



AN AFFAIR OF THE MIND

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:27-30
Eleventh Message
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Sex is one of the great mysteries in life that has to be explained.

Actually, in this context, there are two great mysteries: the mystery of our sexuality and the mystery of our spirituality. Neither of these can be discovered by science or by unaided reason; they must be revealed and explained to us.

The Bible says that sex is very, very good. Hugh Hefner and *Playboy* magazine did not invent sex. God did! The Book of Genesis is very clear about this. In the second chapter of the opening book of the Bible, we read that God created a garden and in it placed a man and a woman and gave them the privilege of uninhibited sexual freedom.

There are two remarkable statements in that chapter. The first is, "the two shall become one flesh." In 1 Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul makes it clear that that expression is an idiom for sexual intercourse. So sex is a gift of God. And second, Genesis says that the man and woman were "naked and not ashamed." They were unabashedly unashamed in their nakedness. The Bible makes a good case for fig leaves outside of marriage, but within marriage, God expects uninhibited sexual freedom. So God invented lovemaking, and he said that it is very good. There is nothing sinful or dirty about it.

But there is something very wrong with sex as we know it today. We say that sex is beautiful, because we know it should be that way, but sex has become ugly and dull. The relentless pursuit of one-night stands is one index of people's frustration. What a disclosure of our inability to achieve loving, lasting relationships. Rock groups, television shows, movies, and the media in general encourage us toward all kinds of activities that offer no satisfaction. "What's love got to do with it?" asks Tina Turner in one of her hit songs, totally disconnecting sex from relationships and love.

Someone has said that less than six per cent of the sexual acts portrayed in the media take place between husbands and wives. In the world of economics, Gresham's Law holds that bad money will push out good money. In some ways, this is true in our world in the area of sex. Ninety-four per cent of all sex in the media today takes place outside of marriage, which is the context where God planned for lovemaking.

J. Allen Peterson in his excellent book, *The Myth of the Greener Grass*, writes:

A call for fidelity is like a solitary voice crying in today's sexual wilderness. What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt and embarrassment now is an affair—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word wrapped in mystery, fascination, and excitement. A relationship, not sin. What was once behind the scenes—a secret closely guarded—is now in the headlines, a TV theme, a best seller, as common as the cold.

As we continue in our series in the Sermon on the Mount, from chapter 5 of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus now turns from the sixth commandment to the seventh, from the prohibition against murder to the prohibition against adultery. Once again, the rabbis were attempting to limit the scope of the commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." Although the sin of desiring another man's wife is included in the tenth commandment (the prohibition against covetousness), the rabbis evidently found it more comforting to ignore this. In their view, provided they refrained from the act of adultery itself, they and their pupils were keeping the seventh commandment. They thus lived by a conveniently narrow definition of sexual sin and a conveniently broad definition of sexual purity.

But Jesus would have none of this. He extended the implications of the seventh commandment, revealing that the true meaning of God's command was much wider than a mere prohibition of acts of sexual immorality. Just as the prohibition of murder includes angry thoughts and insulting words, so the prohibition of adultery includes lustful looks and fanciful imagination. We can commit murder with our words, and we can commit adultery in our hearts or minds.

Just as the sixth commandment is given to protect our brother from our hostility, therefore, so the seventh commandment is designed to protect the love in our marriages. We find Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27-30:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell. (NASB)

Here, Jesus cites the seventh commandment, quoting Exodus 20:14. The issue is adultery, a violation of love for one's spouse. Jesus reinterprets this commandment, saying that the intent of that law needs to be fulfilled in the heart. His point is this: A man can be outwardly faithful—he may never have committed the act of adultery—yet inwardly he may be unfaithful; and that inward unfaithfulness erodes the love that he has for his wife. God wants husbands to love their wives with all their hearts. He is trying to spare us those attitudes that affect the love we have for our wives. If we permit sexual fantasies to persist in our minds (we can't help the attacks, of course), they will eventually erode away our love for our wives.

I have always interpreted these verses as merely saying that if we stop the thought, then we won't commit the act. Although that is true, the point that Jesus is making here is that the intent of the law is to teach us how to love. The extremely serious thing about sexual fantasies is that they have a negative effect on our love for our wives and get in the way of a full expression of that love for them. This is a grave matter. We may try to justify our fantasies, saying that we are not being unfaithful when we indulge them, but they really do affect our marriages. This is what turns active, caring husbands and fathers into passive, uncaring, uninvolved men.

Jesus says this is such a serious matter that it requires stern measures. We must discipline ourselves severely. What is particularly important to grasp is his equation of looking lustfully at a woman with committing adultery with her in our heart. It is the relationship between the eyes and the heart that leads Jesus, in the next two verses, to give practical instruction about how to maintain sexual purity.

His argument is as follows: If to look lustfully is to commit adultery in the heart, in other words, if heart-adultery is the result of eye-adultery (the eyes of the heart being stimulated by the eyes of the flesh), then the only way to deal with the problem is at its source—the eyes. We must chasten those members that evoke the fantasy in the first place. That is what Jesus means when he says, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out"; and, "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off." Deal with those members that evoke the thoughts that lead to a lessening of your love for your wife, or your husband, as the case may be.

And what is it that evokes sexual fantasies? It is what we see and touch. Now it is important to point out that Jesus is not speaking literally here. You don't need to chop off your hand or pluck out your eye. He is speaking metaphorically. What he is advocating is not a literal, physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation, but mortification is the path of holiness, he declares. We need to guard what comes in through the eye: what we look at, what we read, what we watch on television, the movies we go to, etc. Paul

makes the same point in Romans 13, when he says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts." Do not do those things that make it easy for the flesh to fail.

Jesus is quite clear about this. It is better to lose one member and enter life maimed, he says, than to retain the whole body and go to hell. That is to say, it is better to forgo some experiences which this life offers in order to enter the life which is life indeed. It is better to accept some cultural amputation in this world than risk final destruction in the next. Of course, this teaching runs counter to modern standards of permissiveness. That is because it is based on the principle that eternity is more important than time, and purity is more important than culture, and that any sacrifice is worthwhile in this life if it is necessary to ensure our entry into the next. Simply stated, we have to decide whether to live for this world or the next, whether to follow the crowd or follow Jesus Christ.

I want to say a word about pornography at this point; and here I am addressing men more than women. Perhaps you think you don't know anyone who is involved in pornography, but I can say with certainty that you probably do. In fact, there are many men listening to me this morning whose struggle with this borders on addiction. Pornography is destroying many homes in this church. It is a thirteen billion dollar a year industry—more than the combined annual revenues of Coca-Cola and the McDonnell Douglas corporations. You no longer have to go to a back alley to get a pornographic magazine or video. Convenience is the name of the game; you can access it in seconds on your computer.

I have just finished reading a book by Laurie Hall called *An Affair of the Mind*. This is the book from which I drew my sermon title today. It is the story of one woman's courageous battle to save her family from the devastation wrought by pornography. In the book, she shares some letters she wrote but never mailed to her husband during their separation. I will read from one of them to show how devastating our addictions are to those whom we love:

Yesterday, Uncle George told me to dress up in my new clothes; he was going to take me out to lunch to meet some of his business associates. He thought I might get some helpful advice. "Networking is everything," he told me. My insides were in an uproar all the way into Boston...Just yesterday, I had been a wife and a mother, a home-school teacher and a childbirth educator. How I loved all those roles. Now I have to be something new—a businesswoman. It doesn't fit right.

"Her husband has a serious illness and he's not able to provide for his family right now, so Laurie is starting her own business," George explained to his associates over lunch. "Serious illness"—a nice euphemism for sexual addiction. After I got back from the lunch date, Ann called and asked me to stop by. I cried when she gave me a check to buy myself a new coat. I'm so ashamed that she could see how poorly I had been taking care of myself. I went to the coat outlet and bought a full-length purple wool coat—purple for the color of suffering.

Pornography is not a victimless crime. It erodes husbands' love for their wives.

Moral collapse is rarely a blow-out; it is more of a slow leak. It is the result of a thousand small indulgences, the consequences of which are never immediately apparent. Hardly anyone plans an adulterous affair; they transition into it. It begins with attraction. It's not so much lust as infatuation that brings us down. We find ourselves drawn to someone who is sensitive and understanding, who listens well and seems to care. We're seduced by that attraction and led on by subtle degrees. Soon, attraction becomes fantasy. We imagine ourselves with that person, and we feel good. Fictionalized affairs always seem right. That's their fundamental deception. Fantasies soften us, and our convictions erode. Then we're in a frame of mind to listen to our longings, and having listened, we have no will to resist. Next come the meetings, the sharing of inner conflicts, marital disappointments and other deep hurts. With that breach of confidence, the relationship begins to shift. Suddenly, two lonely people feel the need for one another's love. Then comes the inevitable yielding, and with it the need to justify the affair.

We are fools if we think we cannot fall. We are frail and unfinished. No matter how willing the spirit is, the flesh will always be weak. We're never *safe*. And we are in danger whether we're young or old, married or single, in the dumps or on a roll. We'll never be home free until we get home! Our safety doesn't lie in keeping ourselves safe, but in keeping ourselves in God's hands for safekeeping.

So what can we do?

My friend David Roper offers some helpful ideas in his excellent book, *A Burden Shared*. The following thoughts are from his chapter on sexual suicide.

To begin with, we can guard our relationship with God. The wise man says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). There is a close relationship between human sexuality and human spirituality. As Charles Williams observed, "Sensuality and sanctity are so closely intertwined that our motives in some cases can hardly be separated until the tares are gathered out of the wheat by heavenly wit." In some inexplicable way, sexual passion is a small representation of our more profound spiritual passion for God, our "urge to merge" with him. He alone can gratify that desire. Devotion to Christ serves to satisfy our deepest longings and quell our other lusts. But when our love for Christ is on the wane we become restless for something more, and our resolve in every area begins to weaken.

We can guard our minds against romantic and sexual fantasies. Our predominant thoughts determine our inevitable actions: what we think in our hearts is what we will eventually, inevitably do.

"But," you ask, "how can we stop erotic thoughts?" As Martin Luther's mentor, Philip Melancthon, lamented, "Old Adam is much too strong for young Philip!" That is true. Our fantasies are much too strong to subor-

dinate. We should redirect them or displace them. When sexual fantasies intrude into our thoughts, we have two choices: We can reinforce them, in which case they become an obsession; or we can sidetrack them into devotion, meditation, and prayer.

We can cultivate affection for our spouses, daily rekindling the love and passion of our marriages and maintaining their romance. That is mutual protection. We're terribly vulnerable if we neglect our marriages, permitting them to grow dull and unfriendly.

We can watch for infatuations. Augustine confessed that he could not distinguish between the "clear shining of affection and the darkness of lust." Further, he admitted, "I could not keep myself within the kingdom of light where friendship binds soul to soul...And so I polluted the brook of friendship with the sewage of lust."

Are we attracted to someone other than our spouse? Do we look forward to being with them? Do we look for excuses to meet them? Do we dress a certain way when we know we will be in their company? Do we find ourselves wanting to reach out and touch them, hug them, or express affection for them in other tender ways? Do we imagine a romantic or sexual relationship with them? Are we defensive when our spouse expresses uneasiness about our relationship with them? These are early warning signs of a friendship turning into infatuation.

We must guard against intimacy with anyone other than our mates. The secrets of our hearts, our deepest hurts and longings, must be reserved for them alone.

We must be alert during periods of unusual pressure. Flaws become apparent in times of stress. We should be especially wary on days when we're emotionally and physically depleted, when we are lonely and isolated and longing for attention and affirmation.

We can rehearse the consequences of an affair. We gain insight through hindsight, as someone has said, but foresight is the less costly way. As Proverbs warns:

**For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
But in the end she is bitter as gall,
Sharp as a double-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
Her steps lead straight to the grave.**

Adultery is suicide. The victim is your soul.

Paul Dunbar wrote :

This is the debt I pay,
Just for one riotous day.
Years of regret and grief,
Sorrow without relief.

Slight was the thing I bought,
Small was the debt I thought,
Poor was the loan at best—
God! but the interest!

We can publicize our home life, talk lovingly of our spouses, and surround ourselves with mementos and photographs of our marriages. This good for us and good for others.

We can find a friend on whom we can unload our darkest secrets, one who will not flinch when he hears the sordid stuff of our minds, who will hold a confidence, who will hold us accountable, who will ask us the tough questions—and then ask, “Did you lie?”

Every one of us can fall at any time. We may say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” Better yet, we should say, “There but for the grace of God, I may yet go.”

Jesus tells us Matthew 26:41: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” When sexual lust begins to dance in your head, talk to the Lord who lives in you:

Lord, I am tempted now. Don't let me forget your long-range dreams for my life. Don't let me trade them in for some short-term sexual thrill. Keep me safe, Lord, from the evil working on me this moment. Protect me. Make me strong. Guide me. I love you, Lord. I am yours. I want your will more than anything. I will not throw that away.

It is possible that you think it is too late. Maybe your seams have been opened, and your evil deeds have been exposed. No, it is then that God reminds us of his cross, his forgiveness, his incomparable grace, and begins to make us new. God does not despise us when we fall. He discerns the possibilities, even in our defilement, unmakes our mistakes, and sets out to make us better than we've ever been before. He uses our sin to awaken our need for his grace. He softens us and makes us more susceptible to his shaping than we've ever been before. When we fall, we have fallen into his arms.

Rather than mourn our humiliation, we should confess it, dismiss it, and move on. Sin may have terrible consequences which we must live with for the rest of our natural lives, but sin repented of can only work for ultimate good. God takes the worst that we can do and makes it part of the good he has promised. He is the God of fools and failures, the God of another chance.

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