture, and that is how they would have come to know God's commandments; they were told the commandments verbally. And although the penalty for murder was not stated in the commandment, it was stated elsewhere in the law, and the penalty is death. So when Jesus quotes the command he also quotes the part about being liable to judgment, which became part of the oral teaching. The law was that if 2 or more witnesses to a murder could be found, the accused person would be tried, and if found guilty, he would be put to death.

The New Moses

Notice the authority with which Jesus speaks in verse 22. He is not just giving his opinion about the 6th commandment; instead he speaks authoritatively; he says, you have heard it said, but I say unto you. Jesus speaks as the new Moses. And in verse 22, he makes it clear that he is both affirming and amplifying the 6th commandment at the same time. Notice what he says: "but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the Council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Since all of us have been angry towards another person, we should all be concerned about these words of Jesus. But exactly what is Jesus saying?

Interpretation Difficulties

There are some interpretative difficulties in verse 22, primarily due to the fact that Jesus is speaking in the context of the judicial system of Jewish society at the time. An obvious question

that arises is whether or not Jesus is referring to the same judgment of human courts for anger? If he is, then how can you prove anger and bring a person to court and charge him or her for being angry? First of all, no human court would hear the case, because there is no way for human beings to know the human heart. The only court that can judge anger is a divine court – the court over which the God of the universe sits as judge – the God before whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid. Also, exactly what did Jesus mean by saying that the punishment for insulting another person is to be brought before the council? While some speculate, what he meant is uncertain, so we should not speculate.

The Principle

Rather than split hairs about exactly what Jesus meant, it is better to see the broad principle that Jesus is teaching. Jesus is teaching that there are serious consequences for anger, not only for murder. Why? Because anger, contemptuous thoughts, and abusive words are really the seed form of anger. They are the near relatives, the first cousins, of murder. So we must not think for a minute that Jesus is exaggerating when he amplifies anger to help us to see its connection to murder.

Prohibiting All Anger?

Now these words of Jesus raise a valid question: Is Jesus prohibiting anger in every shape and form? Is it wrong to be angry at terrorists who slaughter innocent people? Think of the atrocities of radical Islamic terrorists, like Isis and Boko Haram. What should be the reaction of the husbands and wives and children who lost loved ones due to their atrocities? Should they be justifiably angry? Should we be angry? The answer is a resounding yes! Jesus is not teaching a total prohibition against anger!

What Jesus Means

How can we know that Jesus is not prohibiting all anger? Well, first of all, in Ephesians 4:26, we are told to be angry and do not sin. This means that anger without sinning is possible. We refer to it as righteous anger; it is anger that is the appropriate response in the face of sin. But the problem is that, as sinners, we do not do a good job of exercising righteous anger, and this is why the warning not to sin in our anger is important.

The Anger Jesus Prohibits

So the specific anger that Jesus is prohibiting is unbridled personal anger that tempts us to take matters into our own hands to see a particular outcome without any regard for issues of due process and justice. He is prohibiting the kind of anger that makes us careless with our speech and causes us to be abusive and derisive in our words. This is especially true for the person who is a legalist because he will govern his hands against murder, but he will not guard his heart against anger.

Capital Punishment

It's important to say that while Jesus is upholding the commandment against murder, he is not at the same time prohibiting capital punishment, as some try to suggest. Some people say Jesus is prohibiting all taking of life; but that's not so. Murder, is the unlawful taking of human

life, and that's what Jesus prohibited. Capital punishment is the lawful taking of the life of persons convicted of murder, so when the state lawfully executes a convicted murderer, it is not murder; the state is simply executing the lawful sentence for murder. But these words of Jesus are not about capital punishment – they are about murder, an act that Pharisees were careful to refrain from, and Jesus affirms the law but goes further to show how the Pharisees had a limited view of the law.

So Jesus essentially says to his disciples that the 6th commandment goes deeper than merely prohibiting outward physical violence against your fellow man that results in his death; it also deals with inward malicious anger towards our fellow man. And in essence he is saying: when you go beyond not committing murder and avoid sinful anger altogether, you live as salt and light and demonstrate that you are from another Kingdom and you belong to me.

Pursuing Reconciliation

Now, wisely, Jesus does not just end with amplifying the law against murder. He goes further and illustrates what he means and this brings me to my second point. Starting in verse 23, he gives two illustrations about what he means in his teaching to avoid anger. The setting for the first illustration in verses 23 and 24 is the temple:

***Matthew 5:23-24** ³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

The contemporary example for us is the church, not the temple. If we adapt it for our setting, Jesus is saying that if we are in a church gathering and are aware that someone has something against us, we are to stop our worship and go and do whatever we can to be reconciled to that person. Notice that the person who is being accused of an offense has to go to the offended party. But this does not mean that the offended party has no responsibility to also take the initiative to pursue reconciliation. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus places a similar responsibility on him.

The Priority

Notice the priority in verse 24: get right with your fellow man first before you seek to offer worship to God. The implication is that God will not hear us until we make things right. God recognizes that the offence that exists could lead to murder, if not dealt with, so he commands us to make reconciliation with others a priority over worship to God. So we deceive ourselves when we think that God makes exceptions for us when we refuse to obey his word to pursue reconciliation with whom we are at odds.

The Point

So what's the point of this first illustration? It is this: Legalistic righteousness is concerned with making sure that no effort of ours will bring physical harm to persons with whom we are at odds. But Jesus says that those who would be his disciples are not just called **not to do** something that is negative against those who are at odds with them; instead, they are called to

do something positive and to actively pursue reconciliation. They are called to take active steps to pursue relational harmony, not just avoid a confrontation. And when we do, we help to avoid anger in others as well.

Settling Disputes

The second illustration that Jesus gives to illustrate the commandment against murder has its setting in the court – it's a legal dispute:

Matthew 5:25-26 ²⁵ *Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.* ²⁶ *Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Jesus tells us that we need to embrace an attitude of humility that seeks to settle legal disputes early before they escalate. So, if for example, you are being sued over money you borrowed and have not repaid, your response to receiving a demand letter should not be to get a lawyer to try to fight it and try wiggle your way out of your responsibility. Instead, you should try to settle it with the person or institution, honestly and humbly. This is a call to be a peacemaker, to look for ways to settle disputes.

Clearly, if Jesus is calling us to be humble towards those who accuse us, it should be very obvious that we should seek to avoid being the one who initiates contentious situations. Now this does not mean that we can't use the legal system to settle disputes and to seek justice; we can and we should. These institutions are ordained of God. However, elsewhere in Scripture, believers are instructed not to sue a fellow believer but rather seek to settle the matter using believers as mediators and arbitrators (1 Corinthians 6). While this is ideal and should be pursued wherever possible, the reality is that many churches are dysfunctional in this area, and such mediation and arbitration between fellow believers is non-existent. In addition, for complex commercial disputes, the legal expertise that is needed to sort through the issues might mandate utilizing the legal system.

Why Jesus Came

In Matthew 5:17-20, we see why Jesus came; but they also help us to see why he had to come. The righteousness that Jesus is calling for in verse 20, speaks about salvation, about eternal life; that's what entering the kingdom of heaven means. And that's a righteousness that no human being on his own can ever attain, even when we have had a new spirit in us and we begin to obey with a deeper obedience. Because even our deepest obedience is not perfect obedience.

If we leave off hearing Jesus at this point in Matthew's gospel, we will never know how that righteousness called for in Matthew 5:20 is attained. By the end of Matthew's gospel and through the letters of the New Testament, we understand. That righteousness is not an achieved righteousness; it is an inherited righteousness; it is imputed to us. God through Christ gives it, and it's based on Christ's substitutionary death on the cross for sinners. Only Jesus can

give the righteousness we need. So rather than relax his laws, we must run to him and confess our inability to fulfil them, and seek his grace and mercy.

Magnifying the Law: Lust

As a general rule, men struggle with the sin of lust more than women. And in Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus teaches how those who are his disciples are called to much more than not committing the physical act of sexual sin:

Matthew 5:27-30 ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.

In these 4 verses, Jesus addresses the righteousness that God requires in marriage.

Singling Out Men

Now the commandment not to commit adultery applies to married men and women, but in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was speaking to his disciples, who were men, about the Pharisees who were also men. And that's perhaps the reason he only addresses men. So here is how we can summarize the point that Jesus makes in these 4 verses to the men in his audience: Avoiding adultery involves a radical commitment to do more than keep your hands off other women; it also includes keeping your eyes off other women.

Put another way, in these 4 verses Jesus says to all who are his followers: You are called to do more than religiously avoid outward sexual sin; you are called to radically pursue inward sexual purity.

Deceased pastor and theologian John Stott wrote a very helpful commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, about these 4 verses, he insightfully made the point that the Pharisees "gave a **conveniently narrow** definition of sexual sin and a **conveniently broad** definition of sexual purity." And if we are not careful, we too can be guilty of the same thing that Pharisees did. We can hear these words of Jesus in narrowly defined ways.

Single People

For example, some single people can easily be tempted to exclude themselves from these words of Jesus because they are not married, and single people can't commit adultery. Sex outside of marriage for the married person is called adultery, while sex outside of marriage for the single person is called fornication. But although both are sexual sins, some single people might be tempted to reason that Jesus is only speaking to married people, and so they read these words as if they are overhearing a conversation that's not intended for them.

Women

Women can also be tempted to confine what Jesus is saying to men and exclude themselves.

After all, Jesus is talking about a man looking at a woman and lusting after her in his heart. But is Jesus exclusively addressing men in general and married men in particular? Clearly, he is not. Jesus is addressing the issue of sexual purity in all of our hearts, and all of us, male and female, married and single, have sinful hearts that are the source of all of the sins we commit. So, in these words Jesus broadly addresses all of us and calls all of us to pursue purity of heart.

Being Honest

In verse 27, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” Here Jesus is echoing the 7th commandment; he is affirming the word of God given to Moses in the 10 commandments. God, who created men and women, the institution of marriage, and the gift of sex, says, “Do not commit adultery.” In other words, do not violate the marriage covenant between you and your spouse. Now the way that this commandment was practically understood in Jesus’ day especially by the Pharisees, is that you should refrain from physical involvement with another man’s wife or another woman’s husband. So, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, as long as you keep your hands off another person’s spouse, you keep the commandment against adultery. And this is also how we understand this commandment today as well; and it certainly means that at a minimum. But according to Jesus, it means more than that.

A Deeper Righteousness

Jesus says in verse 28: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” What is Jesus saying is when it comes to fidelity in marriage, avoiding physical adultery by keeping your hands off another woman is not enough; you must also govern your eyes and guard your heart from looking at another woman with the intent to lust after her, because if you do you, have already committed adultery with her in your heart. Jesus was getting after a deeper righteousness that is of the heart.

An Exaggeration?

Is it really true that intentionally lusting after a woman is adultery? Or is Jesus exaggerating the point to make a point? It is really true, and here’s why. Jesus helps us to see that marriage is a deep, intimate, exclusive covenant between a man and a woman. When a man and a woman enter the covenant of marriage, they pledge to give themselves wholly and exclusively to each other, and this includes their affections and desires. Therefore, when a married man or woman has sexual desires for another person other than his or her spouse, it is a betrayal of the marriage covenant, and is therefore heart adultery; and heart adultery, if not repented of, will eventually lead to actual adultery. So Jesus is not exaggerating.

Then and Now

Now when we consider the way women dressed in Jesus’ day it helps us to see the sinfulness of the human heart. In Jesus’ day women wore long flowing gowns that can easily be described as bed sheets sewn together with 3 holes: one for the head and 2 for the hands - so their clothing was certainly modest; yet men still lusted. And we can easily see how men had to be more

intentional to lust in Jesus day than in our day. In our day, clothing for women is generally designed to reveal their bodies, not conceal them. And today, we live in a hyper-sexualized culture. As wonderful a gift as the Internet is, because of the Internet, pornography is immediately and anonymously available over any Internet enabled device. There was a time when those who wanted to look at pornography had to purchase or subscribe to pornographic magazines or television channels, but all that is now available on computers and tablets and phones.

What's the Point?

We should all see that since the words of Jesus about guarding against lust were relevant in his day, they are especially relevant in our day. Even when we don't view pornography, we daily face a culture of increasingly immodest dress and inappropriate sexual content being pushed in our faces. So being bombarded with opportunities to lust is really unavoidable. But in verse 28, Jesus is talking about something else; he is talking about **intentionally** looking to **intentionally** lust. And this is where honest evaluation comes in: Brothers, what do we do when we seek an immodestly dressed women? What do we do when inappropriate content pops up on our computer screen, or when we stumble on an inappropriate website? Do we linger and indulge in lustful desires, or do we turn away, by God's grace, seeking to keep our hearts sexually pure before him?

A Word to Ladies

Ladies, while you are not primarily affected by what you see, you also need to do honest evaluation regarding the purity of your heart. While sex is generally what men lust after, romance is generally what women lust after. Although these lusts are different, they both end up leading us to the same place.

The multibillion-dollar romance industry: books, soap operas, and movies are primarily supported by women — women who are lusting after idealistic relationships, being loved, being appreciated, being nurtured, and being pampered the way they believe they deserve to be nurtured and pampered, and it shapes their hearts to desire these things. And so it is easy for women to lust after or fantasize having a relationship with a man they believe would give them these things. Women, Jesus addresses you in these verses as well.

Getting on the Scales

Anyone who can say that he or she has considered these words of Jesus and did not come up short is like the person who stands on the scale with one foot to be weighed, or who tip toes to be measured. Such a person is not engaging in honest evaluation. But these words of Jesus call us to honestly evaluate our commitment to sexual purity in our hearts, and when we do, based on the standard that Jesus sets, we all to one degree or another come up short.

The Solution

So what's the solution? Jesus provides the solution in verses 29-30:

Matthew 5:29-30 ²⁹ *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.* ³⁰ *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.*

We can summarize this solution as radical mortification. What is mortification? The word means to kill. It is where we get our word mortician from; a mortician deals with the dead. Mortification is the name for the Christian practice of recognizing and putting to death sin in our lives. It is the practice of fighting sin.

The great Puritan pastor and theologian John Owen wrote: "The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin." Owen also said, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you." This is the point that Jesus is making in verses 29 and 30. Having identified the sin of sexual lust, Jesus goes on to tell us how it must be dealt with; in short he says deal with it radically.

What Jesus Means

So what does Jesus really mean? Clearly, Jesus is not speaking literally, although some people over the years have taken him literally. One well known example is the 3rd century scholar, Origen of Alexandria, who castrated himself in his attempts to deal with sexual temptation. No doubt Origen was very sorry when he realized out afterwards that the real problem with sexual temptation was in his heart and not in his pants! Yes, Origen would have still been tempted sexually after castration.

We know Jesus was not speaking literally because even if we tear out our right eye, we still have the left eye, and we will lust through that one eye with greater intensity to make up for only having one eye! And if we cut off our right hand, and lust is acted upon, we will embrace that other woman with one hand.

Jesus' Point

In using such graphic language: Jesus is simply making the point about what our attitude and approach to sin should be. We who are Christ's disciples must be willing to take whatever drastic steps are necessary to prevent and fight sin in our lives. In short, we must be willing to make sacrifices in our fight against sin.

Do you see Jesus words about tearing out eyes and cutting off hands as being drastic, or do you soberly embrace them because of the seriousness of sin in general and sexual sin in particular? Here's what we read in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20:

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Adultery is the most serious of the sexual sins because not only is it a sin against the body, it is also the breaking of a holy covenant. So in our hyper-sexualized culture today, all of us, but men especially, have to radically seek to mortify sexual sin. Again, if it mortification of sexual sin needed in Jesus' day, what about our day?

Dressing Modestly

Ladies, if you profess to know Christ as savior and Lord, you must take seriously Scripture's call for you to address modestly and thus not add to the temptations to lust that men face. Be willing to pass up what is considered fashionable if it is not modest. You can dress attractively, without dressing seductively. Remember that clothing was given to us as a gift from God conceal our bodies, not to reveal them.

Acting Honourably

Brothers, Paul's words to Timothy about how he should treat women should be taken to heart by all of us. 1 Timothy 5:1-2, he writes: "Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity." This is a call to sexual purity that begins in our hearts.

A Broad Principle

Notice that although Jesus is addressing how we need to be radical in fighting the sins of heart adultery and actual adultery, he shares a broad principle of how to deal with sin generally, and this is a further indication that he is not only addressing men. He says if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away.

Notice once again that there is a need to be honest about sin in our lives and the practical realities that cause us to sin. Jesus is not prescribing a one size fits all approach: he says if your right eye causes you to sin; if you're right hand causes you to sin. Our constitutions and experiences are different, and so are our temptations to sin. My right eye might not cause me to sin; but my right hand does. And if I will be a committed disciple of Christ, once I recognize this besetting sin in my life, I must be willing to deal with it radically, which means at its very root.

For example, if you have a problem with viewing pornography, the equivalent of tearing out or cutting off might be in pursuing serious accountability for your computer usage, perhaps through accountability software or accountability partners with whom you pledge to be absolutely honest about your computer usage. Your computer usage might need to be in the open, and not in private. Notice also that it is not enough for us to tear out the offending eye or

cut off the offending hand; we must also throw them away. We must not make it easy to return to sinful practices.

Sober Contemplation

Notice that two times in 2 verses, verses 29 and 30, Jesus repeats a sober warning: For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. This warning about being thrown into hell is sobering, especially when we bear in mind that God is a great judge who not only judges our actions but our hearts as well. This warning is also sobering because it helps us to see the seriousness of sin based on the punishment meted out to it. Hell is what my sin and your sins deserve. And we must not pass this over quickly just because it is not a happy thought. Instead, we must soberly contemplate it, because Jesus is telling us that a refusal to mortify sin in our lives could cost us our very lives when we receive the punishment that our sins deserve.

Jesus does not repeat this warning about being thrown into hell to scare us; he is being honest with us. Committed disciples take these words of Jesus seriously. And if you are offended by the words of Jesus about being thrown into hell, it's because you do not understand the seriousness of sin. When we sin, we don't sin in a vacuum. When we sin, we ultimately sin against God, who is perfectly holy, and because he is perfectly holy he cannot and therefore will not overlook sin.

Conclusion

What Jesus is calling for as he magnifies the law can't be done on our own. The truth is that even if we tear out both eyes and cut off both hands, like Origen, we will still have our sinful hearts. And our memories hold enough data to allow us to lust in our hearts for all of eternity. But Jesus died on the cross to make it possible that the righteousness that God requires can be credited to all who believe in Christ. So, one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to run off with these words of Jesus and believe that we can obey them on our own. We can't.

If as you consider these words of Jesus, you feel hopelessly incapable of attaining to this heart righteousness that Jesus is calling for in the area of sexual purity, that's a good thing. These words of Christ are designed to drive us to him as our only Saviour. Look to Jesus. That's why Jesus came; because even with our best efforts we could never fulfil the perfect heart righteousness that God's law requires.

Next Class: A Different Kind of Righteousness – Part 2. Please read Matthew 5:31-48 in preparation for our next class.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to seek to serve you from my heart, knowing that the righteousness I need only comes from you. As I mortify sin each day, help me to trust in your righteousness alone.