

Sermon on the Mount Matthew 5:27-32

A while back when Matt Jan and I first starting to think about the Pause, Remember, Celebrate service we had last week I said let's leave the chairs in café format for the holidays, and maybe we can use discussion in the messages during that time. We have been going through the Sermon on the Mount and today we tackle the topic of Lust. So around your tables why don't we all share recent experiences of lust with each other!!! No don't, please don't. Actually today we look at Lust, Adultery, and Divorce...but sit comfortably I won't be asking you to confess anything to anybody. Let's get started!

The other day was relaxing in front of the tv channel surfing and came across a programme called the Kaimanawa horses. I had seen it advertised and I ended up watching a bit of it. Not normally my type of programme but these animals are mean. They are wild, this girl got bit by one of them, what a mess.

These girls are trying to break in these wild horses, and it is pretty dangerous. One girl is saying to the other, don't let them see that you are scared – yeah right - when one of those animals kicks, she does one thing. Her instincts kick in and she runs for the fence as fast as she can go. Only after getting behind that barrier does she relax and try to stop looking scared. At that moment she is very thankful for that fence.

The point I want you to get is this: people dealing with dangerous animals love fences - the stronger the better. They don't resent the fence. They know it's there for their good. They know it's not there to restrict or restrain them, but to restrict and restrain that wild animal.

This is a great illustration of what God is trying to achieve with the law. The law, the bible, isn't there to restrict us in the sense that it would keep us from fun. No, it's there to keep us from harm. God's laws are here to protect us, because in a very real sense, God's laws put a barrier between us and that which might destroy us.

Today we're continuing our series on the Sermon on the Mount. We have called the series *Counter Culture – a life of faith in an upside down world*. The Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5-7, is pretty significant, it is a kind of handbook for the kingdom of God.

This Kingdom teaching that Jesus is explaining to disciples is deeper and more personal than the laws of any country. It's not just about behaviour, but delves

into the innermost parts of a person that no other person can judge and only God can know.

Starting from Matthew 5:21 there are six comparisons between external performance of the law and internal obedience to the law. Each comparison starts off "you have heard it said" or something similar. A couple of weeks ago we looked at anger, this week we get to the really juicy stuff of lust, adultery and divorce.

So let's read today's passage...

Matthew 5:27-32

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Let's take this passage one bit at a time. Let's look at adultery and lust for a bit, and no I won't using the power point to illustrate anything!!!

Matthew 5:27

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Here is that reoccurring phrase "You have heard that it was said" and it is referring to the Pharisees teaching on the Ten Commandments – Thou shalt not commit adultery. These commandments are clear and easy to obey and we all understand that any person who commits adultery or murder is guilty of breaking the Law, back then both punishable by death. In the early practice of

Jewish Law, adultery was punishable by stoning the person to death, for both men and women, but in Jesus day it seemed to be only the woman.

But as with murder and anger, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago, Jesus once again intensifies the requirement of the law by focusing on the root of the problem - which is lust.

Jesus' angle was not completely new. Most of the religious teachers of Jesus day would have agreed with Him. They already believed lust was a sin, they saw it as a form of coveting, outlawed in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.

Exodus 20:17 says, *"You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."*

Jesus, agrees with the religious teachers of his day, He connects the word for "lust" to the word for coveting. Lust is more than a quick glance of appreciation of beauty, or that twinge of attraction that happens between two people. No, Jesus is talking about something we enjoy, something we nurture, something we feed and hold on to. Something we think about on a regular basis and allow to work in to the depths of who we are.

Since lust was a form of coveting it was already outlawed...but Jesus is doing something different than the teachers of the Law. **Jesus is making lust the responsibility of the person experiencing the lust and then equating it with breaking the faithfulness of the marital relationship.**

Jewish writers placed the responsibility for preventing lust on the women. Hence why only the women were punished for adultery. They were to wear head-coverings and the right clothing in order to keep others from lusting. If people were lusting after her, then it was her fault because she must have done something inappropriate. Now there is something to be said to those who attempt to provoke lust in others, and being the stud of a man that I am, I have to be very careful, and the very fact that none of you take a second look at me is prove that my precautions are working!! But I digress, we are focusing on this passage and Jesus' focus is to place responsibility and blame on the person doing the lusting.

It is very easy to only point the 'lust finger' at blokes, but yes both men and women are guilty of lust. And so Jesus' words apply to both of us equally.

Men and women experience lust in different ways, but both experience lust. AS you all know, for men lust most commonly takes the form of the visual. The female body has this weird power over a man's ability to control his eyes. For the woman lust most commonly takes the form of romance. They want the love relationship to be a certain way, and when it is not, that caricature of romance found in the movies or novels becomes something more desirable. A man will look at pornographic material and think, "Why can't my wife be like that!" A woman will watch a romantic movie or read a romantic novel and think, "Why can't my husband be like that!"

These are broad generalities, but they serve our purpose. When we consume our minds with physical or mental images of sinful behaviour with someone other than our spouse...we are lusting. When we are tempted to see our spouse as less by something, be it pictures, movies, novels, whatever...we are being unfaithful to our marital vows according to Jesus' words here in the Sermon on the Mount.

Some might ask, who is lust hurting, why is it a sin?

Lust is sin, and it is sin because it damages all those involved.

- At its core it is selfish, and seeks to use others to fulfil a passion or desire without them being a willing participant and often without them being present.
- Lust also destroys the possibility of true love. It dehumanizes the person on the other side, and love is not possible if one person is not fully human in the relationship.
- But more damaging is that it is an act of unfaithfulness to the primary relationship in our lives...our marriage. If Jesus' call is to "love our neighbour as ourselves" how much more does that apply to the person who has joined us in marriage? And when one person begins to lust after someone other than their marital partner...they are breaking the trust of that relationship.

Jesus challenges us to find our ultimate fulfilment of the opposite sex in our spouse. His challenge is so strong that He uses this extreme example...

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut

it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Is this a hyperbole, an overstatement on Jesus' part? I'm pretty sure it is or else we would have a lot of blind and handless people walking around. But there is still an element of truth here.

While our hands and eyes are not the root location of sin...if we don't have them we will not be able to do the sinful act. If we don't have the means to fulfil certain temptations, then those temptations will go unfulfilled. For example – I would be tempted to drive a really flash sports car, but as I don't have much money I drive a little 20 year old Honda prelude valued at about \$1000. If you don't have the means to fulfil certain temptations, then those temptations will go unfulfilled.

Some statistics indicate that we Christians are as guilty of viewing Internet pornography as everyone else. If we are serious about obeying Jesus instructions we should do whatever it takes to get away from it. There are internet safety programs, there is making sure that computers are in public places, there is making sure that your spouse or friend has free access to your computer/phone/tablet. If lust is a problem don't give yourself opportunity to feed it, deal with the electronics.

We accept this truth in other areas...for instance, we don't send recovering alcoholics into bars as an evangelistic strategy. We wouldn't put a person who had a history of fraud in charge of our finances. Why? We understand that if we struggle with something, we make it easier on ourselves to avoid giving in to those temptations if we keep ourselves away from those things.

Jesus reminds us to do whatever it takes to get away from the things that create temptation. That movie, that website, that genre of book, that person, whatever it is that creates and nurtures the lustful thoughts in us...we should do whatever it takes to distance ourselves from it because it can have eternal consequences.

Jesus says, "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." Jesus is not just talking about eternity here he is talking about the present. Hell is Gehenna and fiery rubbish dump just out of the city gates where rubbish was burned. So he is referring to the present and future. Preservation of our future life with God may require depriving

ourselves of something in this life. As Jesus' followers, our actions have eternal significance. Our actions are building the person we will be in God's Kingdom to come.

We go back to an earlier statement, "If Jesus' call is to "love our neighbour as ourselves" how much more does that apply to the person who has joined us in marriage." And our relationship with our marital partner has eternal significance. If we cannot be faithful to this person...how can we be faithful to God.

Lust is one way to break our vows of faithfulness to our spouse...and so Jesus moves on to divorce.

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

I don't think anyone would say that divorce is a good thing, I have talked to a number of youth over the years who have said they not sure they want to marry, "it seems like everyone starts out ok, but then it ends in divorce. I don't want that."

I was talking to someone here in Tauranga and in their child's group of friends they were the only one still living with both original parents.

As I am sure you all know divorce is a real issue, and the church has not always understood or applied the Bible's teaching on it well. It is a difficult subject to talk about with so many painful issues involved. The challenge is speaking about it a way that sets out God's expected standard, but also fully comprehends God's grace for those involved.

Jesus words here are to protect the poor and vulnerable, they are meant to be an encouragement to married people, to stay married, to work at marriage. They are meant to set a standard of what it means to live in a biblical marriage...but we are guilty, like the Pharisees were, of turning these words into a weapon, as a judgement against the divorced.

Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. It is not a Scarlet Letter to be worn for the rest of a person's life. The term scarlet letter was a sign of adultery. For

women, they would just sew on an A on all these dresses. This was used with the puritans. They thought if you sinned, like adultery, you would go to hell. And because of this, no other citizens would want to be near you or else they thought they too would go to hell. And there is no forgiveness. Christians have said and done some dumb things throughout the ages.

Those who divorce and are divorced can and should be forgiven. God's grace and the teaching of the Bible indicates this, but God's ideal is that marriage is a lifelong covenant between two people.

To help us understand this passage, let's first talk about the cultural setting Jesus is addressing. At issue here was that a woman often didn't desire the divorce...it was forced upon her, and she had very few options.

- Remarriage; which usually didn't happen because she was now tainted.
- Returning to her father's home; which would only last for a while.
- Poverty; because she was unable to support herself in this culture.
- Prostitution; because this was the only means of support.

Also at issue here is that the vows were made before God. Husband and wife had become one flesh, and that couldn't be undone. While the Pharisees may have made numerous concessions allowing a man to divorce His wife, even to the extent of burning the toast, God was certainly not going to accept their actions. Jesus calls them back, once again, to understand that faithfulness in this most intimate of personal relationships is an example of faithfulness to God.

If Pharisees were unable to be faithful and to maintain relationship with their wife...how could they ever maintain a relationship with God? And for those who follow Christ, the expectation is that every possible means to rescue the marriage must be taken. Paul even indicates in 1 Corinthians that should a person be married to an unbeliever...they should not seek divorce.

But Matthew and 1 Corinthians include exceptions because for many divorce is not their choice.

I have occasionally, thankfully not very often, listened to the pain of someone going through divorce. I remember one who had tried everything possible to keep her from leaving. But she was divorcing him no matter what he wanted. I think God applauds him, and I don't believe my friend is guilty of sinning. God doesn't punish us for things we cannot control.

When exceptions are made in this passage and others in the Bible, they are not meant to give us an 'out' in our marriages...they are meant to free those who are victims of unwanted divorce.

And even when divorce is done without an exception being available...and we go along with it...we are still not outside of God's grace and forgiveness.

But God's ideal...his expectation of those who seek to follow him...is that we do everything possible to make our marriages work. The allowance of exceptions and the offer of grace and forgiveness do not excuse us from taking Jesus' point seriously. If can't love our spouse...we can't love God. If we can't be faithful to our spouse...we can't love God.

These are tough and challenging words. The challenge is not to interpret Jesus' words as another form of legalism and once again punish those who are divorced and refuse them grace and forgiveness. If we do that...we fail to really grasp the point Jesus is trying to make. But we can also fail if we condone inappropriate divorce and reject God's challenge to live faithfully to the covenant of marriage. The challenge is to see the standard God's sets here and strive from here on out to live up to it.

Conclusion

The marital relationship is God's ultimate example of what it means to be in a relationship with him. It is the relationship that should be the most intimate of any relationship we have...one that fosters openness, transparency, and honesty so we can be truly ourselves before the other person...naked and without shame as Adam and Eve were in the Garden.

The marriage covenant was the primary metaphor used in the Old Testament for our relationship with God. In Malachi 2, God says, "I hate divorce!" He says this not because he hates divorced people or refuses them grace, but because He hates the pain it causes to everyone involved...and He hates what it says about our relationship with Him.

This morning we sit here as a mixed bag of people. Some have been divorced. Some have not. Some have been divorced and are now remarried. What I don't want you to hear is a message that condemns those who are divorced, but neither do I want you to hear one that condones it either.

In fact, I think lust and divorce are the examples Jesus uses to call us to deeper

levels of faithfulness. Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbour as ourselves, and there is no closer relationship on this earth than the marital relationship. We are challenged in this passage to do whatever it takes to be faithful...faithful to God and faithful to loving our neighbour as found in the most intimate of our earthly relationships.