

“Pure Passion”

Matthew 5:27-30

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Once when our daughter Magalie was little, Evelyne and I took her to a park for some play time. There was a big play structure that looked like a fort, all made of timbers. I climbed up it and was goofing around on a platform about six feet off the ground. Evelyne saw me and said, “Ha! Ha! You can’t get down.” I said, “Are you kidding? Watch this!” and I vaulted off the play structure. It looked easy. But when I hit the ground, my ankle folded under me, and I writhed around in agony. Of course, what really hurt was Evelyne saying, “Hey, quit kidding around, let’s go.”

It turned out that I tore a ligament in my ankle. I wish I had just gone ahead and broken it instead. I had been confident I could jump, but my confidence got me into trouble. Sometimes we get that way about God’s Word—we get overconfident in our own ability.

The problem with trusting our own strength.

Maybe we look at the Ten Commandments and we think, “I’m not doing too badly. I haven’t murdered. I haven’t committed adultery. This shouldn’t be too hard.” But the Lord takes what we think are strong points, and he takes it so much deeper. It’s not like a plan to lose 20 pounds in 30 days that promises to change your outer appearance, but doesn’t do anything to fix our overeating or lack of exercising that *got* us in the shape we’re in.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is “the kingdom code,” and it tells us how God wants us to live as members of his family. We’re supposed to be living examples of God’s kingdom breaking into the world, the “up there” coming down here. And it’s radical. Last week we saw how it’s not enough to simply not murder; the heart of the commandment “You shall not murder” is to put away unrighteous anger. This week we look at the passage where Jesus says,

You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery. But I tell you, any man who has looked at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart.
(Matthew 5:17)

What Jesus is saying is radical. When we see how deeply he takes the commandments, we might say, “God, if that’s what you mean, then I’m in trouble. Have mercy on me!”

Making the law more demanding, not less.

When Jesus talks about the commandment, he doesn’t diminish it. He doesn’t do away with the Law or reduce its demands, because the Law is good, and it expresses God’s heart, his moral will. Jesus came to fulfill the Law, and that means, in part, he amplifies its meaning. In Matthew 12, when the crowd won’t believe Jesus, he calls them an adulterous generation. It means that if you compared Israel’s relationship with God to a marriage, they were being unfaithful.

So adultery, which really refers to sexual sin in general, isn't just a matter of acting out physically. Just like unrighteous anger, it's a matter of the heart not being right. That's why the seventh commandment says, "Do not commit adultery," and the tenth commandment says, "You shall not covet," and one of the things it says not to covet is "your neighbor's wife." In other words, the first nine commandments tell us concretely what to do and not to do, and the tenth implies, "Now that you're clear on those outward actions, now, don't even *want* to do evil." That applies to the area of sexual ethics like it does to all the others.

That comes as a serious challenge in any time and place, and especially in our time. Our culture is obsessed with sex. Look at the magazine rack in Giant Eagle or Heinen's, and the headlines all talk about "Ten Techniques For Great Sex You Should Know" or "How to Seduce So-and-So." Or the Internet and the amount of advertisements all about improving your physical appearance, or TV, and all our fascination with the sex lives of famous people, not to mention the plague of pornography. All this makes it very hard to live like God wants us to with the sexual dimension of our lives.

A problem of the heart.

Jesus says the wrong starts in our hearts.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality...
(Matthew 15:19-20).

Therefore, God warns us in the Bible,

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

Abelard and Heloise were famous lovers in the Middle Ages. He was a philosopher-theologian and she was his student in 12th-century Paris. They fell in love and had a passionate love affair, but Heloise's uncle the bishop found out and had thugs attack Abelard and had her sent her to a convent. For years they were cut off from each other, but Heloise wrote to him and tried to renew their relationship again. She wrote,

Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purest, lewd visions of the pleasures we shared take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on my prayers...Everything we did, and also the times and places where we did it, are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I live through it all again with you.¹

She didn't have any contact for fifteen years, but her letters show her passion is still there on the inside.

Jesus is using exaggeration to make a point.

If the problem of lust is a problem of the heart, then why does Jesus talk about plucking out an eye or chopping off a hand? We can use our senses in a good or bad way. Like

¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, London: Penguin Books, 2003 (revised edition), p 68.

Paul says, we're supposed to take the members of our bodies and present them as instruments of righteousness. (Romans 6:13) that is, we present the real us, not the ideal us, and learn to live God's way in a holistic way. He tells us to "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice" (Romans 12:1b) and goes on to say it's our "spiritual worship." Our bodily acts are demonstrations of our spiritual commitments, as Jesus affirms when he says,

"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery..." (Mark 7:21)

When Jesus says to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand, he's using exaggeration to make his point crystal-clear. He does the same thing later in the Sermon on the Mount when he says,

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3)

He does it again when we says,

I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24)

He pushes an image to the point of being ludicrous to make his point unforgettable. It's a classically Middle Eastern way of talking. That's what he's doing in his shocking statement from today's passage. He's making the point that we need a new heart.

So, if lust, coveting, and anger are matters of the heart, then cutting off a hand isn't going to solve the problem of bad attitudes. You could go around with no hands and eyes, and still lust, because the problem would still be there on the inside.

It might help to notice the word used for "look" is an intensive form, and it emphasizes a very intentional look, or leering. It's not just appreciating beauty, not just that someone catches your eye. It's more, it's *looking* to lust. It's purposeful, when we plan scenarios to possess another person. It's like with anger; anger simply happens, and so does sexual desire. When they become sin is when we choose to fan the flames. It's like Luther says,

It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: "I cannot," he said, "keep a bird from flying over my heard. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off."²

Sexual thoughts can come into our heads anytime, because we're created as sexual beings, but we can choose not to build fantasies in our heads that would be wrong to act out.

² (Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount," in *Luther's Works* 21)

What's Jesus' point? Lust and true love don't go together. Lust dehumanizes, and it makes us see someone else as something to be possessed. Love's different. Look how the Bible writer Paul puts it:

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1 Timothy 1:5)

He goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 13:

[Love] is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:5-7)

Jesus says, take sin seriously—it kills. Take action. Do whatever it takes. It's especially important in our culture where marketing uses all its power to make us want, to covet, to lust.

There's a picture of this in the recent movie, *Fireproof*. It's a story about a young couple whose fire and passion has disappeared from their marriage. It seems like they're fighting all the time. She's trying to change him, and he resents her for not respecting him and appreciating how hard he works. Then we see he's spending a lot of time with internet pornography. One day he sees his marriage is worth fighting for; he realizes he's willing to do what it takes, and so he brings his computer outside and smashes it to pieces with a baseball bat.

That's taking Jesus at his word—sin kills relationships, so you have to be decisive. Lust is antithetical to true love: it dehumanizes another person into an object of passion, leading us to act as if the other were a visual or emotional prostitute for our use. Adultery violates the sanctity of another person's being and relationships; love seeks what is best for a person, including strengthening their marriage. Lust demands possession; love respects and seeks to serve other persons with what is genuinely good for them. Lust is incompatible with desiring God before all things.

What I'm not saying is, you have to be good enough if you want to be follow Jesus. Thank God he came to save sinners. Jesus is saying the purpose of the law isn't to make us perfect so we can get to heaven by good works. The purpose of the law is to show us how much we need him. And he loves us so much that he died so he wouldn't have to lose us.

When I jumped off that play structure, I had a lot of confidence, but my confidence was misplaced. The Bible says, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12) Don't put confidence in yourself, because you're forgetting what you're capable of in your heart. Put your confidence in Jesus, and he can make you whole. Now, let me suggest three conclusions to our reflections today, and these truths are for married and single alike, for all who claim to be Christ followers.

First, God created sex, and he intended it for good.

When God made Adam and Eve, he made them to have sexual desire for each other, and he told them to be fruitful and multiply. This was a part of creation before sin entered the world, and God called it “good.” We shouldn’t see it as something bad or shameful, but we should see that God made it for the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. He designed it that way for conceiving children and for the expression of intimacy in marriage. When people use sex the way God intended, he blesses it and calls it good.

Second, just like every good gift from God, sex can be twisted.

Food is a gift from God and we need it for life. But it can be misused, and it can cause eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, and eating food with too much fat or cholesterol can lead to heart disease. We need fire to heat our homes and cook our food, but when it rages out of control, it devastates a community, like the area around Melbourne, Australia this week, and over 200 people were killed. We need water, and can’t live without it. But when you have too much, there’s flooding, and it threatens life. Food and water and fire are good things, but outside of God’s boundaries, they hurt us.

God designed sex for certain boundaries, too. When we keep it within those boundaries, it’s a beautiful gift. But push it beyond the boundaries, and it rages out of control and hurts us. Sinful human beings figure out a way to twist and distort everything, and sex has the power to do great harm if we’re not careful, if we don’t listen to God’s plan. Lust opens up a Pandora’s Box that leads to sexual brokenness, abortion, sexual assault, homosexuality, the breakdown of family, children raised without parents, rising crime, and the list goes on and on. The greater the gift from God, the more power it has both for good and bad.

Third, our sexual purity is important for our relationship with God.

God’s always been concerned with the *truth* question, right teaching, and also with the *moral* question, with right living. Do you ever wonder what God’s will for your life is?

It is God's will that you should be *sanctified*: that you should avoid *sexual immorality*" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

And David writes in the Psalms,

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." (Psalm 24:3-4)

It’s a matter of the heart because God wants to shape us into the likeness of Jesus. Our calling is to fill our minds with “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,” and “whatever is pure.” (Philippians 4:8). So, we have to get radical, and cut temptation off at the root. And if you’ve gone your own way in this and given yourself over to lust, then confess your wrongdoing to Jesus, because there’s always help, also grace, always second and third chances if you authentically turn to him, and:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Get a fresh start, and a clean heart, today.