

Overcoming Sexual Sin

Matthew 5:27-30

April 12 & 13, 2014
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I had a sad moment this past week. I was sitting in my family room with Jennifer, when I read on my iPad, "Megachurch pastor confesses sin and quits." I clicked on the link and was dismayed to see that the pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches in America, around 20,000 attenders, had fallen into sexual sin and was out of the ministry. This hit me particularly hard because he is a man I have met. I have been to his church and admired him from afar. His confession included adultery and a long term struggle with pornography. It stunned me and I had a sense of dread come over me.

As Proverbs says,

"And now, O sons, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth. Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths, for many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death." (Proverbs 7:24-27 ESV)

"All her slain are a mighty throng." We are talking today about overcoming sexual sin. Our series on the Ten Commandments has us on the seventh command, *"You shall not commit adultery."* (Exodus 20:14) Last week we looked at God's good plan for human sexuality and the gift of marriage as the holy context for it. The command protects the sacredness of sex and the sacredness of marriage. Our sexuality is in itself a wonderful gift and in marriage a lifelong pleasure. Outside of marriage, sex is a destroyer because "sex is connected to the rest of life." (Philip Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 162.) Sex before marriage. Sex outside marriage. Visual sex in pornography. Imaginary sex in novels like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Voyeur sex—watching on the TV or movie screen. On and on it goes. This is a huge area of human pain. The mighty throng destroyed by this one area of sin calls us to consider carefully how we may overcome sexual temptation.

By this I don't mean to insinuate that this is a victory to be won but rather a battle to be fought. We don't believe sexual purity earns us salvation. There will be many virgins in hell. We are only saved through Jesus and his righteousness gained by faith in his work on the cross for our sin. On the other side of salvation, we want to please the Lord and God is pleased with sexual purity. So how do we fight this fight?

Overcoming Sexual Sin

Realize where it comes from so you can kill it there

"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. 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. (Matthew 5:27-30)

The early church Father Origen was so frustrated with his sexual desires that he castrated himself only to discover that this did not fix the problem. That would be quite a disappointing discovery, don't you think? Jesus says here that to deal with sexual sin at its core, I would have to castrate my heart. By that he means not the beating heart in my chest but rather my spiritual heart; my soul. For it is deep in the human heart that sin begins.

Notice how Jesus explains this. He begins with the seventh command, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" (Matthew 5:27)* This Jewish audience was very familiar with the seventh command. The seventh command was a famous one just like sex grabs the headlines today. The Jews knew well the story of David and Bathsheba, Solomon and his concubines, Amnon and Tamar, and many other biblical examples. Back then, just like today, when the Levite or Priest said, I am speaking today on sexual sin, he had everyone's attention.

Jesus teaches this differently from anything they had heard before. The Jewish teachers warned them about external sexual sin, but they only interpreted it externally—the actual immoral acts themselves. Jesus tells them that sexual sin doesn't start externally; it starts internally. *"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* (Matthew 5:28) This doesn't mean that whoever looks at a woman has already committed adultery. We don't put blinders on and force ourselves never to see a member of the opposite sex. It is not seeing a woman that is the problem; it is what my heart does with that seeing that determines it.

"With lustful intent." What's that? Now I am speaking as a man, and sisters, you need to apply this too, but all men know what this is inferring. There is a kind of seeing that is pure and there is a kind of seeing that observes the picture, the billboard, the woman in the office with lustful intent. Billy Graham said, "Lust is the second look." It is when the looking becomes lusting. It's one thing to see a woman or even to notice she's attractive. It's another thing to take that and mentally sexualize it. Lust is when our seeing becomes a craving; mentally our mind goes into fantasy. Lustful intent is mental thoughts of sexual desire or imagination.

Why would Jesus say mental sex is a violation of the seventh command? Remember the first command, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* (Exodus 20:3) When a man lusts after a woman, not only is he committing mental adultery, he is craving and worshiping something higher than the Most High God.

Lust is any time I am imagining or desiring something that if I did what I was thinking, it would violate the seventh command. It is adultery of the heart and it is there in the heart where God must be worshiped. So this includes imagination sex and I-wonder-what-it-would-be-like sex and why-isn't-my-wife-more-like-her sex and why-can't-my-husband-love-me-like-I-think-he-could sex and a thousand other forms of heart desires where sexual sin starts. It is my heart where I will either win or lose this battle. To win a war you have to know where the battlefield is. With sexual sin, the battlefield is my heart.

Be on high alert for Miss Eyelashes and Mr. Wonderful

"For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress. Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes....Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?"

So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; none who touches her will go unpunished....He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away." (Proverbs 6:23-25, 27-29, 32-33)

These verses all urge thinking about the consequences of sexual sin BEFORE temptation shows up. Why does a book on wisdom urge this? When Miss or Mr. Temptation show up, the consequences will quickly seem insignificant unless we have carefully considered them.

Solomon writes about this with considerable frankness. Apparently, sexual temptation hasn't changed much over the centuries. The smooth tongue of the adulteress. Her words will be so soothing. *"Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes."* (Proverbs 6:25)

I call her Miss Eyelashes and really it's not the eyelashes themselves, but the way she looks at you. She will evoke a certain sensuality—a sexual openness that she can communicate without saying it. She is Miss Eyelashes. Her male alter ego is similar. His words. His look. His everything says that finally, you have met your Mr. Wonderful. He is the one you should have married. He is amazing in every way!

Pastor Tommy Nelson describes this as *"The Six 'E's' to an Extra-marital Affair"* (Tommy Nelson as quoted by Daniel Ausbun. *"The Six 'E's' to an Extra-marital Affair."* Times-Herald.com. December 14, 2013) I have adapted this for brevity.

1. *Eliminate.* Affairs begin long before the adultery as relational intimacy with your spouse erodes.
2. *Encounter.* Inevitably, you encounter someone else who is attractive to you, relationally, personally, or physically.
3. *Enjoy.* You soon begin to enjoy your relationship with the other person. He/she moves into the emotional space your spouse should have.
4. *Expedite.* You begin to expedite opportunities to be near him/her. Social media provides apparently benign opportunities to communicate. Just an old classmate. Just a new Facebook friend. But behind that apparently casual friendship is an intrigue, a curiosity.
5. *Express.* You will eventually express your feelings. Nelson says, at this point "you've built a bridge to Fantasy Island" and it's now all but certain that you will walk across it.
6. *Experience.* All that remains is to experience physically the emotional bond you feel.

This is the path Proverbs describes. Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, the path is walked by two people for whom the relationship is immoral. Beware when an emotional bond seems to be connecting. Adultery is emotional and relational long before it is physical. It starts with those initial looks and flirts, the little laughter and jokes that are preparing both to walk to their destruction. You may be here and think, isn't "destruction" kind of strong? How bad can it be?

Consider soberly that sexual sin will destroy you

For several years now I have had taped to the back of a door in my office the following list of consequences for adultery. (Randy Alcorn, "Personalized List of Anticipated Consequences of Immorality." *Counting the Cost of Sexual Immorality.* www.epm.org. June 26, 2009.) Why? I am a sinner and because I am, sin's consequences will always seem small unless I

consciously remind myself of the stakes. This is a long list, but I hope the length will pound the nail. Note that this should be personalized for both men and women.

- *Grieving my Lord; displeasing the One whose opinion most matters.*
- *Dragging into the mud Christ's sacred reputation.*
- *Loss of reward and commendation from God.*
- *Having to one day look Jesus in the face at the judgment seat and give an account of why I did it. Forcing God to discipline me in various ways.*
- *Following in the footsteps of men I know of whose immorality forfeited their ministry and caused me to shudder. List of these names: _____*
- *Suffering of innocent people around me who would get hit by my shrapnel (a la Achan).*
- *Untold hurt to _____, my best friend and loyal wife.*
- *Loss of (wife's) respect and trust.*
- *Hurt to and loss of credibility with my beloved children, _____. ("Why listen to a man who betrayed Mom and us?")*
- *If my blindness should continue or my family be unable to forgive, I could lose my wife and my children forever.*
- *Shame to my family. (The cruel comments of others who would invariably find out.)*
- *Shame to my church family.*
- *Shame and hurt to my fellow pastors and elders. List of names: _____*
- *Shame and hurt to my friends, and especially those I've led to Christ and discipled. List of names: _____*
- *Guilt awfully hard to shake—even though God would forgive me, would I forgive myself?*
- *Plaguing memories and flashbacks that could taint future intimacy with my wife.*
- *Disqualifying myself after having preached to others.*
- *Surrender of the things I am called to and love to do—teach and preach and write and minister to others. Forfeiting forever certain opportunities to serve God. Years of training and experience in ministry wasted for a long period of time, maybe permanently.*
- *Being haunted by my sin as I look in the eyes of others, and having it all dredged up again wherever I go and whatever I do.*
- *Undermining the hard work and prayers of others by saying to our community "this is a hypocrite—who can take seriously anything he and his church have said and done?"*
- *Laughter, rejoicing and blasphemous smugness by those who disrespect God and the church. (2 Samuel 12:14)*
- *Bringing great pleasure to Satan, the Enemy of God.*
- *Heaping judgment and endless problems on the person I would have committed adultery with.*
- *Possible diseases (pain, constant reminder to me and my wife, possible infection of (wife), or in the case of AIDS, even causing her death, as well as mine.)*
- *Possible pregnancy, with its personal and financial implications.*
- *Loss of self-respect, discrediting my own name, and invoking shame and lifelong embarrassment upon myself.*

Let me ask you, who in their right mind would look at that list and then think about a few moments of sexual pleasure, *That's so worth it?* But that is the insanity of sin. I wonder who here will be the next example in a pastor's office, smug about an immoral relationship with someone. We will point out all that this relationship will cost you and tell you that if he/she is willing to do this with you, they will also be willing to cheat on you too. Who here will vow that it won't happen to you?

So in battling it, Proverbs says, consider the outcome. Think about it before Mr. Wonderful shows up in your life and let the dread of it drive you to purity.

Deal radically with temptation

"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." (Matthew 5:29-30)

The context is still the seventh command and Jesus gives direction here that sounds over the top. *"If your right eye...[or] your right hand is causing you to sin..."* I take this to mean, the eye is lusting or the hand is touching somebody it should not. Jesus' advice? Go to counseling? Take a cold shower? No. His direction is way more radical. Gouge out the eye and cut off the hand. Isn't Jesus the prophet of love? This sounds really over the top. From a human perspective it does, but that's not the perspective Jesus has. Jesus is looking at this from the eternal perspective and he sees the eternal destiny of the person whose eye is perpetually lusting and whose hand refuses to repent and continues to touch.

If you could choose between having one eye and an eternity in heaven or have both hands and an eternity in hell, which would you choose?

Now that's an easy decision—heaven with no eyes and no hands would be better than eternity in hell with a thousand eyes and a thousand hands. The choice isn't the eye or the hand; it is the person the eye or hand is sexual with versus heaven. Her or heaven? Him or heaven?

But Jesus, wait, what are you saying? Don't you realize that I am a Christian? I go to church. I give a little money sometimes. My parents are Christians. Come on, we all sin and you died for sin, so I'm okay, right? Sexual sin doesn't matter because in the end I go to heaven, right?

What is Jesus really saying? You can't sin sexually and go to heaven? No. What he is saying is that you can't be in an ongoing condition of lust and immorality that willfully chooses the sin over God's will and go to heaven. You are making a choice that reflects the true spiritual condition of your heart. Who is your God? Who are you serving?

Professing Christian men in particular with whom I have pleaded turn from Miss Eyelashes and just shake their head. They will not. No matter what it costs them. They will not. It's not that adultery takes us to hell as much as it reveals a heart that never tasted of the goodness of God—especially as that direction of life becomes solidified. David repented. It's a psalm in the Bible; psalm 51. God forgave him but the consequences of his actions tainted his story the rest of his life.

What does dealing radically mean? Compare David to Joseph. The rich and powerful wife of Potiphar sought to seduce Joseph, finally grabbing him to drag him to bed. What did Joseph do? He ran.

Run. Cut. Get rid of. Eliminate. Get off Facebook. Break off the relationship decisively. Get rid of the iPad. Stop going by where she works. Get out of there. So whatever it takes. Deal radically with it before she takes you to hell.

There is hope in all this. We have men and women in our church whose lives were once obsessed with sexual sin but now have found freedom and purity. They have a new heart; a new love. The gospel of Jesus is powerful and will free us from any and all bondages. Our

heavenly Father wants us free and gives us his Spirit to purify us from all defilement. So there is great hope. Let's be reminded of it again from 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (emphasis added):

"Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

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