

“Jesus’ Sexual Ethic”

Matthew 5:27-30
Sermon on the Mount Series

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight”
Jeremiah 15:16

Dr. Greg Anderson
October 22, 2017

Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

Introduction

This morning I will only be considering Matthew 5:27-30, the passage entitled 'Adultery' in our Bibles. I asked for the other passages to be read because what Jesus says about adultery is to be understood in a larger context.

There will be three sermons on the sections in the Sermon on the Mount entitled Adultery and Divorce: today, on Adultery; next Sunday Pastor Michelle will address 'The Joy of Chastity (as least that is what I suggested, we will see how she is led) and then on November 5, Matthew 5:31-32 on Divorce.

In my first year of theological education my professor, Dr. Bockmuel, introduced us to the Reformed consideration of the Ten Commandments; from the negative: Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery; and also from the positive of 'what then shall we do'. Pastor Michelle and I will be attempting to provide this.

Last week I told you the underlying positive virtue to the command, Thou Shalt Not Murder, along with Jesus' further requirement to not nurture anger, was the virtue of humility – **Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus is poor in spirit and all who follow him, live with him, are formed in humility by him! Humility leads away from anger and toward reconciliation.

What is the positive virtue underlying: Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery?

To help us think about this (why, does Jesus focus on this?), consider for a moment how the Bible, God's Word, begins. How God created righteousness and how man violated it.

God's Creation peaks with Man, as male and female, in worship before God on the seventh day.

This takes place in the Garden of Eden, a place where heaven and earth meet and a place beyond our ability to fully comprehend: with the two Trees: of Life and of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; God walking in the Garden; a walking, talking snake and so on.

But immediately upon Adam and Eve coming out of the Garden into the world we live in, what happens? The first violation recorded, after the birth of Cain and Able, the murder, arising from anger, of Abel by Cain.

Jesus in his Sermon recognizes murder and all it represents as the first violation of the righteousness of God inherent in his Creation.

What is the second violation? Chapter 6 opens with an account of illicit sexuality.

Again, this account is lost in the mysteries of history but we are told the 'sons of God (presumably angelic beings) saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful and they married any of them they chose.

The result: **The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.** Then came the great Flood.

I am not sure what to make of some of these events in the opening chapters of Genesis. However, can there be little doubt -just think of the news headlines from this past week-that if smoldering anger leading to the elimination of others and if out-of-control sexual passions violating others were not a part of the human condition - well we would be nigh to Eden.

The positive virtue underlying Jesus' behavior and call to reject anger is humility.

The positive virtue underlying Jesus' behavior and call to reject sexual lust is chastity.

Text

Let's turn our attention to Jesus' words on adultery. Some more background information:

The sexual practices of our day (except via various technologies) are the same as in Jesus' day.

However, marriage and formal male/female relations were very different.

It begins with the general legal/cultural position of females: it is fair to say that for the most part females were 'things,' chattel, property, in relation to men, not persons - In contrast Jesus is revolutionary. There were exceptions to this, particularly among the high born and wealthy, but generally the female was at the absolute disposal of her father or husband.

Next, marriage was primarily an institution for domestic security and the preservation of the familial name and property.

By the time of Jesus, the Greek way of seeing things had totally permeated the Roman world and was making significant inroads to the Jewish world.

For those who could, here was the Greek view: (Demosthenes @ 350BC) Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure; concubines for the daily care of our persons; but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household.

Now, here is the relevance of this for us:

The cultural milieu regarding male/female unions in the times of Jesus as influenced by the Greeks and Romans, as William Barclay observes was, even in the Jewish world, like this:

'sexual relationships outside of marriage (for the man) carried no stigma whatsoever and were, in fact, the accepted and expected thing.' The new normal!

At least two factors are at work in Canadian society to encourage a similar milieu:

First, in our multi-cultural society there are numerous views and practices regarding marriage and the status of women.

This week the legislature in Quebec passed a law, aspects of which target Islamic women whose faces are covered in public by their dress. Why are women to be covered in public? What is the view of women from the Islamic world who are now part of our world?

In Islamic Law a man is allowed up to four current wives. The former Saudi king who died just last January had 30.

Pastor Michelle will tell you that in rural Uganda where she lived for a year it was the common practice for a man, even a Christian man, to have several wives.

Regardless of what Canadian law dictates, various cultural views regarding women and marriage are permeating the Canadian experience. More and more people are joining Canadian society who would understand sexual relationships with more than one woman and one man is the accepted and expected thing.

Second, Western culture has experienced over the last hundred years an unprecedented revolution, in historical terms, as to the status of women and marriage.

Regarding marriage, our society is redefining its meaning. One of the consequences of this, along with our much-vaunted sexual revolution, is that again sexual relationships with more than one woman and one man is increasingly accepted as normal.

Contrary to all of this, Jesus' words: **But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart** – come as an opposing thunderclap against the norm.

A few more definitions:

Adultery is illicit sexual relations with another man's wife.

In Jesus' culture, it was mainly an issue between men and akin to theft.

In our culture, the Christian view is that any sexual relation on the part of husband or wife outside of marriage is adulterous.

Further, when we go on to hear Jesus' definition of marriage we can broaden his command to all intimate sexual relations outside of marriage.

The lustful look is more than just a look.

Here is how Talbert puts it: . . . 'who looks' (vs 28) translates a present participle whose natural meaning is conveyed by the paraphrase 'who goes on looking'. He translates: **I say to you that everyone who goes on looking at another man's wife for the purpose of coveting her for his own has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

Lust is an English translation of the general word, desire. In this case Jesus is not talking about the natural, even automatic desire (akin to hunger) that arises upon viewing an attractive object, but rather a decision, a movement of the will, to contemplate what I desire and imagine what it would take to have and enjoy it.

Desire arises naturally. Ongoing, active consideration is a decisive action.

It is agreed upon by commentators, ancient and modern, that by calling for a 'plucking out of the right eye' or a 'cutting off the right hand', in the words of the Church Father, Chrysostom:

Jesus is, in fact, talking here of cutting out intimate but compromising relationships with other people.

Application

In the Sermon on the Mount world we are concerned about virtues more than obligations; about the nature of the life of Jesus Christ among his people and how this comes to us.

You know I come out of a Canadian Baptist heritage through my mother and my grandfather. Centuries back in that heritage was a violent rejection of all things Roman Catholic. However, I tell you, in our day and age, wherein for the first time in Baptist history, the surrounding moral culture is turning against our view, it is in the Catholic world, where especially millennia of Christian thought and practice is preserved, that I find myself turning to for help.

Here is the definition of chastity from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The moral virtue which, under the cardinal virtue of temperance, provides for the successful integration of sexuality within the person leading to the inner unity of the bodily and spiritual being. Chastity is called one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

The translation in our Bibles from Galatians 5 is that the final 'fruit of the Spirit' indwelling the believer is: self-control (chastity).

The gift to us, in the following of Jesus among his people, for his mission in the world, is a Holy Spirit inspired self-control leading to the righteousness of God.

Jesus' word about the lustful look is not impossible, as many suggest.

Rather there is gifted power arising from the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of believers to 'pluck out the eye' and 'cut off the hand.'

In order for what? Jesus tells us: for our whole body not to be thrown into Hell.

Do not the headlines coming out of Hollywood, that great purveyor of sexual license, that great generator of all things sexually illicit, what the Arabs call the Great Satan; do not the headlines this week warn us about being thrown into Hell?

We Christians are going to have to start listening to our fellow believers from the first centuries who lived in a moral world like ours.

It is a great moral apostasy that has befallen Western Christian civilization that existed for over a thousand years, the likes of which have never been experience before

But the first Christians experienced the moral chasm between Jesus and the world and they have much to say that we at first are not going to want to hear.

We are not going to want to hear what they say about the Theater, about entertainment, about what we feast our eyes on.

It is to do with chastity, (putting bit and bridle on self-indulgence) a questionable virtue in our day, but a virtue necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. Amen.