

# LOOKING FOR LOVE

*SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY*

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The search for love and connection is universal. It goes back to the very beginning. But confusion is prevalent over relationships, love, sexuality, commitment, and fidelity. In Jesus' day that was also the case, and we're going to look at what Jesus has to say about some of these issues in this message. He takes them head-on, as he has so many subjects.

We are in that section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus provides a number of practical, lifestyle applications of being kingdom people. Remember, he has defined kingdom people as those who are committed to him. He tells the people of his day that they need to shift their concept of the kingdom of God from loyalty to the Law or Torah, to loyalty to him. He is the Lord, and he is the one they need to follow. He says he is the one who will rightly interpret for them the meaning of the Law and give them insight into how to live out the Law.

As we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4905), Jesus begins by recalling one of the Ten Commandments. Matthew 5:27-32:

**You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.**

**It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce”; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

This text is impossible to do in one message, but we are going to survey the ideas in it. I hope that God's Spirit will cause you to think and pray about it on your own.

## **The inner sexual morality**

Once again we see the formula “You have heard that it was said...but I say...” The rabbinic tradition was to merely contribute to the existing wealth of wisdom, to consider different points of view. In contrast to that tradition Jesus sets himself up as the supreme authority on the Law. He asks his listeners to consider the Law from a deeper perspective, and he challenges them to live on a different plane from what is normative in their day.

Observe the nature of Jesus' command. He says choices about sexuality flow from our inner being. As I observed in the last message, we are more than bodies. We are complex individuals, souls made up of emotions and intellect and will. In the same way that murder includes not only attacking a person's physical body, but even assaulting someone's character, or soul, the call to sexual morality

acknowledges that there is more to it than physically refraining from sexual activity. It begins in an inner place. One of my all-time favorite books is *The Singer* by Calvin Miller. It's part of a trilogy of poetic retellings of Jesus' life from the gospels. The various sections of the poem have pithy introductions that I love and have often quoted. His introduction for this section is on point: "To God obscenity is not uncovered flesh. It is exposed intention."(1)

If sexual morality is something that emanates from the very core of who we are, then how are we to talk about it? In my series in 1 Thessalonians I referred to a conversation I had with my son Christopher last summer (Discovery Paper 4861). It bears repeating here because I think it is exactly what Jesus is getting at. Christopher and I were hiking up in the hills and talking about life. We got to the subject of girls and sex, and I asked him how his school and his church and even his family had prepared him to deal with that. He replied, "All through our high school years, all we heard was 'Don't have sex, don't have sex, don't have sex.'" He went on to tell me how he had come to realize that God's call is about far more than just abstaining from sex. It is about purity of heart, and that is a whole different issue that he believed no one had really talked about enough. As parents and leaders, we are greatly concerned that our kids grow up without falling into some kind of sexual liaison and getting themselves into all kinds of trouble. We want to say, "Don't do that!" But what happens when that becomes the major approach is that we fall into the trap of seeing sexuality and relationships only in physical terms. Jesus takes us beyond that and says sexual immorality flows from a person's inner being.

Jesus goes on to say that not only does it flow from the inner being, but it is progressive and intentional. Notice in verse 28: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her..." The word "looks" here is a present-tense verb, which has the idea of continuously looking, not a casual glance but a fixation. And "with lust for her" is literally "in order to lust." There is an intention about it.

Now, Jesus recognizes that we live in a world in which men and women feel attracted to one another, and there are all kinds of issues we have to deal with. There is no way to keep from ever being exposed to those possibilities. If we tried to get to the point where we never, ever saw any evil, we would have to lock ourselves in the bathroom and turn out the light. But Jesus recognizes that we will encounter these images, so what are we to do with them? The implication here is that it is when we settle our attention on an image, fixate on it, let our mind dwell on it, that we are beginning to walk the path of adultery or immorality, and to walk away from purity. We cannot control what comes into our minds through our senses, but through God's grace and his Spirit, we can control what we do with it.

In verses 29-30 Jesus says this command is dead serious. People have come up with all kinds of ideas about how to apply Jesus' words "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off." Throughout church history some have taken this command to the literal extreme and mutilated themselves in an effort to somehow quiet the rumblings of sexual temptation. But such measures prove fruitless. What Jesus is doing here is using hyperbole to emphasize the seriousness of the issue. He is simply saying that if the path toward falling into temptation begins with a fixation on an image or some other stimulus, if we are beginning to dwell on that, to move toward it in our thought life, out of a heart intent to indulge in some immoral thinking that could lead to immoral action, then we need to protect ourselves, do everything we can to remove from our experience whatever will start us down that path. In radical terms Jesus says to err on the side of caution. Understand the power of sexual temptation in your life, and don't even start down that path. It would be better for you to sacrifice even important things in your life if they have the potential to move you in the direction of immoral thinking and possibly immoral action.

In addition to this main command, Jesus gives us a corollary command about divorce in verses 31-32.

## The importance of marriage

“It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” A full-blown theology of divorce and marriage is, again, beyond the scope of this message. But let me offer a couple of comments.

Jesus’ admonition to refrain from divorce except for the sin of immorality, or unchastity, gives weight to his main argument about the importance of sexual purity.

There are at least two implications of this corollary command. First, it guards against a casual attitude toward divorce. Now, divorce began as an accommodation. In Matthew 19 Jesus will debate others on this topic who challenge him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (19:7). Jesus replies, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way” (19:8). It was never God’s intent that people divorce. The reality is that it sometimes happens, so God made allowances for it. In the time of Jesus this accommodation had evolved to an absolute requirement for some people: if there was infidelity or some other serious reason, you had to divorce. At the very least it had become a way to expand the reasons for divorce. In some segments of society a man was allowed to divorce his wife for trivial things like burning dinner or embarrassing him in public. (If we had those rules today, there wouldn’t be too many marriages left.) They had taken this accommodation and elevated it by following the letter of the Law rather than the heart of God behind the Law. Consequently, society had developed a rather casual attitude toward divorce. So Jesus’ command here reinforces the importance of the marriage relationship.

Second, this corollary command also acknowledges that the proper place of sex is exclusively in marriage. The exception clause points out that adultery violates the most intimate expression of the commitment of marriage. Now, Jesus doesn’t command divorce when adultery happens, but he allows it, because violating the sexual relationship within the bond of marriage goes right at the heart of what God intended for the union of two people in all of their being.

In all of this Jesus calls us to a view of sexual morality that goes against the tide of the prevailing views of society.

Why does this teaching of Jesus’ matter? I would suggest four reasons.

## God’s great plans

First, the command not to commit sexual immorality calls us to value marriage as divinely created. There are three things that God planned for marriage. First, marriage is a grand picture of relationship, which is part of being created in the image of God. We are relational people, for God himself is a relational person. The Scriptures describe relationship within the Trinity, and God relates to those he has created in his image. The relationship of man and wife becomes a beautiful picture of relationship taken to its nth degree, if you will, its most intimate form.

Second, marriage is a grand picture of covenant love. God has made a covenant with his people. He loves us unconditionally. That love took him all the way to the cross to remove the barrier that separated us from him. When God brings us into covenant relationship with him, it is unconditional and unbreakable. The marriage bond, covenant love exercised on the human level, is a picture of God’s unfailing covenant love for his people. That is why Paul talks about the mystery of Christ and his church

and the mystery of the marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:22-33). But if we take marriage lightly and abuse it through sexual immorality or divorce, we shatter that picture. So as the people of God we are called to reflect God's covenant love for us in marriage.

Finally, marriage serves as a grand picture of intimacy with God. The Bible term that is often used euphemistically for sexual union is "to know." Adam knew his wife (Genesis 4:1). The same term is used for relationship with God. While in no way do I want to imply that our relationship with God is sexual, it is designed to be intimate. The marriage union is the highest level of intimacy in human relationships, bound by covenant love and commitment, and it pictures the wonderful possibility of intimate, personal relationship with God at the deepest core of our being. Therefore we dare not fail to take seriously Jesus' command of sexual purity and fidelity.

The second reason Jesus' teaching on sexuality matters is that it declares that sexuality involves more than the body. We are complex emotional and spiritual beings, and sexuality cannot be separated from the totality of who we are. Our culture puts out the lie that two people can have a casual, recreational sexual liaison that is nothing more than a physical thing, just fun for the evening or the weekend. One of the ways this has become deadly is the huge emphasis on externals, on appearance over character and performance over relationship. We live in a country with a multi-billion-dollar cosmetics industry focused on perfecting the outside of a person. It is bad enough being bombarded by all that, which tends to objectify women as valuable only if they look good enough, but now we have to put up with a new barrage of advertisement at every turn for all kinds of male sexual enhancements to improve their performance.

What really concerns me is the way we are passing on these obsessions to our children. It breaks my heart to hear story after story of young women with eating disorders, young people crashing their lives through sexual promiscuity. They are following the lead of the preceding generation. Without meaning to lay a guilt trip on anyone, I think as leaders and parents we have a huge responsibility for this.

Notice, too, how our busy lives hinder healthy relationships. Our emotional, physical, and spiritual depletion makes us vulnerable to falling into all kinds of temptation, because this society tries to force us to think of sexuality as separate from the totality of who we are. But we do so at our peril.

The third reason Jesus' teaching matters is that the very nature of his command shows us that true love consists of sacrifice. Love as described in the Bible is about giving. Jesus loved us enough to go to the cross and sacrifice his very life for us. As his followers we have an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that love is about sacrifice. But as long as we approach sexuality in terms of what's in it for me, we fail to show forth the true nature of God's love. We distort the picture of God and make choices that end up being destructive.

Finally, this command to live out sexual purity and fidelity reveals God's own heart for us. Back in the Beatitudes at the beginning of this sermon (Discovery Paper 4902), Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). What we are bartering away by our self-indulgence in sexuality is the intimacy with God that he invites us into. The true longing of our heart is for God's love, for intimacy with him. This intimacy with him then becomes the foundation for human intimacy.

There are a couple of things to note about the way Jesus lived. He was comfortable in the presence of people involved with sexual sin. He didn't condemn them or write them off. He loved them. In many ways, he was more comfortable with them than he was with the self-righteous Pharisees. He gave them hope. He offered them forgiveness. He offered them himself.

If all we have to offer our children and our world is a set of moral codes to live by, we will fail. Jesus

offered himself. When we find the heart of God in Jesus, understand his incredible offer of intimacy with him, and issuing out of that, the possibility of intimacy with other people, then as the people of God, we can begin to make a statement in our world by illustrating God's character and life as we esteem the intimacy of marriage. The call to purity is a call to know God. It is a call for the people of God to esteem that which God esteems, and to proclaim his sacrificial, covenant love through our commitment to covenant love.

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## Notes

(1) Calvin Miller, *The Singer*, © 1975, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. P. 79.

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