

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made some very hard hitting statements. He was digging deep. He wanted to speak to the heart of the people. Jesus talked about how the people's hearts had been corrupted by their culture and how they could set things right. That's what we're going to talking about tonight, setting things right with God and with one another in our hearts.

PRAYER

READ Matthew 5:27-32: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

There are a couple of issues in this passage to consider in order to properly understand it. First, there's the way it is written. And second, there's the backstory, the cultural stuff behind the story. Let's talk about that first.

During Jesus' time his fellow Jews had changed the meaning of the 6th commandment. As you know, the 6th commandment reads, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." The theologians of Jesus' day decided what God really meant was "Thou shalt not steal another person's spouse." You heard me correctly. They changed "adultery" to "steal."

Perhaps that was a problem in the day, the stealing of spouses, especially cute ones. I don't know. But the fact is there was already a commandment that addressed stealing, as in, "Thou shalt not steal." That's commandment #7.

Another cultural-theological issue had to do with divorce. As I'm sure you know, even the people of God look for ways to justify bad behavior. We have the best of intentions and we want to do what is right, but sometimes..., okay, most times, our passions, cravings, and feelings take over, and our good intentions fly out the window.

The religious leaders in Jesus' day probably had the best of intentions when they read the Bible, searching for answers for their questions about divorce. Here's what they found in the Old Testament. Moses said, **Deuteronomy 24:1-4, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, he may write her a certificate of divorce and put it in her hand and send her out of his house...."**

The condition for divorce was "indecency," according to Moses. That's all it said: indecency. It was a relatively small community Moses ruled over, and there was probably no reason to be more explicit. Everyone knew what he was talking about. But 1,500 years later the Jews were reading these words and scratching their heads, asking themselves, "What did Moses mean by 'indecency'?"

The easy answer was that he probably meant adultery. But—and this is the big but—if you want to divorce your wife, and if you're the guy who is in charge of interpreting the Bible, you can conjecture that "indecency" meant just about anything you wanted it to mean. Which is convenient.

So that's the backstory of Christ's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. There was a lot of cultural baggage the people had concerning God's will and the problems of adultery and divorce. And Jesus needed to address it.

The other thing I wanted to talk about was how the Lord taught. Jesus said, **Matthew 5:29-30, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."**

If these commands were to be taken literally, we would be faced with a big problem: How would we read the Scriptures without our eyes, assemble care packages for the destitute without our hands, how would we care for our property, play music, or drive our cars to visit shut-ins?

Furthermore, even if eye plucked out both my eyes and sawed off both my hands, I'd still find ways to sin!

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used hyperbole, gross exaggerations to make a point. What Jesus was doing was poking people in the heart. He was saying, adultery isn't about stealing, it's about sex with someone who is not your spouse. And it begins in here (in your heart).

When you look at another person lustfully, you're secretly fanaticizing about having sex with them without their permission. That's sick! Knock it off. Your heart is not right with God or with your neighbor. That's what Jesus is saying in this sermon.

How often have we heard someone say, "Hey, I was just looking!" Jesus was speaking to this, knowing full well that "looking" leads to imagining, which leads to desiring, which leads to scheming, which may ultimately lead one to the moral failure of adultery, which leads to the implosion of the family.

Jesus wanted us to treat temptation as a very real threat to our sanctity, our relationship with God. He wanted us to get at the root cause of the things that are going on in our hearts.

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:32, "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."**

Jesus was talking to men who treated women, even their wives, their soul mates, worse than they treated their cattle. After all, they would never leave a cow to fend for itself, homeless and without anyway to provide for its daily needs. Jesus was teaching these men to take responsibility for the welfare of everyone in their homes, especially their wives.

So you see why Jesus was severe, talking about plucking out eyes and sawing off hands, and why he stuck his foot right in the middle of this legal game the religious mucky-mucks were playing with marriage and divorce. Jesus wanted to change the way people looked at one another, how they treated each other, and

how they thought about their relationship with God. He wanted to change their hearts.

It's the same today. Jesus wants to transform us from the inside out. He wants to come into our hearts and make us into new creatures, children of his Father who art in heaven.

Friends in Christ, Jesus died for our sins, and he left behind an empty tomb on the third day. Fifty days later he sent down the Holy Spirit who dwells in us all. This is how he transforms our hearts.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River to fulfill all righteous, and so he did for each and every one of us. In this same baptism we met Jesus, and the Spirit of the Living God lives in and through us. This is how Jesus transforms our hearts.

Jesus said, "Take eat.... take drink, this is my body... this is my blood for the remission of sins." And so we eat and we drink, and the Lord transforms our hearts.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, over the next few days let us give thanks for everything the Lord has done to lift us up from this world that justifies its sickness with more sickness.

Let us call on our Savior Jesus when we are faced with a temptation that threatens to unhinge God's work in our hearts.

And let us take some time this week to share the good news of our Lord's work in our hearts with another person who really needs to hear it, in Jesus' name. Amen.