

One Sermon That Changed The World

Wanderlust

September 24, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matthew 5:27-30 ESV)

WE NEED THIS SERMON

Did you hear about it? That career ended and reputation ruined when we learned of the affairs, the abuse, and the betrayal. Maybe you’re thinking of a well-known politician, or player, or performer or preacher. Maybe you’re thinking of people in all 4 categories. We seem to hear those stories almost routinely.

We could rightly ask a lot of questions; but the one question we need not ask is “why?” We know why. We know the powerful forces at work—that drive that seems (in our teen years) as powerful as a locomotive. The intensity may lessen, but it doesn’t disappear. We know the drive and we know the temptation. And even if a different temptation has been our drug of choice, it is not difficult to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and imagine, “if there had been just a few subtle changes of circumstance, could that have been me?” Or, perhaps more realistically: “how long until I, too, am found out?”

Let’s face it. Gathered in this room this morning are several hundred people: all of whom are known sinners. Some of us have committed adultery. Many more of us have struggled with pornography. A number of us have felt the wounds left behind, wounds left by our parents, friends, and loved ones. Some of us suffer deeper emotional scars

from our own shame and regret. We know first-hand the power of self-deception, and if this morning you find yourself confused and overwhelmed by the frustrating turmoil of your innermost desires, know you are not alone.¹

If you long for healing from past mistakes, you need this sermon. If you would benefit from a warning and rebuke because you are currently unfaithful to your vows, your spouse, and your God, you need this sermon. And if you don't know what you don't know about what makes unrealized desires and feelings so powerful, you need this sermon.

LEARNING FROM LUST: KING DAVID & CHANGING TRAINS

To help us see what we often fail to see, let us travel in our mind's eye to Jerusalem in the days of King David. The old city sat on a ridge. The Kidron valley sat steeply below it on one side: on the other, another narrow valley. Between the valleys, right at the top of the height in the slope sat the palace. If you have ever been to Topanga canyon in the Los Angeles area, or perhaps seen pictures of Cinque Terra, you can imagine what the roof lines would look like. Typically, as you look down the slope from the roof, you would be looking on other roofs below. Depending on the angle, it would be easy to see onto another roof. It would even be possible for someone on the roof of the Palace, looking down the slope to see into the houses easily, such as looking in a window (without curtains).

The story as Samuel tells it, is that David was resting on a couch before he arose to walk on the roof and saw a woman bathing (2 Sam 11:2). In that culture, in heat of the day, people would have what we would call a siesta. It's fairly normal for David to be sleeping on the roof amidst the prevailing breezes and the shade. For him to get up, stand on his deck, and peruse down the valley is typical too. Maybe she was bathing on her roof; or perhaps she was bathing in her home, near one of those open windows. For her to bathe, and for him to see it, could both be innocent events.²

Besides, this is a story about lust; and these stories often begin so innocent. There's nothing wrong with noticing the fact that she was incredibly beautiful. Along with truth and goodness, Beauty is one of the names for God. When we notice symmetry, lines, and curvatures in a great work of art, or among the stars in the night sky, we need not feel guilty—we praise God for it. And when we see beauty in a person, we need not be

¹ Here I summarize the introduction in Peter Yonker, "Going Deeper: Even If You Look," Sermon preached at LaGrave Christian Reformed Church, Jan 17, 2021. <https://www.lagrave.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-01-17-Going-Deeper-If-You-Even-Look-Jonker-Matthew-5.pdf>

² I am grateful to Dr. Dale Manor for the vivid illustration in this paragraph.

ashamed. Beauty is good. The attraction that one feels when drawn to beauty—even in a person—speaks to a good drive placed in us by God.

David saw her bathing. He saw beauty. But he also saw something else. He saw an opportunity. One that wasn't his to take. You see enjoying a work of art on display at the museum can give you goosebumps; trying to steal it and take it home will give you 10 years. But his mistake—indeed his treachery—was more than just wanting to possess her, to steal her from Uriah and claim her for his own. That's bad enough. He didn't see a "her." He saw an "it." An opening. A window (so to speak) to his pleasure, his satisfaction, his inner desires. He saw an object to be used to placate his impulses. He saw "it." Did he ever really see her?

Lust doesn't want to see a real person. Can you imagine a culture where people gather to hoot and holler as a waiter slowly lifts the top off of the platter to reveal...a plate full of bacon? If we saw that, we would think these people have a very misguided sense of food.³ But this is precisely what happens at the strip joint, as men turn women into objects to lust after, rather than people to be loved and respected.

Lust "dehumanizes" people. It has to. It doesn't work when we see people as fully human. It's why exotic dancers always use fake stage names? A leering man doesn't want to know her real name. Peter Yonker says, "You know how to empty out the club?

Stand up before a dancer [is] about to come on and say, "This is Sultry Susan, but her real name is Mary Wallinski. She has four brothers and sisters. Her parents divorced when she was 5. Her mother is an alcoholic. She has been married twice; her last husband beat her. She has two kids and is struggling to get by. She likes dogs and would love to be a dental hygienist someday." That would empty out the room."⁴

Lust dehumanizes the other, so, of naturally, it works to destroy covenants that require love and trust.

Bathsheba had something David wanted, but nothing David needed. He used her to satisfy his lust. Don't you ever believe the lie that you can have cheap sex. There's no such thing. These stories don't end cheap. Feeding our lust is terribly expensive. It costs David his judgment. It costs him his reputation. And there's more. The lust led to a lie,

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3: Christian Behaviour, 5: Sexual Morality.

⁴ Rev. Peter Yonker, "Lust," sermon preached at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, March 11, 2018. Quoted in Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, Chap 9: "Lust: Sexuality Stripped Down."

a cover-up, a murder, a prophetic announcement of God's judgment, and the death of a child. Bathsheba lost her husband and her son. Uriah lost his life. David lost all trust from his loyal subjects; he lost a child, and he caused a rupture in his close relationship with God. How costly.

Who would have thought that lust would have a body count? Like anger, lust can lead to betrayal and divorce (which is breaking your vows to do right by someone); it can also lead to taking new oaths (when lust and anger vow to do wrong by someone), and it can even lead to murder. We see all of this in the David story. And it's no coincidence that you see all of these key words in the verses surrounding our text for this morning. Maybe Jesus has David in mind. Maybe it's Herod Antipas, whose lust for his brother's wife leads to betrayal of her oath of fidelity, and a new oath of wickedness and finally murder for John the Baptist. So maybe you are thinking of David. Maybe it's Herod.

But then we think about that politician, that player, that performer, or that preacher whose downfall came to mind at the beginning of the sermon. And we remember that for just a few changes of circumstance, that could have been me. Just that one innocent look, that one chance encounter, that simple flirtation—how were we to know what terrible things were to result?

We didn't think twice when we were kids creating those ideal bodies in video games. Didn't blink once when we repeated those women-degrading lyrics in the song with the nice beat. Never blushed once when we bought those romance novels lining our shelves. And we thought of those porn sites stuck in our history as none of your business.⁵

And what did I lead to? Men, unable to deal with real things, are now far less likely to date or marry; women bearing the brunt of unrealistic expectations accommodating degrading behavior just to feel wanted; and, because it sells, 4.8 million young people bought and sold into sensual slavery around the world, including 50,000 in our country.⁶

It all seems so innocent. Innocent looks prove it so. But it only takes a spark to set a fire going.

If David could travel back in time and talk to himself on the roof that day, what would he tell himself? I think I know. I think he'd say two words: "Look away."

⁵ DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (2nd ed.).

⁶ Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex In America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, And Think About Marrying* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

Sarah had been married for 5 years, living in New York for 2. She took the metro train to work that day. She took the metro train to work every day. But on this day, a drop-dead gorgeous man boarded the train and just sat there—in her words—“simply being irresistible.” Their eyes met. Then a warm smile that seemed to be shared by the both of them crept onto their faces. A conversation ensued, before both exited the train. All innocent enough.

But Sarah began to get to the train stop a bit early. She seemed to pay closer attention to her perfume and tended to sit near another open seat. After all, he wasn't just handsome. He listened. He really, really listened. Not like her husband. He was drop-dead gorgeous, deeply interested in her life, and they met every day on the same train. So, of course she slept with him. I mean, what was she supposed to do?

Her friend gave her two words of advice: “Change trains.”⁷

WHAT JESUS IS DOING

It's what Jesus would say, also.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”
(Matthew 5:27-30 ESV)

To appreciate Jesus' words, you have to appreciate hyperbole. We see the power of hyperbole when Jesus claims “whoever says You Fool is liable to the hell of fire” (and we have called people fools—as does the Bible—and didn't think we were going to hell for it). We see the power of hyperbole when Jesus says, “do not swear at all,” and yet we have boy scouts, and people in jury duty. We see the power of hyperbole when Jesus says, “do not resist an evil person” and yet all of us lock our doors at night, and our security team is—let's just say---‘ready to resist’. And so, it is in this text. We see the power of hyperbole when Jesus says “if your right eye offends you pluck it out” since

⁷ Train illustration taken from Sam Wells, “Three Solutions To Adultery,” Sermon preached at Duke University Chapel, July 30, 2006.

<https://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2006/060730.pdf>

virtually all of us have sinned with our eyes and yet we are not a congregation of one-eyed Christians. We must think something else is going on there.

No, Jesus isn't literally calling for us to cut off our hands. And he's not redefining adultery. He's not giving us new law. Do you know what he *is* doing? He's giving us new eyes. Eyes to see ourselves and others in a brand-new light. To see as God would see. And so, Jesus offers us 3 challenges.

The first thing Jesus is doing is he's challenging us to take our hearts seriously.

In every line of our text this morning, Jesus is asking you a question: How seriously do you want to be like God? Jesus is going way beyond ethics, far beyond "do's" and "don'ts." He is challenging the heart. When we ask God where the line is, so we know how close to it we can get without going over, he's questioning our question. If you want to be pure in heart, why do you care where the line is?

The 10 commandments were well known to everyone. #7 says "You shall not commit adultery." This was a sin you couldn't "not know" you were doing. Tim Keller imagines it this way: no body starts to sleep with a woman and then suddenly says, "wait a minute. You aren't my wife!" You know when you are committing adultery, and you know when others are committing adultery. It is a humanly enforceable offense.

But then God gives a 10th commandment, "You shall not covet." That has to do with what you desire; what you want. He goes on to list things one could covet, such as what belongs to your neighbor. By the time of the first century, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek; in the Greek version, the line read this way: "You shall not covet your neighbors wife"—and the Greek word for "covet" there is the same word Jesus uses here for "lust." Do you know what that means? All the way back in Moses' day, God said "don't do these big sins, and don't *want* to do them." 9 were enforceable; one wasn't unless it led you to actually do one of the others (like stealing your neighbors stuff, killing your neighbor to get his stuff, or sleeping with your neighbors wife).

Jesus seems to be saying "you all know the 7th commandment and hold yourselves and others accountable to it. But don't you see, God thinks the desire that leads to that commandment is just as important to God as the action. What is unenforceable among humans is enforceable with God, and ought to be self-enforced by people who want to want what God wants!"⁸

⁸ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*.

Because behind every command, every iota, every dot in the law stands a person—the one who made you. A person with a will. A person with a heart. Read the words from God but see the heart of God. If you can't see it, you're reading it wrong. And when you face difficult situations, if your question is “what loophole or footnote in the law code gives me an out to follow the desires of my heart,” you're reading it wrong. If your question is “how can I make *them* change,” you're reading it wrong. When God speaks, he speaks to change you. And that leads us to our second challenge this morning.

The second thing Jesus is doing is he is challenging us to take full responsibility.

You see, the Pharisees reasoned, when it comes to a man's lust, a woman's wily ways are to blame. Ancient Jewish wisdom texts spoke of men being “ensnared by a woman's beauty” (Sirach 25:21)—and that language of being “ensnared” was meant to imply that women set a trap into which men happen to fall. For this reason, a married Jewish woman was expected to wear a head covering. “The haughty stare betrays an unchaste wife” (says a Jewish wisdom text), “her eyelids give her away” (Sirach 26:9). But Jesus says none of that. If you want to preach a sermon on modesty, go right ahead; but this isn't the text for it. Jesus doesn't mention it. That's because if Jesus moved straight to what *others* should put on, he would be doing a Pharisee move: one more rule about what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or what we shall put on. No, Jesus is not talking about them. He's talking about you and me. Jesus puts the responsibility for lust squarely on my shoulders. For Jesus, this is not your sin of your ill-fitting head covering; it's a sin of my unpurified heart.⁹

What does Paul say to the Thessalonians? He says you were called to holiness. And for this reason, each of you should learn how to control his *own* body, rather than being caught up in the passion of lust like those who don't know God (1 Thess 4:1-8). Your own body, not your neighbors. Your own.

The third thing Jesus is doing is he is challenging us to remember just what it is we really want.

Fear is not a lasting motivator. “Lust is wrong” won't keep you out of danger for long. Instead, focus on what it is you truly want.

Do you remember that first date? Both of you nervous as can be. You are sitting there at the movie theater waiting to put that arm around her shoulder. And then wondering—what...what is she going to do? Am I going to get the cold, swift look of rejection? Or worse, will she stand up—in mid-arm move—and walk out of theatre? But...she doesn't! In fact, she leans in, and puts her head on your shoulder. Ahh.... It's

⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*.

the little move that sends shivers down your spine, and a smile across your face so wide you can see it from the moon. It says to each other “I invite you into a story much greater than you can even imagine; You can trust me and hold my hand as we begin this journey together.”¹⁰

That’s what we want! That’s what we want! It’s called intimacy. And we find it long before any physical union. In fact, if we don’t find it there, we’ll never find it later. Because the physical act isn’t meant to satisfy; it’s meant to express a connection that already exists. When it takes place in a covenant of love, bound up with trust, accountability, and facing the storms of life together, it becomes part of a larger, beautiful story where every day, in every way, we reaffirm that we stand naked and unashamed before each other to face life together, come what may. Making love becomes a covenant renewal ceremony! Outside of that, feeding our lust is nothing more than takers and breakers, leaving vulnerable people even more vulnerable. And it starts with lust. Lust short-circuits the whole story, turning the other into an object to be used rather than a person to be loved.

Sam Wells writes:

One thing most of us never learn is that another person, fabulously beautiful or fun or interested in us as they may be, will never become that magical toy that fulfills all our desires. When we meet an attractive person, or spy them from a rooftop, that person becomes the vehicle onto which we project all our desires. To be cynical one could say that most relationships last as long as each partner can keep up the appearance of carrying the other one’s projections. This is expecting too much of another person. But it’s also turning them into an instrument of our own fantasy...[W]e have to recognize that we each do this all the time. We are constantly disappointed when people fail to fulfill expectations they never invited us to place upon them. A real relationship is based on learning to love the real person once the fantasy has disintegrated – not just seeking a new fantasy. [In fact], Pretty much everyone at some point in a marriage meets someone they would rather have married than the person they did marry. The only mistake is to think that’s a big deal.¹¹

During my Senior year of College, John Mayer wrote and sang “your body is a wonderland.” He didn’t see the body as a work of art to be appreciated; he saw it as an amusement park to be used. Just like at an amusement park, writes Rebecca DeYoung, after the thrill is gone, we can leave them behind, right “along with our trash and our

¹⁰ See a fuller version of this illustration in Peter Yonker, “Going Deeper: Even If You Look.”

¹¹ Sam Wells, “Three Solutions To Adultery.”

sweat on the vinyl seats.” What if bodies are not “a place for cheap thrills?” What if they are “sacred spaces?”¹² Far beyond my ignorant projection on you of my deepest fantasies, I have the chance to get to know the real you—a true wonderland beyond my wildest dreams.

In her poem, “To a Long Loved Love,” Madeleine L’Engle writes:

“Because you’re not what I would have you be
 I blind myself to who, in truth, you are
 Seeking mirage where desert blooms,
 I mar your *you*.
 Aah, I would like to see past all delusion to reality;
 Then would I see God’s image in your face,
 His hand in yours, and in your eyes his grace.”¹³

Why do you think studies continue to show that living together before marriage doesn’t make it more likely you will stay together after marriage; it makes it less likely?¹⁴ You know why. Because, that turns every night together into a “never-ending audition.”¹⁵ How about lust? Do you know why lust isn’t enough—why you need to constantly feed it? Do you know why soft porn isn’t enough, and that it is a progressive sin that only gets worse and worse? Because it doesn’t actually feed anything. It’s chewing on air and only starving more. What we really want is to feel fulfilled in our own lives and to do something meaningful in another’s life. That can only happen through real, meaningful relationships.

THREE CLOSING MESSAGES

In closing, let me say three things. First, to the disciple of Jesus who wants their heart to beat in lockstep with the heart of God; to avoid dehumanizing your brothers and sisters and setting a whole course on fire, take lust as seriously as you take what follows after it, and *change trains*. Take a cold shower. Exit the rooftop. Cut off the 5G. Perhaps it is better to enter into marriage with no phone or laptop than the alternative.

¹² Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (2nd ed.).

¹³ Madeleine L’Engle, “To a Long Loved Love: 7,” in *The Ordering of Love: New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L’Engle* (Colorado Springs: Shaw Books/Waterbrook, 2005), 138. Cited in DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (2nd ed.).

¹⁴ Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex In America*.

¹⁵ See Tim Keller, “Love & Lust.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUWnE6GeOiE&ab_channel=GospelinLife

Second, to the disciple of Jesus Christ who has broken covenant with their eyes, with their body, and with their heart—those who have lusted after others, committed adultery, or otherwise broken their vow of purity in heart. Find hope and renewal in the Lord. When we come to Him in our brokenness, we don't find a cold stone tablet with etchings pronouncing our guilt; we find a person who knows every bit what it's like to be human, who sympathizes with our weakness, and says "I called you knowing full well you would face this struggle. And I'm not going anywhere."

And finally, to one who feels betrayed by a partner's wandering eye or philandering ways. Hear the high calling of this message from a God who keeps his commitments even when we do not. God knows and understands the pain you are feeling. It is overwhelming. It may even seem irredeemable. But God majors in irredeemable things. Your partner's unfaithfulness is not the only thing that is true about them, just as your failures are not the only thing true about you. Faithfulness is God's ideal; but in point of fact, he is the only one who remains faithful. All we, like sheep, have gone astray; everyone to his own way. And God comes to us every day and renews his vows; for the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Oh yes. Great is His faithfulness. Believe in the gospel of repentance and renewal, and as God gives you strength, attempt to forgive the inexcusable, just as God forgave the inexcusable in you.¹⁶

¹⁶ Twisting a line from C. S. Lewis.