

Feb 5 – Leader’s Guide - Matthew 5:27-30

1. At the beginning of the sermon Tim compared the purity culture sex ethic that was promoted in the church and the contemporary sex ethic. The church said – “Sex is bad – squelch your passions”, the culture said “Sex is just a natural human appetite, indulge your passions”. Tim reflected a bit on the harm each of these movements had on those who adopted them. Have you seen any evidence of the harm arising from each of these perspectives?

The purity culture ethic often left people feel nothing more than shame or guilt when it came to sex. It tended to put a “god-stamp” on misogyny, spiritually cementing the double standard when it came to sex. As an example it blamed women for the sexual desires of men – don’t dress that way, talk that way.

It would seem that psychologists and sociologists are beginning to point out some of the damaging effects of indulging our passions in this area. Pornography is a good example of this. Legal, available, and with the internet completely accessible with perceived anonymity. 90% of men and 70% of women say they regularly engage it, and 50% of men and 20% of women would describe their engagement as addictive and the stats are no different in the church. Many experts suggest that this is disastrous. It is normalizing violence particularly against women, it is diminishing people’s ability to deal with the difficulties of real relationship, it is cementing unrealistic expectations of physical appearance and sexual performance, and partners are feeling forced to accommodate the sexual practices contained in pornographic material.

2. Ahead of looking at the passage itself Tim gave two preliminary observations. 1. The whole counsel of scripture affirms the gift and goodness of sexual desire. 2. Love is the fulfilling of the law, what the law is really after is love. So Jesus speaks this way because he loves us. Why do you think these observations are important leading into any conversation about navigating our sexual relationships and appetites?

Often the Christian sex ethic misses the goodness and gift of sexual desire. From the earliest verses of Genesis, to the book of Song of Solomon, sex and sexual desire is affirmed and celebrated. Affirming this would have done much to erode the perspective that sex was bad / dirty.

We often see any curbing of our passions to be unhealthy. A command to direct our sexual desires toward the covenant of marriage appears to paint Jesus as a “kill-joy”. Jesus knows though how we were created, knows what will bring full flourishing in life, so he speaks the way he does because he loves us.

Read Matthew 5:27-30, Genesis 2:18-25, Matthew 19:1-6

3. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Adultery was defined as sex outside of covenant. From the Genesis and Matthew passages what might you conclude is the purpose of sex?

Here is an unedited expert from the sermon that may help navigate this piece:

The purpose of sex is that two become one - it is an integrative act – to combine the totality of one – into the totality of another – the bible has a word for this – coming together in covenant – the covenant of marriage.

Adultery then is sex where there is no covenant – it is saying - I want to have sex with you but – I don't want to be one with you – I want keep my options open – play the field – not get tied down – or have you impact my life-long decisions.

It is doing with your body what you are unwilling to do with the rest of your life - I'll be physically naked with you – but not emotionally – spiritually – legally – financially.

On the other hand – when we have sex within covenant – we're saying – I have pledged myself to you completely – exclusively – and I'm acting that out – I'm giving you my body as a token of how I've given you my whole life

John White – Canadian Psychiatrist writes this – Erotic pleasure is the most superficial benefit of sex. It is a delight but only of a moment. The bodily exposure that arouses and accompanies it can be both profoundly symbolic and powerfully healing. It symbolizes the uncovering of our inner selves, our deepest fears and yearnings. It makes sense then that sex can be confined to marriage. For acceptance and mutual disclosure are not the activities of a moment but the delicate fabric of a lifetime's weaving – two become one.

4. (28) How does Jesus fill out what the law was really after?

Again here is an unedited excerpt from the sermon to help navigate this question:

Jesus continues – but I tell you – everyone who looks at another with lustful intent has already committed adultery with them in their heart.

Now sexual desire is good – a gift given to us by God – but there's a difference between sexual desire born of love and that born of lust – we know there's a difference – C.S. Lewis reflected on it this way – he said - lust wants a pleasure for which another happens to be the necessary piece of apparatus. Love desires a person, lust desires pleasure – Where love says – I love you – lust says I love me – and I want you – lust desires to possess – there's a difference between sexual desire born of love and that born of lust.

The Greek here is also a little ambiguous – I think consciously so – because it could also be translated – everyone who does something in order to get the other to lust – it feels good when another wants us – is interested in us – our flirting – sexual innuendo – attire – can all be consciously and unconsciously used to awaken lust in others

This command is about protecting the covenant of marriage as a culture, as a people.

5. Jesus uses the word *epithumeo*, which means an over and above desire. It was a word most often used of idolatry, false worship. It is taking something good and putting it central to our lives, looking to it to give us something that only God can give. How does seeing the word this way help us to understand Jesus' words? How do we look to sex and romance to give us what only God can give?

Again another unedited excerpt from the sermon to help with this question.

*I want to bring up something I believe is central – when we think of lust – we think sex – but there were ample words Jesus could have used to point us there - but he doesn't – the word translated lust is the word *epithumeo* – it means an over and above desire – and of the 60 odd times it's used in the NT only twice does it have anything to do with sex – it's used primarily of idolatry – false worship - most often related to money.*

*Ernest Becker won a Pulitzer prize for his book *the denial of death* – in it he reflects on how secular people deal with the loss of belief in God – now that we think we are here by accident - not made for a purpose how do we instill a sense of significance – meaning - one of the ways Becker reflected was to say that we look to sex and romance to give us transcendence - a sense of meaning that we used to get from faith in God – we load up all of the deepest longings of our hearts into sex – into romantic love.*

He writes this – the failure of romantic love as a solution to human problems is so much a part of our frustration – for no human relationship can bear the burden of godhood – however much we may idealize and idolize a partner – they will inevitably reflect earthly decay and imperfection – after all – what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? We want to be rid of our faults, our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know our existence has not been in vain. We want redemption – nothing less. Needless to say sex and romance cannot give us this.

I think the church has participated in this idolatry right – we put a God stamp on it - hold up marriage to be the ideal way of life – husband wife two kids and a dog – leaving singles – and others who don't fit into that mold feeling like second class citizens in our midst – somehow less than – we too must repent of our idolatry.

*Picture your life for a moment like a circle – you can have many things in that circle – money – sex – career – kids – hobbies - but that circle can only have one center – we were made to have God at the center – *epithumeo* is taking one of those good things in our lives – and putting it at the center – and if we put anything other than God at the center there will be an unravelling of our lives – because we will look to that thing to give us what only God can..*

6. (29-30) Jesus uses a Hebrew idiom to communicate that if we use sex in ways it wasn't intended or ask it to give us something only God can give it will unravel us. Have you seen evidence of this truth?

Here are some of the examples from my experience as a pastor...

The countless men and women I've encountered who are being deeply diminished by an addiction to pornography – Gehenna.

Marriages torn apart by affairs – physical - emotional – Gehenna.

The woman using sex to find affirmation of her beauty - to feel loved and accepted – failed to find it – was taken advantage of by her many partners – and sitting in my office is now contemplating suicide – Gehenna.

The man for whom pornography wasn't enough – and began to venture downtown regularly to elicit unprotected sex from strangers – Gehenna.

I would suspect that some of the deepest wounds present in our lives will have a sexual component to them – Gehenna.

7. ...gouge it out, cut it off...The idiom invites us to deal with these things quickly and deliberately. What are some of the wholistic ways we might do that? How does the good news of Jesus help us in that work?

Some of this will have to do with self-discipline. Now our sexual appetites are all aroused by different things right? This may mean different things for different people. It might mean putting accountability software on a computer or phone, deleting an app, or unsubscribing from a channel. It might mean to stop putting energy into those flirtatious interactions and invest in repairing a marriage. It might mean not creeping people from previous relationships on social media, playing out fantasies of what life would have been like if we had stayed with them. It might mean laying down a particular genre of literature, that stir up yearnings that no one can satisfy, and would only crush potential suiters gouge it out.

Now such input has its place, but it treats it as a problem for which all you need is self-discipline, and anyone who has found freedom from these realities knows that is not all that it is, because it doesn't get after the underlying reasons we go there.

Jay Springer wrote an incredible book called unwanted. Jay is a mental health counsellor, helping others to navigate their own unwanted sexual behaviors. He invited his readers out of his clinical experience to be curious about their lust, for it will expose a need to be filled, a holy desire for belonging, to be known, loved and accepted. It may also reveal wounds to be healed.

Springer highlighted that shame was one of the most consistent drivers. In shame someone or something has made you feel unwanted, unworthy of belonging, perhaps borne of abuse, bullying, or neglect. We go to some of these unwanted sexual behaviors to deal with shame but sadly only find it grow.

Alongside shame were the drivers of futility, loneliness, frustration and feeling out of control. One or many may be present, but once we recognize something sitting behind our unwanted sexual behaviors what hope is there?

*Thomas Chalmers, a famous Scottish preacher, wrote an incredible sermon called *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* - in it he essentially says, seldom do any of our habits or flaws disappear by a process of extinction through reasoning or by the force of mental determination. We cannot will these things out, self-discipline is not all that is needed, but what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.*

In Epithumeo we load into sex and romantic relationships transcendent questions of purpose and meaning: am I loved, do I belong, am I accepted? These are questions it was never intended to answer. If we load such questions into it or use it as it was never intended, it will unravel us.

The heart however cannot be left without an object of affection, there must be the expulsive power of a new one. In the sermon Chalmers invites us to receive the only affection that is able to expel all others, that is the great love of God for us in Jesus

It is glorious good news then that the teacher on the mount is also the Lord on the mount, the Savior on the mount. Jesus is able to answer all of our transcendent questions. Jesus is able to meet the deepest longings of our hearts. He loves us with unimaginable love. He lavishes upon us a forgiveness won at the cross to cover our shame and guilt. He heals our deepest wounds to make us whole. In our futility he offers us kingdom purpose. When he is at the center everything else in our life takes its proper place, sex is just sex, romance is just romance, and his commands that we once saw as robbing joy are now sources of liberation. They give us freedom to flourish. For the one who teaches us this way does so because he loves us, more than we can possibly imagine, and longs to make us whole.