

INTENSE DESIRE

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:27–30
6th Message
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As the pastor in charge of the Fall Retreat, our annual retreat that's open to everyone, I have very little responsibility, to be honest with you. We have a great team that takes care of just about everything.

There's really only one thing I'm responsible for: baptizing people. By now, those who are regular attendees of the Fall Retreat know they can count on one thing as I stand beside the pool next to the candidates for baptism: at some point, I'm going to lose it.

I think about the death and resurrection of Jesus, which the rite of baptism reenacts. I think about the people we're baptizing. I think about the community that has contributed to the lives of these people. I think about the place, the pool at Mission Springs Conference Center, which has been the scene of so many baptisms through the years and is therefore especially meaningful to the people who are being baptized. It all converges in my heart, and I'm a goner.

The heart: that's what Jesus is after in the Sermon on the Mount. Biblically speaking, the heart is more than just our emotions. The heart includes our emotions, our intellect, and our will. Most importantly, your heart holds your sorrows and your longings. Even with his words concerning lust, Jesus wants to capture our hearts.

Lustful intent

Matthew 5:27-28:

“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 lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Who said, “You shall not commit adultery”? God did. Just like the commandment prohibiting murder, which Jesus commented on in Matthew 5:21-26, the commandment prohibiting adultery is one of the Ten Commandments, which came straight from the mouth of God (Exodus 20:1-17). The fact that Jesus doesn't

come right out and say who said it may imply that other people were also saying it while putting their own spin on it, which would generate debate about what did and didn't constitute adultery. In any case, Jesus goes beneath the commandment.

The basic meaning of the verb translated “lustful” is “to intensely desire” (*epithumeo*). Human desire, even intense human desire, is good. God has made us as creatures of desire.

Jesus uses the verb in Luke 22:15: “I have *earnestly desired* to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Jesus intensely desires to do something, and he intensely desires to do something good.

God created us as sexual beings. Sexual desire is good. Intense sexual desire is good.

Although human desire is good and sexual desire is good, it is quite possible for humans to desire that which is not good—that which is not good for them and for those who are affected as they pursue that which they desire. This is especially true with sexual desire.

Pascal says, “Human being are peculiar in that they pursue ends they know will bring them no satisfaction; gorge themselves with food that cannot nourish and with pleasures that cannot please.”¹

Thus in Romans 13:9, the English Standard Version, and most other English translations, translate the verb *epithumeo*, the same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 5, with the English word “covet”: “For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not *covet*,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

In Romans, Paul is referring to the Tenth Commandment, which reads in full: “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's” (Exodus 20:17).

Giving birth to sin

Read what James says: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). The noun translated “desire” (*epithumia*) is related to the verb *epithumeo* in Matthew 5. Like Jesus, James is talking about intense desire.

James distinguishes between intense desire at the stage of temptation and sin. In Matthew 5:28, then, seeing is not wrong. Desiring is not wrong. Temptation is not wrong, though we should not seek it out, of course. When desire welcomes temptation, nurses it, and chooses what it offers, then desire and temptation give birth to sin, so to speak.

In the Sermon on the Mount, then, what’s the problem? More literally, Matthew 5:28 reads this way: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman *in order to intensely desire her* has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Taking Jesus’ words at face value, the problem is intentional looking for the purpose of intensely desiring another man’s wife.

Although Jesus doesn’t speak directly about a woman’s desire for a married man, we shouldn’t imagine, of course, that he would condone such a desire when it is nursed. Although he speaks directly only about adultery and not about other forms of non-marital sex, neither should we imagine that he would condone the desire for such forms when it is nursed. Neither should we imagine that he would condone sexual fantasies or the use of pornography, which usually go hand in hand. So the intense desire that is adultery of the heart is the desire for an actual sexual encounter, the desire for an imagined sexual encounter, and the desire for sexual fantasies.

Adultery of the heart dehumanizes the person who is desired. When you think that a person, even the image of a person, exists to satisfy your desires, you are dehumanizing that person.

“The desire is desired, embraced, indulged, elaborated, fantasized,” writes Dallas Willard.² To look at a woman or a man in this way is to take a good desire and direct it wrongfully.

Jesus treats adultery the same way he treats murder. He goes beneath the commandments to the reasons why people murder and commit adultery. He goes to our

hearts, the source of our sorrows and longings, from which our actions arise: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

Of course, although adultery of the heart is sinful, actual adultery is worse—especially the consequences.

In the face of temptation, what would Jesus have us do?

Body parts

Matthew 5:29-30:

“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. 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.”

There are multiple problems with these verses if one tries to take Jesus literally.

It’s impossible to tear one’s eye out. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that you were able to tear your eye out, Jesus, if taken literally, wants you to do more than that; he also wants you to throw your eye away. Supposing that you managed to tear your eye out, you’d be in too much pain to throw it away. And why would you need to throw it away if you can no longer see out of it?

You’d have a better chance at cutting off your right hand than you would at tearing out your eye. Jesus doesn’t say go get a surgeon to tear your eye out or cut your hand off; he tells us to do the operations ourselves. Supposing that you were able to cut your right hand off, how are you supposed to throw it away while you’re writhing on the ground and bleeding all over the place? And how is throwing your hand away going to be more helpful than simply removing it?

How is it that only your right eye, and not both eyes, could cause you to sin? Does Jesus suppose that your left eye is closed or that your head could be tilted in such a way that you could only see out of your right eye? And if your right eye in fact caused you to sin, what good would it do to remove it when you still have a left eye? If your right hand causes you to sin, what good would it do to remove it if you still have a left hand?

Assuming that you managed to tear out your right eye and cut off your right leg, assuming that you managed to throw both of them away, and assuming that you continue to sin nonetheless, are you to continue tearing off and cutting off offending body parts and throwing them away until there's nothing left of you but a stump? Finally, are we to suppose that, having taken such measures, you are going to go to heaven without a few body parts, or maybe as just a holy stump, so that your whole body doesn't go to hell?

Taking Jesus literally results in multiple absurdities. No, he didn't mean to be taken literally, though some, tragically, have done precisely that, most notably the church father Origen, who castrated himself.

What causes you to sin?

How, then, are we to take Jesus?

Does your right eye cause you to sin? No. Does your right hand cause you to sin? No. No body part causes you to sin. What causes you to sin? Your heart, the seat of your sorrows and longings, causes you to sin. Your actions, both hurtful and loving, emerge from your heart. Your heart causes you to sin.

Didn't Jesus just say that? Everyone who looks at a woman in order to intensely desire her has already committed adultery with her in his "heart." Actual adultery emerges from adultery in the heart.

Jesus told the Pharisees, "How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (Matthew 12:34-35).

You can't tear out or cut off or throw away your heart.

Heart problem

What is Jesus doing? Jesus is building off what he said in Matthew 5:20: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The righteousness that exceeds the deeds-based righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is the heart-based righteousness, or deep goodness, that Jesus offers us.

To deal with sin, the scribes and Pharisees take a surface-level approach: they tear out eyes and cut off hands, so to speak. Jesus is saying that the deeds-based,

surface-level approach is insufficient. He uses different metaphors later in Matthew to illustrate the insufficiency of such an approach:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:25-28)

With sin, you're not dealing with an eye problem or a hand problem; you're dealing with a heart problem. Adultery is a heart problem. Adultery of the heart, quite clearly, is a heart problem.

What if you are committing adultery of the heart and want to stop doing so? You could take some measures: build in accountability, modify your devices, or even smash your devices to bits and throw them away. In the extreme, you could join a monastery, but in recent times, we've heard the horror stories of what has happened in some of those places.

I am not suggesting that you shouldn't take such measures. Such preventative measures can be helpful and may be necessary. What I'm suggesting is that such measures by themselves are insufficient. They do not get to the heart of the matter, which is your heart. Even if it were possible to remove every external temptation, it is still impossible to remove your heart.

The focus of preventative measures is what you shouldn't do, not what you should do. The purpose of the commandments, especially as Jesus goes beneath the commandments, is not to not sin; the purpose of the commandments, as Jesus goes beneath the commandments is to love—first God and then others. As Paul says, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Bill Thrall and Bruce McNicol write in *The Kingdom Life*: "I discover that attempting to sin less doesn't guarantee that I will love more, but loving others will definitely result in less sinning."³ Try it sometime: try loving more and see if you sin less.

For us to love God and others, something has to happen in our hearts. Good news: Something has already happened!

New covenant

The kingdom of heaven has drawn near, first with the coming of Christ and second with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God's healing, loving power is available to all. The Lord in Ezekiel 36:26-27 anticipated the outpouring of the Spirit: "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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the Lord anticipated the outpouring of the Spirit as part of a new covenant—that is, a new partnership—with his people. The writer of Hebrews, having declared that the new covenant has been enacted and that the Spirit has come, mostly quotes from the Lord's words in Jeremiah:

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel

after those days, declares the Lord:

I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,

and they shall be my people.

And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor

and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
for they shall all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,

and I will remember their sins no more."

(Hebrews 8:10-12)

The Spirit, who now dwells in the hearts of believers as part of the new covenant, is nothing if not relational. He relates us, both individually and collectively, to God. He helps us to "know" the Lord.

God is romancing us

In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, marriage between a man and a woman illustrates the Lord's relationship with his people.

The intense desire that we have for a sexual relationship is tied to the intense desire that we have for God. The intensity of our sexual desire can and should therefore remind us of our intense desire for God. If God

created us to desire him, what does that mean? It means that he desires us! The intensity of our sexual desire can and should also remind us of God's intense desire for us.

When Jesus says to his twelve disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you," do you think that his desire is only for twelve men? At the Passover meal he shared with his disciples, he breaks the bread and pours out the wine, which represents his body and his blood—broken for all, shed for all. Jesus intensely desires to be with you. The bridegroom wants his bride.

The person looking at a computer screen is imagining that the person looking into the camera is looking at him or her with desire. It's not true. What is true? Something so much better. God wants you.

The Spirit is in our hearts to fan the flames so that we will feel God's intense desire for us and our intense desire for him. Can you feel it? Can you feel your desire for God? Can you feel God's desire for you?

God is romancing us. Listen to Brent Curtis in the book *The Sacred Romance*:

Indeed, if we will listen, a Sacred Romance calls to us through our heart every moment of our lives. It whispers to us on the wind, invites us through the laughter of good friends, reaches out to us through the touch of someone we love. We've heard it in our favorite music, sensed it at the birth of our first child, been drawn to it while watching the shimmer of a sunset on the ocean. The Romance is even present in times of great personal suffering: the illness of a child, the loss of a marriage, the death of a friend. Something calls to us through experiences like these and rouses an inconsolable longing deep within our heart, wakening in us a yearning for intimacy, beauty, and adventure.

This longing is the most powerful part of any human personality. It fuels our search for meaning, for wholeness, for a sense of being truly alive. However we may describe this deep desire, it is the most important thing about us, our heart of hearts, the passion of our life. And the voice that calls to us in this place is none other than the voice of God.⁴

Don't try to conquer your desire for sexual intimacy. Instead, recognize through your desire for sexual intimacy that you have an even greater desire: a fierce yearning to lose and find yourself in God and all he has for you.

Draw near

In Matthew 5:28-29, Jesus talks about what is “better” for you. What is better for you than adultery of the heart, looking at a woman or man who is not your spouse in order to intensely desire her or him? Desire for intimacy with God is better. The greater desire transcends the lesser desire. Only God can heal your deepest sorrows and satisfy your deepest longings.

Based on the new covenant and the Spirit’s presence in our hearts, the writer of Hebrews urges us to “draw near” to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22). Draw near in prayer and worship and reflection. Enjoy God.

Noticing what God has done and is doing in your life and reflecting on it will help you draw near to God and enjoy him. When the waiter brings your meal to your table, what does he say these days? “Enjoy.” The kingdom of heaven is a feast. You have to take in the wonder of it all, including your sorrows and longings.

In order to observe what God has done and is doing, I try to take a few minutes at the beginning of each day to look over the previous day, reviewing in my mind the moments, the interactions, the sensations. Some people practice such an exercise at the end of the day and look back on the day from that vantage point. This exercise helps me notice God, draw near to him, enjoy what he’s doing, and enjoy him! Perhaps this kind of exercise could help you.

Poolside

Sure enough, as I stood beside the pool again at Mission Springs last Saturday, next to four young women we were about to baptized, I lost it again—multiple times. So, what’s going on when my heart explodes each fall? God is romancing me.

I think he’s romancing you too.

Endnotes

- 1 Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Green Stick: Chronicles of Wasted Time* (Hopkins, MN: Olympic Marketing Corp., 1982).
- 2 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 165.
- 3 Al Andrews, *The Kingdom Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2011), 79.
- 4 Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 6-7.