

Lust and Sex in the c21st, Matthew 5:27-30, July 4th 2021

1 Corinthians 6:12-19; Matthew 5:27-30.

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Prayer: Gracious Father, now give us diligence to seek you, and wisdom to find you. May our ears hear your voice, our eyes see your goodness, and our tongues proclaim your name as we commit our lives to pleasing You. Amen.

Western society has much to say about sex. Sex before marriage is now regarded as the norm. It is said, that for a long term relationship you need to test if you are physically compatible. In fact, sex is seen as a step along the way towards becoming a 'settled couple.'

Years ago, the pressure from parents was not to have sex before marriage. Now there is substantial pressure from different angles, in the other direction. I remember a chat with a good friend at uni, about a girl I was going out with. He asked if we were going to have sex together. I said I did not plan to as I was a Christian and I believed in waiting til I was married... My friend listened to my views, challenged it a bit, but by the end I felt like I was being looked on as a bit 'different' and a bit 'conservative' not doing the normal thing.

Also, today, an adulterous sexual relationship has become far more acceptable. The current impression communicated within the popular media, would be that anything in the way of sexual relations is regarded as correct as long as both people consent to it. If it is about love, then it is okay; if one is unhappy, and meets another who makes him or her happy, it is fine.

As we come to Jesus teaching on this subject. It is important to begin with the biblical view of sex. We look at the themes of creation, fall and redemption.

Creation : Good News

We begin with Good news. The Bible tells us that God created sex, he affirms its goodness. When he creates human beings, tells them to marry and multiply; he looks at all he has made, and he declares it good! CS Lewis reminds us that pleasure is God's idea, not the devil's. God is not surprised by sex, he came up with it!

In the past the church has either avoided this topic, or perhaps communicated a message that seemed to suggest sex was something, not right or even connected to the Fall.

Sex brings delight, contentment. We covered the Song of Songs last summer and we thank God it is here. Part of God breathed scripture. It is a beautiful poem, a celebration of love, of engagement, of marriage and of long term commitment, growing older together. It celebrates the beauty of the human body, the joy of love and making love. It celebrates, in poetic language, the gift of sex.

It is God's design, that sex cements the relationship of marriage. Marriage brings about a union that is not just physical, biological, but emotional, psychological, spiritual. Sex expresses the union. It helps bring it about. Note in Genesis 2, how it is said that "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh." Now. The importance of sex in this process is brought out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6. Corinthian church has a section of their church who believe that because they are in grace, they can live as they like – we can sin, we are free, for the cross covers all sin. Part of their practice is that they are going to prostitutes. Paul then says : Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body. For it is said: The two will become one flesh." And he quotes Genesis 2.

The Fall - Sex becomes complicated.

The second theme in the Bible is of course the Fall. All of us have fallen short in every area of our lives – thoughts, words and deeds as the old Anglican prayer puts it – and that includes for many of us, sex and sexual desire – whether in our thinking, our desires, or in what we have done. The Fall has left us with a heart problem – Jesus shares "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony." Paul, writing, says "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry etc etc". He then says: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so you do not do what you want."

We are a walking civil war. It means that there can be many things that rattle within us. These words remind us, that none of us are alone – in any struggle – as we all have a flesh.

People can have struggles which they feel they cannot discuss and so they are a source of uncomfortableness, wondering what a spouse or friends will think or how they will react.

Rob Bell says: "We have cravings and desires and urges and temptations that can easily consume us and make us helpless in their presence. ... Some of the most comforting words in the Universe are 'me also.'" That moment when you find out that your struggle is also someone else's struggle, that you are not alone, and that others have been down the same road." Gumbel, p70.

Redemption - Transformation

Transformation. Sex can be restored. Jesus died for you and me. Which means in any area of life, we can make a new start. It does not matter how far we feel we have fallen or how much we feel we have messed up, forgiveness is always possible.

For those who have experience sexual abuse or assault, or have had traumatic experiences of harassment, healing – over time, I believe can come.

Months after he spoke his words on the Hill side, Matthew describes many who are being healed. We know the illnesses are from physical and emotional conditions. He says Jesus told people not to speak about him, and then he says:

¹⁷ This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight;

I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.

²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice through to victory.

²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.'^[b]

A reed – bruised – normally is not worth using. It cannot hold anything. A candle wick – which is nearly out – we snuff out and replace. Jesus ministry is different. It is a beautiful ministry. A person who feels they are bruised, broken, nearly snuffed out; he does not ignore, they have his loving attention, he seeks to restore. Jesus may do it through prayer, through worship, through professional support and skill, but healing can come, for those who have suffered sexually. He can help us to forgive, through his power, as we bring our anger to him, bring our wounds, asking him to help us forgive the perpetrators. Forgiveness does not mean we trust them in the same way again, or give them access again to our life in the same way. Forgiveness and healing are possible in and through the suffering Christ.

So. The biblical view.

"That the rightness of sex, *the place of sex*, is tied to a solemn and lasting covenant for life between two individuals, a man and a woman, and sexual arousal and delight, is a response to the gift of a uniquely personal intimacy ... that each partner has conferred in enduring faithfulness upon the other." Willard.
A beautiful image.

What is Jesus teaching?

Adultery means sexual intercourse with someone who is not your spouse. Adultery is a form of unfaithfulness. It is almost always in secret. It leads inevitably to pain. All people involved are hurt in some way, and especially any children.

By using this example, Jesus is not only defending marriage he is pointing to the appropriate and inappropriate times for sex. And it begins with what is going on in your heart.

Sexual attraction is not wrong, as a natural uncultivated response, any more than anger is wrong, or pain is wrong. It has a role in our lives.

He is not forbidding us to look at a woman or man and to find them attractive. The prohibition is to look lustfully. I think we know the difference between looking and lusting.

But to be clear. What is LUST.

Lust

The literal meaning of the Greek is: the man who is condemned is the man who looks at a woman with the deliberate intention of lusting after her. The man who is condemned is the man who deliberately uses his eyes to awaken his lust." (Barclay,p.169).

The Greek is clear: "it means looking at a man or woman with the purpose of desiring her or him. 'Desiring sex is the purpose for which we are looking.'" Willard.

Jesus connects the seventh commandment – do not commit adultery – with the tenth – do not covet. The word that Jesus uses for lust, is the same word, used for coveting. To desire to have something. So he reminds the listeners, that sexual purity was more than just not doing the deed, but what is going on in our minds, our imaginations.

Sexual lust is wrong because it turns healthy desire for a loving connection with another person, into a depersonalized encounter in which the other person – whether real or fantasy – is reduced to an object who can satisfy one's desire.

Lust seeks gratification for that moment. Lust is a longing to possess to have, rather than an act of love.

Sexual lust is contrasted with sexual love, God's intention, which is the mutual giving and receiving of pleasure in intimacy. (Comments from *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, pp558-59).

Lust can be proactive and not just reactive.' People, who, when they see a sexually attractive person, do not see the person, they see themselves sexually engaging with her or him. They see the adultery happening in their imagination. Someone who embraces lust, it can be seen in a person's expressions and body language. It can affect those people around them. And the person subjected to the fantasy, is deeply affected by such lusting. Sadly what can flow from the lusting may be what can be called sexual harassment or something worse.

That is lust.

Temptation

But some bible translations, in these verses change 'adultery in the heart' to 'everyone who looks at a woman with desire.' It is not helpful. The word desire, sounds like attraction, and so 'Adultery in the heart' becomes something that no one can avoid, as something that happens without their will being involved. So any feeling any attraction we have to a person, we feel guilty about.

It leads us to confuse temptation and lusting. The thought may come into mind about sex with someone. That is temptation. Thoughts fly around in our heads like airplanes. Do we let them land? Do we dwell on them – to do so, where we embrace it, it becomes lust. Someone asked: What is the difference between looking and lusting – the answer was given, 'about two seconds.'

Temptation is not wrong. Jesus came under it and experienced it, he understood temptation and resisted it. The thoughts are not sinful, *the entertaining* of them is.

Again to be clear. There is nothing wrong about appreciating a person's handsomeness who passes you on a bike, or who you work with, or who joins your class at college. Jesus is not outlawing the natural and human desires that are part of our instinct and nature – to be attracted. We are not to feel guilty about feeling attracted or acknowledging he or she is handsome or beautiful.

What can we do? Choices, Community, Power.

Bishop Graham Tomlin writes: 'Lust is like eczema, the more we scratch it, the more it itches.'" Gumbel, p.79. The more we give into lustful thoughts, the more difficult it becomes.

Our choices.

Jesus words. The eye pluck it out. The hand cut it off. We are to deal drastically with sin. We cannot excuse it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling with it around the edges, or thinking how far can I go.

Paul puts it maybe clearer for us : Colossians 3:5 – Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed.'

Jesus did not intend us to do literally what he said. If I cut out my right eye. Would not my left eye do the same? And if I blinded myself, would I now still have my imagination? Could I not gaze mentally at forbidden things? When we think of Paul's words – put to death – we see, it is about having a ruthless moral self denial.

Some of us are more prone to temptation in this area than others. We may need to examine our lives honestly and prayerfully in order to recognize where we are vulnerable and then to act ruthlessly. Part of this, is knowing yourself. Years ago, someone told me, they had such a good

memory, near photo graphic, they always remembered, she could not watch certain films, with any sexual content, for it would stay in her head....

In Job 31, Job declares I made a covenant with my eyes, not to look lustfully at a girl. He has – so to speak, an agreement with them – that the eyes would not engage in lusting.

He asks how could he fantasise about a woman? He knew his look would be seen by God – and it would lead into sinful actions.

He says: If my steps have turn from the path,
if my heart has been led by my eyes, or my hands have been defiled... if my heart has been captured by the wife of another, and I have sought an opportunity to be with her''

So Job sets an example. He understands temptations can exist. He makes a decision. To be right sexually before God. To be a person with a detailed, disciplined practice of not engaging eyes, his mind, his bodily parts, or to take part in activities that give opportunity, lead up to or give expression to sexual lust.

Our community.

There are our choices. But also support through community. For some, they feel they are in a place of being entrapped by lust. Such person will need help beyond advice and a sermon... Professional help or long term pastoral support may be needed. If you feel you are entrapped, the first step can be to share and let others know. In your life group, or in your Christian friendship circle. John Wimber said, correctly, 90% of the power of sin is broken by confession to others. Most of its power over us, is guilt, shame, we try to keep it hidden.

I think Graham Tomlin and Nicky Gumbel are right when they say – gardening does not only involve plucking out weeds but also planting flowers. We have to be different in our community.

The Christian community should be an alternative society. Salt and Light. That supports us all in our walk to live a holy, which includes, a sexually pure life.

Tomlin says:

“I think the church needs to be a place where it becomes possible to live a good and wise and holy life. Out in the world it is very hard to live a life of purity and goodness, because the standards are sometimes set so low and the expectations is that people will often lie, cheat on their partners, sleep together outside of marriage, fly off the handle etc.

It is much easier to live a pure life if you are in a community where there is not constant innuendo jokes and sex is not a constant topic of conversation and where women are honoured. The reason we keep to high standards of behavior in the church is to encourage one another to live like this. That is why Paul says there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality among you.’

Our power.

Finally. Will power on its own is not enough.

We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit's power. We are not alone in the struggle.

Paul points to the inner power – the one who can help us. Live by the Spirit. We recognize that we need someone else to help... We need to seek God in all these temptations and trials.

Shall we pray...

Prayer.

Our closing prayer – is an ancient one...

"Thanks be you thee my Lord Jesus Christ,

For all the benefits and reconciliation thou has given to me

For all the pains and insults and anger thou hast borne for me

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,

Give me afresh your Holy Spirit, that

I may know thee more clearly

Love thee and others more dearly

And follow thee more nearly,

Day by day. Amen.