The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION THIRTEEN — Lust and the Dignity of Persons

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness · Texts: Matthew 5:27–30; Exodus 20:17

The Texts

> **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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*
>
> **Exodus 20:17** *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife… or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

The Second Contrast, and a Warning

Jesus turns now from anger to desire, and the move is exactly the same as before: past the outward act, straight to the root in the heart. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at another person with lust has already committed adultery in his heart." Once again he takes a command people felt safe about and follows it down to its source.

But I have to pause before we go a step further, because this is one of the most misused passages in the entire Bible, and the misuse has wounded a great many people. It has been turned into a weapon to shame human desire as if it were filth. It has been used, especially, to police and blame women — their bodies, their clothing, their very presence — as though they were responsible for what goes on in someone else's heart. That is not what Jesus is doing here. Not remotely. What Jesus is actually protecting is something our world desperately needs protected, and has largely forgotten: the truth that a human being is never, ever a thing.

Let's search the Scriptures together — carefully.

The Same Move, Deeper Ground

The pattern is the one we learned last session. Jesus goes past the deed — adultery — to the heart-orientation underneath it. In fact he is quietly doing something elegant: he is reading the seventh commandment, "you shall not commit adultery," through the tenth, "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife." He is saying the act and the coveting are of one piece — that adultery does not begin in the bed; it begins in the heart that has already decided to treat a person as something to be taken and used. Same greater righteousness, driven to the same root.[1]

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. This teaching appears only in Matthew; the "eye/hand" sayings recur at Mark 9:43–48 and Matthew 18:8–9. Jesus effectively reads the seventh commandment (adultery, Exodus 20:14) through the tenth (coveting, Exodus 20:17).

What Jesus Is — and Is Not — Talking About

Now, with great care, the distinction that everything depends on. Jesus is not condemning sexual desire. He is not saying that attraction is sin, or that noticing another person is beautiful makes you guilty, or that the God who made us embodied and drew us toward one another is disgusted by the drawing. Desire is not filth; it is part of being human, and the Bible has a whole book of poetry celebrating it. Hear that clearly, because shame has done enough damage in Christ's name.

The phrase Jesus uses is precise. It is not "everyone who finds someone attractive," or "everyone in whom desire stirs." It is, literally, looking at a person in order to covet them — the deliberate, cultivated, chosen gaze that stops seeing a soul and starts seeing an object; that reduces a whole human being to a thing to be consumed for one's own appetite. There is a world of difference between the involuntary spark of attraction and the willed decision to feed on another person as a thing. Jesus is not talking about the spark. He is talking about the feeding.[2]

Who Bears the Weight

And now watch where Jesus places the responsibility, because this single detail overturns centuries of misuse. "Everyone who looks… has committed adultery in his heart." In his heart. The entire weight falls on the one doing the looking, the one doing the coveting — to deal with his own eye, his own heart, his own habit. Jesus says not one word about the person being looked at. He does not tell them to cover up, to hide, to make themselves less visible so that no one stumbles. He does not make the object of the gaze responsible for the gaze.[3]

This matters enormously, because the church has so often done the exact opposite — taken this very text and used it to shame women's bodies, to police their clothing, to teach girls that they are walking temptations responsible for the thoughts of men, to build whole cultures of purity-shame on a foundation Jesus never laid. Hear it plainly: that is a betrayal of this passage. Jesus puts the burden on the heart of the one who covets, never on the body of the one who is coveted. The problem is never the other person's existence. The problem is my willingness to reduce them to an object. Full stop.

The Dignity Underneath

So what is Jesus really guarding? The sacredness of the person. Every human being is a whole soul, made in the image of God, of infinite worth — never a thing to be used and discarded. This is why lust, rightly understood, is a failure of love: love wills the good of the other as a full

[2]The phrase rendered "looks… with lust" (Greek pros to epithymēsai autēn) means looking in order to covet—the deliberate, cultivated gaze that reduces a person to an object of consumption. It does not condemn attraction or the involuntary noticing of beauty, which are part of being human. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 5:28.

[3]Jesus places the entire responsibility on the one who looks ("in his heart"), not on the person looked at. This directly resists the long, damaging misuse of the text to police and shame bodies (especially women's) and to make the object of the gaze responsible for the gazer's heart. The concern is the dignity of the person made in God's image (Genesis 1:27), never a call to blame them for another's coveting.

person, a subject in their own right; lust reduces the other to an object for the self. To look with lust is, quite literally, to un-person someone in your heart — to erase the soul and keep the body, to make a means out of an end.[4]

And this is bigger than private thoughts. A world that treats people as objects to be consumed — that builds whole industries on reducing human beings to bodies to be bought, used, and discarded — is precisely the anti-Kingdom, the opposite of everything this Sermon is building. So the "greater righteousness" here is nothing less than learning to see people as people — whole, sacred, irreducible — all the way down. It is the same sight we spoke of with the pure in heart, who see God even in the face across the room. Lust looks at a person and sees a thing; love looks at a person and sees a soul — and, if we are honest, most of us need to be re-taught how to see.

How Seriously He Means It

And then Jesus says something shocking, and we need to read it rightly. He speaks of tearing out the eye that causes you to stumble, cutting off the hand — better to lose a part than the whole. Now, first and clearly: this is hyperbole. It is deliberate, dramatic overstatement, the way a preacher pounds the pulpit to make you feel the weight of a thing. Jesus is not commanding anyone to harm their body — the church has never once read it that way, and the Lord who spent his life healing bodies is not telling you to destroy yours. Please hear that plainly.[5]

What the shocking image is for is this: to measure how seriously the dignity of persons matters, and how ruthless we ought to be with the habits that erode it in us. If something in your life is steadily training your heart to see people as objects — an input, a habit, a stream of images, a pattern of looking — then deal with it decisively. Cut off the habit, not the hand. Pull the plug on the thing that feeds the un-seeing, however much you would rather keep it. That is the point: not self-harm, but a holy seriousness about protecting your ability to see a human being as a human being.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and here it is almost the definition of the word. To refuse to reduce another person to an object for my use — that is freedom for others in its most basic form; it is the very floor beneath love. So ask with me, gently and honestly: whose full humanity have I been consuming rather than honoring — in my looking, in my imagination, in the things I feed my eyes? What input, what habit, that trains me to see people as things, might I need to cut off? And how might I help build a community, and a world, that honors persons as sacred

[4]Lust is a failure of love: love wills the good of the other as a subject; lust reduces the other to an object for the self. The "greater righteousness" is learning to see persons as whole and sacred—a concern that reaches from the private heart to a culture that commodifies human beings. Compare Session Seven: the pure in heart "will see God," even in the face across the room.

[5]The "tear out the eye / cut off the hand" sayings (5:29–30) are Semitic hyperbole—deliberate exaggeration for rhetorical force, not a command to literal self-harm; the church has never read them literally, and the Lord who healed bodies is not commanding the destruction of one. Their point is radical seriousness: deal decisively with whatever trains the heart to treat people as objects. See France and Davies & Allison on the Sermon's hyperbolic style.

instead of consuming them? *Freedom for others may cost us the "right" to consume people with our eyes — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- This passage has often been used to shame desire and to blame women. What difference does it make to hear that Jesus puts the whole responsibility on the one who covets, never on the one coveted?
- Jesus distinguishes the spark of attraction from the willed choice to consume a person as an object. Why does that distinction matter — and why do you think the church has so often blurred it?
- Lust "un-persons" someone; love sees a whole soul. Where in our culture do you see people most reduced to objects — and where do you feel that pull yourself?
- The "eye and hand" language is hyperbole for radical seriousness. What input or habit trains you to see people as things — and what would it mean to cut it off?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. What would it take to relearn how to see people as people?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements, and let us do them without shame — this is about learning to love, not about self-punishment. First, practice seeing. When you catch yourself reducing someone to a body, an object, a thing — gently stop, and deliberately re-see them as a whole person God loves, with a story and a soul. Do it as many times as it takes; it is a muscle. Second, cut one thing off. Name one input or habit that steadily trains you to consume people as objects, and this week decisively remove it — the app, the feed, the pattern. Not out of shame, but out of love for the people you want to be able to truly see. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, the third contrast, and another that has been badly misused: "you have heard 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate' — but I say to you…" We'll handle it with real pastoral care, because these words have been used to trap and to shame people, and that too is a betrayal of what Jesus was actually doing — which, as we'll see, was protecting the vulnerable, not tightening a snare.

Benediction

So go this week and learn to see. See the people around you as Jesus sees them — whole souls, sacred, of infinite worth, never things to be used. Refuse, gently and firmly, every habit that would teach your heart to consume a person, and guard the deep dignity a human being carries simply by being one. And hear this, if shame has ever been laid on you in the name of

these words: Jesus did not come to shame your body or anyone else's. He came to teach us all how to love — which begins the moment we stop looking at a person and start seeing a soul.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION THIRTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still. Warm, careful.]

Welcome back to the table. Jesus turns now from anger to desire — and the move is exactly the same as last time: past the outward act, straight to the root in the heart. "You have heard, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at another person with lust has already committed adultery in his heart."

But I have to slow us down before we go one step further — because this is one of the most misused passages in the whole Bible, and that misuse has wounded a lot of people. It's been turned into a weapon to shame human desire like it's filth. And it's been used, especially, to police and blame women — their bodies, their clothing, their very presence — as if they were responsible for what happens in someone else's heart. That is not what Jesus is doing here. Not even close. What he's actually protecting is something our world desperately needs and has mostly forgotten: that a human being is never, ever a thing.

[The move.]

The pattern's the one we learned last week — he goes past the deed, adultery, to the heart underneath it. And he's doing something elegant: he's reading the seventh commandment, "don't commit adultery," through the tenth, "don't covet your neighbor's wife." He's saying the act and the coveting are one piece. Adultery doesn't begin in the bed. It begins in a heart that's already decided to treat a person as something to be taken and used.

[The distinction — careful.]

Now, the distinction everything depends on. Jesus is not condemning desire. He's not saying attraction is sin, or that noticing someone is beautiful makes you guilty, or that the God who made us embodied is disgusted by it. Desire isn't filth — it's part of being human, and the Bible has a whole book of love poetry to prove it. Hear that, because shame has done enough damage in Christ's name.

The phrase he uses is precise. Not "everyone who finds someone attractive." It's, literally, looking at a person in order to covet them — the deliberate, chosen gaze that stops seeing a soul and starts seeing an object; that reduces a whole human being to a thing to be consumed. There's a world of difference between the involuntary spark of attraction and the willed decision to feed on a person as a thing. Jesus isn't talking about the spark. He's talking about the feeding.

[Who bears the weight.]

And watch where he puts the responsibility — because this one detail overturns centuries of misuse. "Everyone who looks has committed adultery in HIS heart." In his heart. The whole weight falls on the one doing the looking — to deal with his own eye, his own habit. Jesus says not one word about the person being looked at. He doesn't tell them to cover up, to hide, to be less visible. He does not make the object of the gaze responsible for the gaze.

That matters enormously, because the church has so often done the exact opposite — used this text to shame women's bodies, police their clothes, teach girls they're walking temptations

responsible for men's thoughts. Hear it plainly: that's a betrayal of this passage. Jesus puts the burden on the heart of the one who covets, never on the body of the one coveted. The problem is never the other person's existence. It's my willingness to reduce them to an object.

[The dignity.]

So what's he really guarding? The sacredness of the person. Every human being is a whole soul, made in God's image, of infinite worth — never a thing to be used and discarded. That's why lust is a failure of love: love wills the good of the other as a full person; lust reduces them to an object for the self. To look with lust is to un-person someone in your heart — erase the soul, keep the body. And this is bigger than private thoughts — a world that builds whole industries on reducing people to bodies to be bought and used is the anti-Kingdom, the opposite of everything this Sermon is building. So the greater righteousness here is learning to see people as people — whole, sacred, irreducible. Lust looks at a person and sees a thing; love looks and sees a soul — and most of us need to be re-taught how to see.

[The hyperbole — clear and brief.]

And then Jesus says something shocking, and we need to read it right. He talks about tearing out the eye that makes you stumble, cutting off the hand — better to lose a part than the whole. First and clearly: this is hyperbole. Deliberate, dramatic overstatement, the way you pound the pulpit to make people feel the weight of a thing. Jesus is not telling anyone to harm their body — the church has never read it that way, and the Lord who spent his life healing bodies is not telling you to destroy yours. What the image is for is this: to measure how seriously the dignity of persons matters, and how ruthless we should be with whatever trains our hearts to see people as objects. If something in your life is steadily teaching you to un-see people — an input, a habit, a stream of images — deal with it decisively. Cut off the habit, not the hand.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: whose full humanity have I been consuming instead of honoring — in my looking, my imagination, the things I feed my eyes? And what habit that trains me to see people as things might I need to cut off?

Two things to practice, and let's do them without shame — this is about learning to love, not self-punishment. First, practice seeing: when you catch yourself reducing someone to an object, gently stop and re-see them as a whole person God loves. It's a muscle. Second, cut one thing off: name one input or habit that trains you to consume people, and this week decisively remove it — not out of shame, but out of love for the people you want to be able to truly see.

Next time, the third contrast — divorce — another one that's been badly misused to trap and shame people. We'll handle it with real pastoral care, because what Jesus was actually doing was protecting the vulnerable, not tightening a snare.

[Slow. Land it — gentle.]

For now, go and learn to see. See the people around you the way Jesus sees them — whole souls, sacred, never things to be used. And if shame has ever been laid on you in the name of these words, hear this: Jesus didn't come to shame your body or anyone else's. He came to teach us all how to love — which begins the moment we stop looking at a person and start seeing a soul.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.