

Healing Mutilations

Matthew 5:27-30

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Last week we saw how Jesus, the fulfiller of the Law, dealt with the root of murder in human anger and speech. “Thou shalt not kill” entails “thou shalt not be unjustly angry and speak in a violent, dehumanizing way about your brothers and sisters.” This morning, in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, beginning at v.27, Jesus moves from the sixth commandment — thou shalt not kill — to the seventh — thou shalt not commit adultery. We will make two points. The Teaching in vv. 27 and 28. And the Remedy in vv. 29-30.

I. Teaching

First, then, the Teaching. You have heard that it was said: You shall not commit adultery. He cites the 7th commandment. Now, the church has always understood that the implications of the 7th commandment forbid not just adultery, but all sexual impurity.

And surely this bit of teaching, while it focuses on adultery, can be applied to all forms of immorality. Jesus, then, as throughout this chapter, says: But I tell you. Again, this is his way of saying “As the Messiah, as the fulfiller of the law, I determine its end, its full extent, its application.” He is not disagreeing, at least here, with the “you have heard it said” part. How could he be? You have heard it said: You shall not commit adultery. Straight from the Torah.

Adultery was quite rare among Jews of Jesus’ time. So many would have thought — well, I’m pretty good with that one. It appears that Jesus is addressing a situation where many have a narrow definition of sin — just don’t commit adultery — and thus they have a broad, generous definition of their own purity — I keep the commandment — I’m a good person. But Jesus wants us to see that this command entails more — much more-- than simply not committing adultery.

Again, this is not new teaching. But he feels the need to press it home. Proverbs chapters 5-7 clearly teach the connection between lust and adultery. And the 10th commandment forbids the coveting of your neighbor’s wife. Jesus wants us to see the commands NOT as merely external, but to radically deal with what leads to adultery. And radical means to deal with, or to go to, the root. And Jesus is ruthlessly radical here.

And, in the light of this teaching, there will be no one congratulating themselves for not transgressing the outward commandment. This is teaching which leaves no one unscathed, no one standing upright and unharmed. So, he says: But I say to you: that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

No. He is not literally equating adultery with lust — as if we could make no distinctions. But is driving the holiness of the law deep down into the marrow of our souls. He has deepened the seventh commandment in terms of the tenth. Not the act of adultery, but on the interior coveting — in the secret recesses of the person, there Jesus places his finger.

And it's not looking per se, but looking lustfully, the idea is one of a sustained gaze. The objectifying second glance. The deliberate harboring and nurturing of desire, that is what Jesus condemns. This is the very opposite of love which seeks the good of the other. This is a form of self-indulgence, which reduces the other, as one commentator put it — to a visual prostitute.

Now, the senses, human desire and imagination are wonderful gifts, if used wholesomely. The sanctified imagination is a beautiful and fruitful, life-giving thing. But we are fallen creatures, and the fall has corrupted our senses and our desires. Just as murder is rooted in anger and its reckless speech, so adultery is rooted in the heart. The defiled imagination.

But notice--- the heart is not where Jesus DIRECTLY focuses. The eyes are the gateway to the heart, so his concern is with our eyes. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will say:

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. "

So his point is that the heart is controlled by the eyes. The eyes of the heart can have their field of vision clarified or distorted by the eyes of the flesh, our physical eyes. Your physical eyes are the lamp which either lights up, or darkens, your inner person. This is a simple enough point. But let's note that it's a bit counter intuitive, a bit different than the way we might normally look at things.

We would, I submit, tend to want to move from the heart to the eyes, but Jesus does the reverse here. Doesn't Proverbs 3 say to watch over your HEART with all diligence for out of IT flow the issues of life? Doesn't Jesus say that it is out of the HEART that murder and adultery flow? Yes, of course, this is all very true. If you keep your heart pure your eyes will follow.

But Jesus recognizes that this is not the whole picture of the human condition. We are embodied creatures, and what we do with our bodily members is profoundly important. There is virtually nothing in our minds, our imagination, our inner lives, which does not enter through our senses. As far back as Aristotle we have the saying: there is nothing in the mind, which is not first in the senses. The ear, the nose, and especially the eyes are portals, floodgates which impinge directly upon our souls.

So think of it as a kind of loop. The heart, or the soul, can control and direct the body as Scripture often indicates. But the loop works, and works profoundly, in the other direction as well. What we do with our bodies, our eyes, shapes and forms and directs our souls.

Jesus realizes this, and here he focuses on, if you will, the second part of the loop, that part that runs from the body back to the soul. Our eyes solicit our souls. Lust reaches into us through the portals of the eyes. Indeed, human sin began with the eyes when Eve SAW that the fruit was good for food and pleasant to the eyes. This was obviously important in Jesus' day.

Even long before Jesus, Job recognized that he had to make a covenant with his eyes not to gaze on a young woman. Solomon warned his sons in Proverbs: Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. And a bit later in the NT, Peter speaks of false teachers as having "eyes full of adultery." How much more important is this our highly visible, image-oriented, sensate age?

So the point is clear. Almost all Adultery, all impurity, starts with the eyes. And the eyes, of all the senses, are a kind of coveting, desiring organ. We see and we want. We see and we imagine possessing. Sight itself, an exquisite gift of God, becomes a source of defilement for us. We who are destined for the beatific vision, the looking upon the Triune God in the face of Jesus Christ, with resurrected physical eyes, find ourselves having to rigorously police the movements of our disordered eyes.

II. Remedy

Our second point begins in v.29 where Jesus moves to his shocking remedy. If your right eye.... Let me stop on this word "if." It means that the rule Jesus is laying down here is somewhat subjective. It will vary from person to person. He knows people are different. One person might not be able to see a certain movie without sinning, but that does not necessarily mean no Christian could see that movie. One person might need to avoid a class of people which have no impact at all on another person. IF YOUR right eye causes YOU to stumble — then you need to heed these words. Let others deal with the question of IF THEIR right eye causes them to stumble.

Now, the right eye, and later, the right hand, in this world, meant the hand or the eye that was considered better, or more valuable, or more useful. It's clear, and hopefully doesn't need to be said, that Jesus is not saying don't worry about your left eye and hand.

Back to v.29. If your right eye. If your eye, which was given by God, in all its complex wonder, so that we would NOT stumble (in the dark). If it causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. Now, Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation. His language is intentionally exaggerated and hyperbolic. He means take drastic measures. Make drastic sacrifices. Sever the appropriate relations and activities. Hate sin. Crush it. Gouge it, dig it out of your soul. He is commanding ruthless self-denial. Not physical mutilation, but spiritual mortification. Renounce, put to death, the deeds of the FLESH, and the eyes, execute them. Slay them by confessing and living out what is true of your life in Christ. Namely, that in baptism you are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

The moral warfare here is not an independent work, to be added to your union with Christ. It is a call to make that union work in the realm of the eyes. To be who you are as baptized into his death. We have been — past tense — crucified with Christ. We have — past tense — died to the world and the world has been —past tense - crucified to us. All who belong to Christ Jesus, Paul says, HAVE — past tense — crucified the flesh and its sinful desires.

Thus, we might say we are to live in this realm of lust, AS IF we had no eyes, no hands, no feet. As spiritual amputees. As inwardly maimed. Or, in more explicitly biblical language, as those who are circumcised of heart. Thus by being mortified, crucified with Christ, circumcised with the one who was cut off on the cross, this is deep healing medicine. Our radical disorder requires nothing less than the radical remedy of Christ Crucified.

Sadly, there have been some in the history of the church, most notably the 3rd c. biblical scholar, Origen, who have — wrongly — taken this commandment literally. Origen castrated himself. He thought that's what Jesus meant here, and when he spoke of becoming in eunuch for the Kingdom in Matthew 19.

The Council of Nicea (we know it for the Creed) rightly, in one of its decrees, prohibited this barbarous practice. Origen's example is instructive to us, but not simply because he read the verse too literally. But rather because his solution was not radical enough! For, one can certainly be blind and lame and still have a problem with lust. The loop we spoke of earlier works in both directions, from the eyes in, and from the mind out. And you cannot castrate the mind's eye.

The radical solution, the one that gets to the root, is not physical mutilation, but union with the mutilated One. There we become dead, blind if you will, spiritually

maimed, eyeless to the seductions of the world. There, and there alone, is the power needed to make the eyes, the lamp of the body, a source of light, and not darkness.

You know the little children's song: So be careful little eyes what you see, for the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see. It's fine, but it's moralistic and bloodless. And the blood that's missing is the blood of the cross. Little eyes, and bigger people's eyes, it turns out, need to be dealt with by THAT holy violence. That is what the Father up above has provided in his Son.

Jesus then expands on the command with its rationale. It is better for you to lose one part of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. Notice, that while this can seem extreme, the point is pastoral. Sin's reward is death, hell, separation from God. All sin, if it runs its course, ends in destruction. At its root it is a choice for hell, for it despises the holy presence of God. Issues of great gravity, of eternal moment then, are being worked out in our daily, hourly, choices. Lust itself is a fire. It leaves people tormented and unfulfilled. It mangles lives. Like all sin, it's a kind of hell in advance of hell.

Jesus wants our well-being here. That's why he is so sharp and uncompromising. Notice: it is BETTER FOR YOU. Better to be partially, spiritually maimed, than for your whole body, all your members, to be thrown into hell. Hell, its dreadful reality, which Jesus mentions 6 different times in the gospels, IS a motivation to purity. And if that seems crude or beneath us we will have to take that up with our Lord. Here, however, he fights fire with fire (the fire of lust w/ the fire of hell).

He makes the same point in v.30, only he substitutes hand for eye. Not only what you see, but what you do, can lead to impurity. And, in chapter 18 he makes the point again, in the context of temptation to sin generally, and not just sexually. And there he changes it to foot.

So, not just what you see, and what you do, but where you go, must all be cut off, circumcised by the cross. Jesus, apparently, really liked this form of teaching. And that's because, in his love, he knows we need this kind of ruthlessness. Nothing else takes the measure of what we are up against seriously.

So be radical. Act drastically with your body. In Paul's terms: you have been bought with a price — glorify God in your body. Flee immorality — even its first seeds — it is NOT to be negotiated with. It is to be killed. IN the words of the great Puritan, John Owen — be killing sin or it will be killing you.

Hearing this text — honestly — should create deep poverty of spirit in us. We should cry out with the hymn writer:

One thing I of the Lord desire —

For all my way has darksome been —
Be it by earthquake, wind or fire
Lord, make me clean, make me clean!

Who sits unscathed? Who has clean hands and a pure heart to ascend the hill of the Lord in worship? Only Christ. Whose purity covers and liberates us from our impurity. And we must treasure him, and his obedience above all. For desire becomes disordered when the Triune God in Jesus Christ is not himself our sole, chief love, our supreme good, the One we are ravished with. Union with this one, in his death and resurrection, is the desire that mortifies all disordered desires. For adultery is an issue of religious infidelity, of idolatry, which is why the Lord often — through the prophets — accused Israel of spiritual adultery when she went after other gods. This kind of lust — like all sin — is a God-substitute. And the remedy is substituting God for the God-substitutes in our lives.

So be radical. And nothing is more radical and drastic — and more health-giving -- than continual union with the gouged, mutilated and circumcised one, the crucified Christ, the fulfiller of the law. The One in whom we ascend the hill of the Lord with clean and hands and pure hearts. Amen.

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