

It has been great to increase the story quotient in our community this Fall--whether it's stories like the one that Christine shared this morning, the stories we've been posting on our website, or the stories we've been hearing from our baptismal tank--every story gives witness to God's work in our midst.

In September, we launched an initiative entitled "Cultivating Life;" our aim as a community has been to cultivate relationship with Christ by engaging in the spiritual disciplines. More than 200 of you signed on to this initiative and we want to continue to share your stories of growth, and challenge, throughout this coming year.

Last Sunday, we looked at Jesus' *Sermon*, specifically, we turned our attention to His words about anger and contempt. This week we're going to look at what Jesus has to say about lust. Let me encourage to grab your Bible, paper or electronic, and turn with me to Matthew 5:27-30. **Read.**

*27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'
28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."*

Last week I used the analogy of the iceberg: 80-90% of an iceberg's mass exists below the waterline; what we see is just a sliver of the greater reality--the same is true of our behaviour.

As Jesus invites people to embrace God's leadership, to embrace the Kingdom of God, He addresses both our behaviour and the unseen thoughts, attitudes, and intentions of the heart. As I said last week, Jesus offers a master class in scuba diving for the soul--*what's lurking beneath the surface of your life?*

This morning I want to organize my teaching around three simple questions: (1) *What did Jesus say?*; (2) *What did Jesus mean?*; and (3) *How now shall we live?*

1. What did Jesus say?

Let me offer a few observations on what Jesus said.

- **first**, Jesus sets forward a distinctly biblical sexual ethic, and His ethic stands at odds with our Western, secular, sexual ethics.

And the primary difference between the two comes down to where the boundary markers are placed. In our current culture, there are very few boundary markers: sex with children is offside, so too is sex with animals, but casual sex with multiple partners, without a committed relationship, has been broadly welcomed as "the way things are."

I should also say that having sex with someone else's spouse is still generally seen as "wrong," unless it can be shown that the new couple is "in love"...this undefined "love" trumps the marriage commitment every time.

illus: A number of years ago, in a church where I was pastoring, it came to my attention that a member of our church had been engaged

in what the bible calls “adultery”--a sexual relationship with a woman who wasn’t his wife. When it came to my attention, I called him as soon as I could, with fear and trembling might I add. When I asked him if it was true, he proudly admitted that it was--when I questioned further, he let me know in no uncertain terms that he was very disappointed in me. “*Why*,” you might ask? Because I wouldn’t celebrate the fact that he was “*in love*,” that he felt “*alive*” with his new partner.

In vs. 27, Jesus upholds one of the primary biblical boundaries around sex; He quotes the 7th commandment from the 10 Commandments: *you shall not commit adultery*. Sexual desire is a gift from God, but it is a gift meant to be enjoyed within clearly marked boundaries--in this case, within marriage, between a man and a woman.

But in vs. 28, Jesus takes things one step further--He gets to the heart of the matter by addressing lust. Allow me read a translation of vs. 28 that gets at Jesus meaning: “*But I tell you that every man who looks at [a woman] and wants to have sex with her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*”¹

- **here’s a second observation:** Jesus places the weight of responsibility squarely upon the one who is doing the “looking,” and hardly mentions the one who is being looked upon.

Jesus shuts down the all too familiar blame-shifting tactic: “*but it’s not really my fault, look at how she is dressed;*” or, “*I’m the real victim here, she purposely enticed me*”. The problem, as Jesus defines it here, lies with misdirected sexual desire.²

Let me make another observation--you may have noticed that I have talking about lust as a singularly male problem. I have referred to it in this way, to this point, because Jesus too is speaking to misdirected male desire. That is not to say that female misdirected desire is either nonexistent, or, of little concern to Jesus. If Jesus were preaching His *Sermon* today, I suspect He would broaden the focus. The problem, as Jesus sees it, lies with all misdirected sexual desire, not simply within males.

- **here’s a third observation:** Jesus is a brilliant teacher, and He regularly uses rhetorical devices to drive home the point He wants to make.

In a few moments I’ll explain what I mean, but for now let’s move from what Jesus said, to what Jesus meant.

(2) What did Jesus mean?

- Let begin with the all important statement in vs. 28, Jesus said “that anyone who **looks** at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” If I can frame the question this way, *what does the “look” that Jesus refers to look like?*

¹ R.T. France, *New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 192.

² Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: The Sermon on the Mount*, 88.

Let me begin by saying that noticing beauty isn't sinful. In fact, an appreciation for beauty, human or otherwise, is a part of being made in God's image. Neither is it sinful to be "attracted" to another person. The rightness or wrongness of our "looking" comes down to what's happening in our heart as we look.

To lust is to look with a desire to devour. Our look becomes lust when we imagine using someone for our own pleasure.

illus: When I turned 19, I took a year off school and spent much of that year working in the kitchen for an Earls restaurant--even in the early 90's Earls was known for its "Earls girls".

A few months ago, I met our District Superintendent at the Earls I used to work at--I hadn't visited there in nearly 20 years. As we walked into the restaurant, we had to pass through a gauntlet of girls at the front door--all of them young, attractive, and barely clothed.

Not too long before, I was having lunch with a pastor friend of mine, and he mentioned that he has been getting to know the owner of an Earls restaurant in the Vancouver area. I don't know how it had come up, but the owner had causally mentioned his hiring protocol--he said that he made a habit of only hiring girls that he'd like to take to bed.

Lust is reductionistic--it reduces others to something less than human, something disposable, something to be consumed and then thrown away. You've gone beyond looking to lusting when you see a person in terms of your own gratification.

Pornography promises "safe" sex--how can looking at an image hurt anyone? It's a lie of course--pornography destroys our ability to connect with real people, in real relationships.

Those who are portrayed in pornographic images are more "image" than real "person." They are presented as two-dimensional persons: they don't have flaws, they don't have any expectations of us, they don't have needs, dreams, or aspirations. We don't have to relate to them or to care about them. They are presented as bodies without souls, without minds, without feelings--they are simply there to be used, to be consumed, to satisfy our desires. Engaging in this self-centered way of seeing bleeds over into every relationship we have. Pornography destroys our ability to relate to real people.

- Let move on to something else Jesus mentions: *what is He getting at with His eye-gouging and amputation language?*

I said before, that Jesus is a brilliant teacher, using all kinds of rhetorical devices to drive His message home; here, Jesus uses exaggeration to make His point. If I were to tell you that I was so hungry that I could eat a horse, what would you deduce from my comments? That I had a hankering for horse flesh? That I intended to eat the equivalent of 1000 pounds? Of course not! You would get the message loud and clear: *Mark is really hungry.*

illus: Throughout Church history, a few very well-meaning Christians have taken Jesus words literally. The story is told of Simon the Shoemaker, an Egyptian holy man who lived in the 10th century. One day while at work, a woman came in to be fitted for shoes. Simon knelt down to measure her feet, but when he held her foot in his hand he was struck by the beauty of her foot, and he felt a

twinge of lust. After she left, Simon went out and gouged out his eye in obedience to Jesus command. Origen, the 2nd century theologian, castrated himself in order to deal with his lust.

The question is, *did Jesus envision this kind of response?* No, He didn't. How can I be so sure? Because a one-eyed person can still lust; so can a blind person for that matter. And further, we don't hear about any of Jesus' disciples gouging out their eyes, nor was this a common practice in the early church. Either those early followers never experienced a moment of lust, or, they understood the point that Jesus was making.

D.A. Carson writes, "What then does Jesus mean? Just this: we are to deal drastically with sin. We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy it, nibbling a little of it around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out."³

Why did Jesus target the eye? Why the hand? Carson writes "the eye is chosen because it has looked and lusted; the hand is chosen, probably because adultery, even mental adultery, is a kind of theft."⁴ In lust, just as in adultery, we dare to take something from someone that doesn't belong to us. The 10th Commandment makes this same point, saying "*You shall not covet...not your neighbor's house, his wife, his servants, his livestock, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.* (Ex 20:17)"

- one last thought before we move on to the application--what does Jesus mean by His references to hell?

Is Jesus suggesting that lust, adultery, or any other form of sexual impurity, are in a different category of sin, one that will buy us a first class ticket to eternal separation from God?

Let me say, categorically, that the Bible does not teach that hell is reserved for people who commit certain sins. The deciding factor in determining our eternal destiny has nothing to do with which sins we've committed, it has everything to do with whether we've received by faith the grace and forgiveness Jesus won for us at the cross.

In our English translation, in vs. 29 and 30, we see the word "*stumble*": "If your right eye/right hand causes you to *stumble* then..." If you're like me, when you hear the word "stumble" you probably envision someone who unintentionally trips over something--a misstep, a slight loss of balance, something easily recovered from. Jesus is saying something very different.

Jesus is describing something that causes a major detour, something that alters one's entire direction and path--Jesus sees sexual sin in this category and He has good evidence to support His view. As we read the biblical story we discover sexual sin frequently led God's people away from Him and it destroyed their ability to relate to one another.

³ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7*, 44.

⁴ Ibid.

Separation from God rarely happens in a moment, it usually happens by degrees. Eternal separation from God, what the Bible calls “*hell*,” is the culmination of thousands of decisions to live life independently, or separate, from God.

Jesus is our Protector, He is fierce, loving and strong--ANYTHING that causes us to stumble, stepping off His path and away from life, is something He is going to take issue with. This is why He is so fierce about lust.

3. How now shall we live?

In the time remaining, I’m going to attempt to apply what Jesus has said; in light of His words, *how now shall we live?*

I thought about offering a few suggestions on how to deal with lust, after all, Jesus does tell us to get drastic. We could cancel our cable package, burn your romance novels, stay away from the magazine aisle in the grocery store, and avert our eyes at the checkout line. We can be selective in our movie watching, we can download internet accountability software, or get an accountability partner. I would commend these practices to you, they have been helpful in my own pursuit of sexual purity.

But my problem is that these suggestions don’t go far enough; no list of rules or boundaries--no matter how long--can ever go far enough. Boundaries deal with externals: *don’t go, don’t look, don’t touch*.

We all know what we’re not supposed to do, what we don’t know is why we keep doing these things. Every wise gardener knows that if you want to get rid of a weed, you must pull it out by it’s roots. No

matter how hard we try to legislate behaviour, it never gets to the root of the problem--rules cannot transform will, desire, the heart.

Do you want to be transformed? From the inside out? I suspect that many of us desire freedom this morning, but that many are not prepared to do what is necessary. We want a quick-fix, pain-free approach, that will guarantee success. After you hear what I’m about to suggest, some of you will say to yourselves, “*there’s got to be an easier way*.” There is none, at least none that I’m aware of. Inside-out transformation requires something **drastic**.

If you want to be transformed, you will need to face your pain--what’s inside must come out. That’s it. That’s the strategy.

When you talk to someone who is being hammered by lust, and you get beneath the surface of their behaviour, you discover that their outward behaviour often has very little to do with sex. This shouldn’t surprise us--the issue often isn’t the issue. Have you ever had someone snap at you in anger, and you later discovered that they were angry about something else? The issue often isn’t the issue, it’s simply what we see above the waterline (**iceberg**).

More often than not, misdirected sexual behaviour is fueled by woundedness, not by an out-of-control libido. This is true of any misdirected behaviour. Our woundedness can come from almost anywhere--conflict, disappointment, abuse, or inadequacy. Fear, loneliness, a sense of worthlessness, or rejection can be the cause. But because the pain is so painful, we try to avoid dealing with it.

The workaholic, the shopaholic, the entertainment-aholic, and the alcoholic all have something in common with the late night pornographer--they've all found a strategy to avoid pain.

illus: let me encourage you to turn your attention to the video screen; I'd like to offer a visual representation of how people frequently deal with their pain (**The Managed Life**).

Most of us try to live life above the waterline...this is the part of the iceberg that can be seen by everyone. The Managed Life is our attempt to control life so that we can look and feel good. We focus on a set of principles to live by that will help us to be successful. But sooner or later something happens, something we cannot control or manage, and we end up wounded.

The Wounded Life lies just below the waterline. In this stage, the question we are asking is: *how can I stop the pain and get back to looking and feeling good?* At this stage we focus on doing whatever it takes to get back to the managed life. We might have a few too many drinks if it will stop the pain. We might escape through entertainment--at least for the three hour epic movie, we won't need to think about our loneliness. Or we might visit pornographic sites--the two dimensional images won't reject us.

Notice that God hasn't been involved in any way; we're simply trying to avoid pain through some form of escape. Our natural inclination is to avoid pain, and so our movement is typically from the wounded life back to the managed life.

I've said before that every sin begins with a lie. One lie that many people believe is that their woundedness will always define them and so there's no point facing it. Another lie that is frequently believed is that God doesn't have their best interests in mind.

David Benner, in his book *Sacred Companions*, writes "sin is ultimately a refusal to believe that what God wants is my happiness and fulfillment. When I fail to believe this, I am tempted to sin--to take my life into my own hands, assuming that I am in the best possible position to determine what will lead to my happiness. As I become convinced that God wants nothing more than my fulfillment, surrender to his will is increasingly possible."⁵

Jesus invites us beneath the waterline, past the managed life, past the wounded life, until we reach the forming life. Here we ask the question, *what is God doing through this and in me?* What does this pain reveal about my values, my priorities, my expectations?

This way is counter-intuitive--facing our pain would seem to make things worse instead of better. And yet the Holy Spirit meets us in the place of our pain. In the forming life we are focussed on allowing the Holy Spirit to do His work in us through the pain. This is where we find healing. This is where we find freedom. This is where we grow.

We will only live this way if we have a deep sense of the Father's ongoing presence and love. As we rest in our identity in Christ, as beloved sons and daughters of God, we can face our woundedness, bring it to Jesus, and allow Him to heal us and our pain over time.

⁵ David Benner, *Sacred Companions*, as quoted by Alice Fryling, *Seeking God Together: An Introduction To Group Spiritual Direction*, 111.

If you want to be transformed, you will need to face your pain-- what's inside must come out. That's Jesus' strategy.

Jesus' strategy flows out of His mission. Luke, the Gospel writer, captured a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry. In chapter 4, Luke paints the scene of Jesus standing up in His hometown synagogue, grabbing Isaiah's scroll and reading out the following, "*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners (Is. 61:1)*".

There is good news for the broken-hearted, the one held captive, the one imprisoned by lust--Jesus can transform your woundedness, He can transform your misdirected desire, He can transform your behaviour. But this is also good news for any of us who are experiencing woundedness of any kind--Jesus can transform our woundedness, our desires, and our behaviour. He is a good God, a loving God, a strong, powerful, healing God--and He wants us to be free. Turn to Him today.

Pray