

# Raising the Bar on Faithfulness

## Matthew 5:27-32

**Series:** The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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**Worship:** Faithful God

**Key Sentence:** God desires faithfulness of heart and life

**Outline:**

I. Lust = Unfaithfulness

II. We have to take this seriously

III. Divorce = Unfaithfulness

**Matthew 5:27–32** “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’<sup>32</sup> 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.

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### Matthew 5:27-32

For over twenty years now whenever I do marriage preparation with a couple, I have given them, as a wedding present, a framed copy of their vows. I think it's good to have a visible record of the commitments you've made so that on those days when faithfulness to those commitments is hard, you have something to remind you that promises ought not to be lightly broken.

Some time after we started doing vows for others, Gail and I decided to frame our own vows. We had memorized them for our wedding, but we thought it would be nice to have them on our wall. I still like this traditional wording. "I Robert take you Gail to be my wife. And I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful husband. In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; As long as we both shall live."

There are a couple lines I've seen over the years that I could comfortably add to our vows. One is "forsaking all others I give myself only to you." I think that's implied in the commitment to be a faithful husband or faithful wife, but it adds a level of specific clarity that I like. I think Jesus likes it too. Whenever he talks about marriage or about sexual issues, he speaks plainly and specifically. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:27-33 he sets the bar for righteousness in these areas very high. We learn from him that God desires faithfulness of heart and life. He wants us to be faithful.

In these verses we will find the second and third of the six contrasts that Jesus gives with the formula "you have heard . . . but I say," each an example of the depth of righteousness he desires in contrast to the shallow surface righteousness of the Pharisees. We studied the first last week, where Jesus raised anger to the level of murder. Here he raises unfaithfulness to the level of adultery. Matthew 5:27-32 "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* <sup>28</sup>*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* <sup>29</sup>*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.* <sup>30</sup>*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.* <sup>31</sup>*"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'* <sup>32</sup>*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.*

Jesus quoted the sixth of the ten commandments in his first example, and here he quotes the seventh, “You shall not commit adultery.” The formal definition of adultery is when a married person has a sexual relationship with a person who is not their spouse. Sometimes we call this unfaithfulness. And the fact that God chose to include this particular sin in the ten commandments, rather than any other form of sexual immorality is significant, because it points to the sanctity of God’s design for marriage.

As I said in Children’s Corner, it is never good to use something in a way it wasn’t designed. If you owned a Stradivarius violin it would be horrifying to watch you try to use it as a hammer. It would destroy the Stradivarius and not drive the nail. What if you used a Corvette convertible as a dump truck? It wouldn’t move much dirt, and would ruin the Corvette. Or used a utility knife as a pry bar? It’s all fun and games until somebody loses an eye. The point is that it’s never helpful and usually hurtful to use things other than the way they were designed. God’s prohibition of adultery is all about allowing his design for sexuality to be expressed in the union of one man and one woman inside a marriage. Genesis 2:24 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” This is God’s design for human sexuality. Any other use of it will be hurtful and harmful.

The Old Testament gives many other commands guarding against misuse of our sexuality. Each helps to protect God’s design from all less flourishing alternatives. The New Testament confirms these commands and reinforces the harm caused by sexual behavior that violates God’s design.

Because we live in a fallen world, and because we are all by nature sinful, temptations to these behaviors are sure to come. Just as a compass is attracted away from true north by a magnet, so we are drawn away by temptations to sexual sin. In this fallen world there will be many who are attracted to adultery, to sex without marriage, to pornography. In the same way, in this fallen world there will be many who are attracted to the LGBTQ+ behaviors.

These attractions, the temptations, are not in themselves sin. It is the behaviors which are sinful, and the embracing of these behaviors in our imaginations and fantasies. But the temptation is not sin, no matter which of these sins we might be attracted to, or feel like it’s “just how we’re made.” Whether it is me, who has a strong attraction to pornography, or someone else who might have a strong attraction to homosexual or transgender behavior, God’s good is found in saying no to that attraction, no matter how right it might feel. And those who have the attraction but by the power of the Holy Spirit reject the behavior are to be helped and even applauded as they respect God’s design.

The point of this discussion is that when we try to use things other than the way they were designed, it causes harm. Adultery destroys marriages and families. Pornography destroys marriage relationships and promotes sexual trafficking and slavery and evil against innocent women and children. Transgenderism, it's becoming more and more clear, is especially harmful to children. Studies in recent years have shown that as many as 90 percent of children who once identify with the opposite sex want to return to their own biological sex after a time. But the administration of puberty blocking drugs and cross gender drugs makes this return unlikely. World Magazine, citing a major study in Britain, says "The findings support a growing body of evidence showing the harm and irreparable damage of experimental medical treatments for children with gender dysphoria." Stepping away from God's design is harmful.

So one elevation of the command against adultery is to recognize that it applies to all sexual sin. The Pharisees by their narrow interpretation may have missed this. But Jesus is going to do more. He is going to turn the command inward, from behavior to the heart, imagination, and fantasy. Stott says "His emphasis is that any and every sexual practice which is immoral in deed is immoral also in look and in thought." Verse 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." Jesus makes sexual purity an inward thing, not just external.

Let me repeat the distinction between temptation and sin. In this fallen world every person faces temptation, some more in one arena, some another. Temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted and never sinned. But it goes too far the other way to say that only the behaviors are sin. Jesus is teaching that the intentional embracing of sexual imagination and fantasy is sin on the level of adultery. The Pharisees with their shallow righteousness would say "I never did that." But believers, aided by the indwelling Holy Spirit can learn to say "I have stopped even entertaining the thought of doing that." The Puritans called this "mortification." It means putting to death. Through the power of the Spirit I no more respond to such temptation than a dead man would. Paul says in Colossians "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Even the thoughts and intentions of our hearts can come under the Spirit's power.

This is good news for our moment in history. Never before has it been so easy to indulge and feed the fantasies of the mind and imagination. Anyone with a hint of curiosity can find on a cell phone or a computer depictions of every sexual sin. They are addicting. They fuel fantasies, raise unrealistic expectations, sanction behavior God abhors, de-humanize the people depicted and they increase the desire to act out more and more vile behaviors.

All of this is well documented in the literature and I need not go into it here. But our generations need the good news of Spirit given inward purity, for in the face of this flood, I doubt that many can escape their darkened hearts and thoughts.

Jesus wants us to take this seriously. Verses 29 and 30: “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. <sup>30</sup>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.” These verses call us to walk a very fine line. In the early days of the church they were taken both seriously and literally and some believers with more zeal than wisdom literally plucked out their eyes, or cut off their hands. The other extreme is to not take them seriously at all, to forget Jesus ever said this and permit yourself unlimited sinful imaginations because “it doesn’t hurt anyone,” and “no one will ever know.” The path of wisdom is to recognize that Jesus makes such a shocking appeal to get our attention and action.

As I’ve read the commentaries, both Carson and Hughes defer to John Stott’s explanation of this: “What does this involve in practice? Let me elaborate and so interpret Jesus’ teaching: “If your eye causes you to sin because temptation comes to you through your eyes (objects you see), then pluck out your eyes. That is, don’t look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away, and were now blind and so could not see the objects which previously caused you to sin. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is: don’t do it! Don’t go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so could not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin.” That is the meaning of “mortification.”

Let me give you three words, tested in my life, that can help keep temptation from turning to sin, especially if you struggle as I have with pornography. (1) Accountability. Tell someone of your struggles and temptations and ask them to hold you accountable, at least once a week, with a total commitment to honesty. (2) Boundaries. This is what Stott was talking about. Don’t go where the temptation is. If the temptation is on a computer or device, install an app that stops you from going there, and holds you accountable. If the temptation is another person, don’t go where that person is, or where that kind of behavior is expected or allowed. (3) Most important of all, what Thomas Chalmers called “The expulsive power of a new affection.” If you get enthusiastic and invest yourself in something godly, to the point where it somewhat consumes you, you will find that there is less room in your life for these temptations.

Furthermore, if this pursuit is truly godly it will give you true pleasures that expose the poverty of the false pleasures of sin. This new affection might be God's Word, it might be godly music, it might be gardening or a craft or pickleball. God has given so many legitimate pleasures, they push out the desire for sin.

Jesus raises the bar on faithfulness, both to God and to our spouses. Faithfulness is not just about external behavior, but about the heart, about our thought life, our imagination and our fantasies. Our culture wants us to believe that pornography, which fuels these unrealistic fantasies and victimizes women and children, is harmless. It's not. Our culture wants us to believe that all sexual behavior is just a matter of consent, even if it is far from God's design of one man and one woman in a marriage covenant. The only place consent can safely be given and received is in the designed boundaries of marriage.

Which brings up the question of divorce. If marriage is God's design, is there any place for divorce in the picture? And what does faithfulness have to do with it? Jesus begins to address this question in his next contrast, Matthew 5:31-32 *"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> 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.*

The introductory formula "It was also said" is shorter than all the others in this chapter and is linked to the preceding by a connective, here translated "also." Therefore these verses carry further the argument of the preceding discussion. Jesus not only insists that inward lust is the moral equivalent of adultery, but that divorce is as well. This arises out of the fact that the divorced woman will in most circumstances remarry. In first-century Palestine, this would probably be her only means of support. The new marriage, whether from the perspective of the divorcee or the one marrying her, is adulterous.

In verse 31 Jesus is referring to the Old Testament teaching on divorce found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. If a man divorces his wife because of "something indecent" in her (not further defined), he must give her a certificate of divorce, and if she then becomes another man's wife and is divorced again, the first man cannot remarry her. Divorce is not affirmed in that passage, but regulated. But Jesus says that that remarriage in the case of a "divorce for no reason," is adultery. This passage would be more difficult if Matthew hadn't included a longer discussion in chapter 19. It appears that the two verse summary in Matthew 5, while fitting into the "you have heard . . . but I say" form of the Sermon on the Mount, was not able to contain the richness of Jesus' teaching on this subject, and so he included a more detailed explanation in a later event.

Matthew 19:3-9 says “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”<sup>4</sup> He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,<sup>5</sup> and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”<sup>7</sup> They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”<sup>8</sup> He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.<sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

The question in Matthew 19 is almost certainly the same context implied in Matthew 5: what grounds of divorce are legitimate? The Pharisees ask “Is divorce OK for any cause.” There was a school of teachers, whom Jesus may have had in mind in chapter 5, who literally held to any reason for divorce. A burned meal, a wrong word about her husband’s mother, a suspicious outing, all of these were the “something indecent” that constituted grounds for divorce. They hadn’t quite gone as far as our culture has with “no fault divorce” but they were close. Another school of rabbis did teach that “something indecent” meant sexual sin. So in Matthew 19 Jesus is asked to rule on the subject.

He begins by stressing the intimacy and permanence of marriage. In marriage two people become one. He quotes Genesis 2, and points out that there is no intimacy like the marriage covenant where God’s design for the sexual relationship can be fully expressed. This intimacy implies faithfulness, permanence. Jesus says “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” People are not to take the marriage covenant lightly and rip it into two pieces. In our vows marriage we say “as long as we both shall live,” but in our culture we say “as long as I feel like it,” and we divorce for any reason or no reason at all. In our day this has been taken to the extreme where marriage itself is optional at best. For younger adults, starting in about 2015, more were living together without marriage than married. And 85% of Americans across all age groups say it is acceptable for an unmarried couple to live together. Yet the statistics continue to show that married couples have more relationship satisfaction in all areas than cohabitating couples. This is because marriage is God’s design.

But the Pharisees still want to trap him, so they say “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” Notice that they formulate it as a command. Jesus then correctly points out that this is a permission or a regulation, not a command to divorce.

Verse 8: “He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.” Allowed, permitted, but did not endorse. Jesus says “in the beginning it was not so.” This is not the way it was designed. The Biblical standard is faithfulness and permanence, as we saw last summer when we studied Malachi. It’s with this context of permanence and faithfulness that Jesus says in Matthew 19:9 “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” Notice that between Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 the elevation of divorce to the level of adultery has been extended to all parties. It’s adultery if you marry a divorced woman, it’s adultery if you’re the one who gets a divorce and you re-marry, and it’s adultery if the divorced woman re-marries.

Except. In Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 Jesus says “except for sexual immorality.” What does this mean? That when one partner in a marriage breaks the bonds of that marriage by sexual immorality, then the other partner is not considered guilty, not considered bound and is free to both divorce and remarry. Now it is true this exception clause does not appear every place Jesus talks about divorce, but that is probably because it was assumed that sexual immorality was grounds. What is this sexual immorality? It’s the word *porneia*, from which we get the word pornography, but in the Greek it was really any kind of sexual sin, and Jesus’s hearers would understand that to include all the sexual prohibitions of the Old Testament. Notice though that even in these cases divorce is permitted but not required. A spouse is not wrong to seek repentance and reconciliation with the partner who has fallen into sexual sin, and a spouse is not wrong to repent and desire that the marriage bond continue. But if the bond breaking behavior continues, or the bond has been so broken that it cannot be rebuilt, divorce is permissible.

Is there anything else that can break the bonds of a marriage this way? Yes. According to the Apostle Paul, when a believing spouse is deserted by an unbelieving spouse, he or she is free to divorce and remarry. When a believing spouse is divorced by an unbelieving spouse, that’s desertion, and the spouse would be free to remarry. But though those are the only explicit exceptions, they may not be the only acceptable reasons. For decades some conservative Bible scholars, most recently Wayne Grudem, have argued that divorce is permissible, not required but permissible, for other offenses which break the marriage bond, such as spousal abuse, child abuse, neglect and addiction. These arguments come from many directions, some from Exodus 21:10-11, some from Matthew 19 itself, some, like Grudem’s, from a careful reading of the Greek of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7. I believe that if you amass these arguments cumulatively, under the heading of “what destroys the marriage bond,” then you have leave to assess each individual situation on a case-by-case basis.

Our elders have, in fact, always addressed questions of divorce and remarriage on a case by case basis, with the same presupposition Jesus puts forth in Matthew 19, that from the beginning marriage was designed to be permanent and indissoluble. But we've also recognized the exceptions that break the marriage bond, and in light of this recent scholarship I want to more strongly advise our elders to consider whether the marriage bond has already been broken through unfaithful actions taken against an essentially innocent spouse.

Jesus wants us to take faithfulness seriously. He wants those vows on our wall to mean something. He wants us to see marriage as a state of permanent faithfulness. He wants us to push back against the culture that says all forms of sexual relationship and sexual activity are OK. But in this pushing back I want to say clearly that Jesus loves and values, has compassion and care for all people, including people who have been hurt and scarred by any kind of relationship. He cares for those who were innocent victims, and he cares for those who were sinful and he cares for those who just went along and he cares for those whose lives were ruined and he cares for the children who often bear the consequences of divorce or unfaithfulness. No one is beyond the reach of his loving hand. No one is beyond the reach of his forgiveness. And there is no shame in needing him to restore and rebuild a broken life.

Yet, he also wants us to examine our own hearts. He wants us, through the power of the Spirit, to deal drastically with the thoughts, imaginations and fantasies that are heart level sexual sin. He wants us to recognize by this that we are all sinners desperately in need of salvation, all poor in spirit, all hungering and thirsting for righteousness that only he can satisfy. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Each one of us desperately needs what Jesus can offer our hearts. Forgiveness and restoration, and the power of the Holy Spirit to cleanse, to guard, to give us new affection, and a deeper righteousness.