

Lust: The Spirit of Immorality (Matt 5.27-30)

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most comprehensive teaching on what it looks like for a believer to actively participate with God's grace to build firm and steady foundations in this life. This teaching portrays a life that is lived in partnership with the grace of God that is centered around the things that God defines as valuable.
- B. The Sermon begins with the eight beatitudes, which are Jesus' most succinct portrait of the value system of his kingdom (5.3-12). The presence and growth of these values in our lives are the substance of our discipleship (5.13-16) and are the measure of true and lasting greatness in God's kingdom (5.17-20).
- C. In Matthew 5.21-48 Jesus highlights six particular sins that must be *actively resisted* in our pursuit of cultivating and pursuing wholehearted obedience to Jesus.
- D. Each of these six examples are like strongholds in the human heart that stand in the way of the fruits of righteousness being fully matured in our lives.
- E. These are each introduced by Jesus highlighting what his hearers would have often heard said ("it is said...") either through the Old Testament or the teaching of the rabbis. He then demonstrates the true spirit of the law ("but I say to you...") and invites his disciples to practice walking in the *opposite spirit* from these inner dispositions.
- F. It is important to understand that Jesus is not presenting this as a new, or deeper, law. If he was doing so, he would have exhorted his followers to resist the sin itself or be on guard to not fall prey to its power. Rather, Jesus gives particular *applications* or *practices* to break the cycle of these sins (and their effects) in our hearts and in the lives of others.
- G. Each of these realities could be said to be like a poison (either in our hearts or in relationship around us), and the applications that Jesus gives are meant to resist and remove the poison and its effects *primarily* in our hearts.
- H. Jesus concludes the teaching of this section by exhorting his believers to walk in wholehearted obedience in every area of their lives in active pursuit of his grace (Matt 5.48). Far from being a demand to walk in sinless perfection, this is a call to walk in the way that leads to wholeness.
- I. The commandments of Jesus are intended to *recognize the severity of sin* (spiritual cancer) and *maximize joy* (what it means to be fully alive). To miss this important element of Jesus' words will distort our desire to pursue obedience in accordance with his grace.

II. THE SPIRIT OF IMMORALITY: LUST

- A. The second of the six temptations that Jesus identifies as poison to our hearts is the spirit of immorality at work in our lives. Jesus highlights that the teaching against adultery was not confined only to the physical sexual act but included internal elements of lust.
- B. This teaching of Jesus is not the whole picture on sexual sin, addiction, or brokenness. Rather, it is intended to highlight several principles that are important in understanding and waging war against lust. First, Jesus wants his disciples to understand that immorality does not begin in the actions, but in the heart. Second, Jesus wants to invite his disciples to make radical and costly choices to remove what enflames lust.

- C. Like the teaching on anger, we must understand that Jesus is seeking to extract a poison from the human heart that has the potential to grow in us and cause destruction both to our souls and to relationships around us.
- D. The Bible teaches that immorality includes all sexual activity (this includes: physical, verbal, technology, etc.) that happens outside of the covenant of marriage that is between one man and one woman. The reason that the Lord draws boundaries for our sexuality to be expressed within this type of covenant is that he knows that this is the *only* context in which sexual activity is for the good and ultimate enriching of our lives.
- E. Sexual immorality is not neutral or innocent. It brings destruction and defilement to our own soul and to others. Over time it will cause us to experience real loss, greater dullness/darkness in our hearts, and will ultimately devalue others.

1. Immorality is dangerous because of its growing nature. This is not something that can be dabbled in and controlled later (apart from true repentance). The nature of immorality is that it grows as our hearts and minds are dulled and darkened.

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived... ²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened... ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie... ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions... ²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. (Rom 1.18-28)

2. There is a particular severity throughout the Scriptures placed on sexual immorality. It is a sin that is committed against the body.

¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. (1 Cor 6.18)

- F. Jesus declares here that whoever *looks* to another with the purpose to lust has already participated in the spirit of immorality in their heart. This happens whenever someone looks at another individual (either directly or through media/pornography) for the purpose of lusting after them. This type of looking fuels the heart with sexual fantasy and imagination and must be recognized (and repented for) as sin.
- G. James outlines the escalating and growing nature of sin (lust) in our hearts and promises that God will give the crown of life to those who remain steadfast under such temptations. To remain steadfast means to pursue wholehearted obedience over time in partnership with God's grace.

¹²Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him... ¹⁴each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (Jas 1.12-15)

1. **Stage #1: Initial stirring of lust:** Being *lured* by lustful desires occurs as the imagination is stirred up as we begin to casually think on the possibility of walking out lustful actions. Satan desires that our fleeting thoughts become a sustained habit of thinking (fantasy). There is a vast difference between a momentary wrong thought and being enticed and captured by it.
2. **Stage #2: Sustained lustful thoughts:** As the mind and imagination is lured away, we become *enticed* by desire. At this point a fleeting thought becomes sustained and we are captured in a fantasy of immorality.

3. **Stage #3: Decision to act:** Before the actual act comes a decision point. This is the point when the action becomes *conceived* in the heart and mind. This is the moment when the action of sin becomes “alive” in us at a new level.
4. **Stage #4: Acting in immorality:** This desire then *gives birth* and the act of sin becomes seen to all. It is important to understand that Jesus is stating here that the principle of sin has been alive in us prior to this point and needs to be dealt with according to radical principles. However, when immorality manifests itself in these ways, the effects become more significant both in our lives and in the lives of others.
5. **Stage #5: Sin becomes habitual/addiction:** As sin is acted upon (outside of repentance and waging war), these sinful choices become habituated as it *grows*. One thing that many do not understand is that our capacity for sin is progressively enlarged in us as we act in accordance with lust. These, over time, become ingrained in patterns and habits (addictions) that become much more difficult to overcome and have victory in. This wounds the conscience and dulls our souls as we become more comfortable in sin (cf. 1 Tim 4.2).
6. **Stage #6: Consequence:** As sin grows it brings *death*. Immorality progressively destroys life as we reap more consequences (Rom 6.23).

H. Jesus wants us to be aware of sinful tendencies and the spirit of immorality at work at us in the initial stages. Unchecked, this is a poison that ultimately leads to *judgment*. To remain complacent to the movements of lust at work in us and imagine that we are ok is a dangerous place to live. The testimony of Scripture is that this is like a cancer that has the potential to kill us without the proper treatment.

III. OVERCOMING IMMORALITY

- A. Jesus invites us to understand several realities as we are called to partner with his grace in actively resisting the spirit of immorality in us.
- B. The first truth that Jesus invites us to understand (and this helps us in waging war against immorality) is the **role of the eye** in the battle for purity. Jesus teaches that immorality is at work in us at the beginning stages with regards to what we *look at*.
 1. Job declared that he made a specific covenant with his eyes in order that he would not look at a woman with the intention to lust after her.

¹I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin? (Job 31.1)
 2. David vowed to live with integrity of heart in his home (the place of the most familiarity, secrecy, etc.) and not set any worthless thing before his eyes.

²I will ponder the way that is blameless. Oh when will you come to me? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; ³I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. (Ps 101.2)
 3. Our commitment to sexual purity should have specific, concrete, and costly implications for what we consume through our eyes.
 4. There is a profound relationship between your physical eyes (what you see, consume, etc.) and the eyes of your heart. Jesus desires that the eyes of our souls would be *singular* in their focus and unclouded by worthless things. Our eternal destiny is to **see God** (Matt 5.8), but we must receive and pursue purity in what we look at in order to grow in purity of heart.

- C. The second truth that Jesus invites us to see in relation to resisting the spirit of immorality at work in us is the necessity to make *severe and costly choices* to pursue wholeness here.

²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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. (Matt 5.29-30)

- D. If we do not understand the nature of sin, its poisonous effects on our souls and in our relationships, and the commitment of Jesus to our *ultimate joy*, then we will misunderstand the nature of these exhortations.
- E. Jesus is not promoting self-mutilation here but is rather teaching his disciples to attack sin and temptation with utmost severity. He is inviting us to *respond* to sin and its presence within us with tenacity and severity equal to its destructive power.
- F. These include costly decisions to lose what is *valuable* (i.e., the eye) and necessary for *productivity* (i.e., the hand). To make such decisions will be difficult and demonstrate the “narrow way” that is costly to us in the present — but in light of eternity will be a truly wise decision (cf. Matt 11.19).
- G. Many are unwilling to make the needed changes to their lives (relationships, places, what we watch, internet habits, etc.) to walk in freedom in this area.
- H. Yet, Jesus is declaring that although discipleship is costly, the cost of non-discipleship is much higher.
- I. Paul warns his readers to flee from situations that incite ungodly desire and lust within us. This is to be done in the fear of the Lord.

¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁷and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” ^{7.1}Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. (1 Cor 6.16—7.1)

- J. In Romans 6 Paul outlines several truths that are to enable Christians to stand in the midst of temptation.

Truths to BELIEVE / KNOW about Christ and about union with Christ	Exhortations to OBEY in light of these truths
Truth #1: Know that we are baptized into Christ’s death <i>so that</i> we can now experience the newness of his life (vv. 3-5)	Exhortation #1: Therefore, consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God (v. 11)
Truth #2: Know that you have been freed from the power of sin <i>so that</i> we might live with Christ (vv. 6-8)	Exhortation #2: Therefore, we are to no longer let sin reign in our body (v. 12)
Truth #3: Know that Christ, being raised from the dead, is no longer subject to death (vv. 9-10)	Exhortation #3: Therefore, we are to no longer present our members as instruments of sin, but present them to God as alive from the dead (vv. 13-14)