

CAPTURING YOUR IMAGINATION MATTHEW 5:27-30

Several years ago a futuristic television program called *Max Headroom* featured an episode that was both fascinating and frightening. The story revolved around some high-tech wizards who had developed a machine that could literally capture a person's imagination. You've heard of a VCR? This was what you might call a VDR—a video *dream* recorder. By connecting a person's brain to this machine through a complex system of electrodes and wires, they could tap into every thought, fantasy, and dream, and then project those images onto a screen where others could observe them.

Question: How would you feel if your innermost thoughts were made public? That in itself would be a horrible nightmare. We would be terrified of such exposure, and for good reason.

The president of the seminary I attended once said to our class: "If you knew me like I know me, you wouldn't let me teach this class. On the other hand, if I knew you like you know you, I wouldn't let you in this seminary." The fact is we're glad other people cannot see everything that is in our hearts and minds, because intermixed with good things are an assortment of bad things.

I would guess that if it were possible for our innermost thoughts to be projected onto a screen, the ones that might make us squirm the most would be thoughts about sex. Not that sex is evil in and of itself, but we all know that sexual thoughts and desires can easily be perverted.

We also live in a society that has mastered the art of stimulating and exploiting sexual desire. Someone said, "Lust in America is an established national pastime" (Yancey, 133). And it's not just the pornography industry. Marketing strategists discovered long ago that sex sells products, and they use it to sell everything from perfume to auto parts, blue jeans to beer. The music industry, talk shows, television networks, books, sports magazines—almost all of them attempt to stimulate erotic desire.

It's because they know how powerful sexual desire is, and they know that if they can sufficiently arouse those desires they cannot only capture someone's attention, but the contents of their wallet.

It's not easy living in such a sexualized society. But it is in the midst of this society that Christians are called to be salt and light. We are called to show the world what it means to *really* live—to live life to the full. And our sexuality is one way in which we do that.

Jesus addresses this in His Sermon on the Mount. He says in **Matthew 5:27-30**.
²⁷ "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."

Jesus is commenting on the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery", which was well known by His audience. Most of them would have read the command and pronounced themselves innocent, for they were part of a Jewish culture that prided itself on strict monogamy and that imposed the severest of penalties on those who were caught in adultery.

What is more, they could compare themselves with the Greco-Roman culture in which

they lived—a culture that endorsed promiscuity and exploited sensuality—and they could smugly declare, “I’m righteous. I’m in compliance with the Law. I’m doing what God has required.”

When God gave the Ten Commandments He wasn’t merely prohibiting certain behavior. He was placing extraordinary value on people and relationships and institutions that He had established. The command, ‘Do not commit adultery’ is meant to uphold the sanctity of marriage. And it is meant to protect the mystical union that God calls “one flesh.”

That union, expressed most profoundly in their physical intimacy, is sacred. Sacred enough that nothing should ever come into the relationship that threatens to diminish or damage that union; sacred enough that it should be protected at all costs.

A lot of people have thought that as long as they don’t have sex with another person they have satisfactorily protected that sacred union. On a superficial level that is true. But simply abstaining from extra-marital sex doesn’t ensure *purity*, and *purity* is required to truly protect that relationship. Jesus says that marriage is so holy that even mental fidelity is required to keep it pure. Look at **verse 28**. ***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 says that lust constitutes adultery, and He will go on to say that there are serious consequences to this sin. So we need to be absolutely clear what it means to lust. Before we actually look at the meaning of the word translated “lust,” there are a couple of things in the grammar of verse 28 that shed some light on its meaning.

First, the present tense of the verb, “looks at”, indicates that this is not just an involuntary glance; it is more like a gaze or a perusal. It describes a person who keeps looking.

Furthermore, the word translated “lust” in verse 28 is an infinitive preceded by a preposition (*pros*) which indicates a goal or purpose that accompanies that gaze. In other words, “it is a look with a purpose” (H. Robinson, p.142). The ESV captures the essence of this grammatical construction in translating it “lustful intent.” There is no question but that Jesus is describing the intent of one’s heart.

But it is also helpful to know that the word translated *lust* means “to strongly desire.” By the way, this word is not always used with reference to sinful or sexual desires. During the Last Supper, when Jesus told His disciples, “I have *earnestly desired* to eat this Passover with you”, He used this same word. It simply means you want something badly.

Strong desire can be good. Even strong sexual desire can be good, if it is directed toward one’s spouse. But the desire for sex with someone other than your spouse is wrong. It is the antithesis of true love. The country singer who wrote, “I’ve got wandering eyes but it’s true I love my baby,” didn’t know what love was. True love is absolutely loyal. Lust is betrayal. True love treats a person as someone made in the image of God. Lust reduces persons to objects. True love is selfless—it wants the best for a person at whatever personal cost. Lust is selfish—it cares for nothing except personal gratification. True love elevates a person’s dignity. Lust demeans and belittles persons. Love is pure. Lust is polluted. Love builds. Lust destroys. Love binds together. Lust divides and separates.

Oh, lust does have a few compelling rewards: An adrenaline rush. A feeling of transcendence. A burst of euphoric pleasure.

Big deal!

Do you remember the story of Esau? Esau was the older of Isaac’s two sons, the heir to the blessing. One day, after he’d been come back from one of his hunting trips, he was

famished. He was so hungry, so desperate for food that when he saw his younger brother stirring a pot of stew, he offered his birthright in exchange for a bowl.

There's not a person I know who wouldn't call what Esau did a very foolish thing. But that's exactly what someone who lusts is doing with his or her life and marriage. They are forfeiting the blessing that God wants to give and has made available for those who are pure. They are exchanging a few moments of pleasure for what may be an eternity of pain and suffering.

Of course, it is one thing to know and believe that lust is foolish, sinful, destructive, and selfish. But how does one *overcome* these strong desires—desires that are so strong they can overpower one's logic and convictions and conscience? And what does this mean in a society where lust is an established national pastime, and one no longer has to go to the sleazy side of town and *look* for eroticism? It is now accessible in the privacy of our homes. It is accessible 24/7 on devices that most of us carry in our pockets or purses.

How does one overcome? Jesus tells us in **verses 29-30**. ***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.***

There you have it. You want victory over lust? You won't get it from a cold shower. You won't get it from rigorous exercise. Jesus says, amputation is the answer.

Or is it? There have been many in the history of the Church who have taken Jesus literally here. More than a few men have castrated themselves, although I'm not sure why. Jesus did not say, "Cut off your private parts," perhaps because He knew we would take Him literally.

When we lived in Kenya I read a story in the newspaper about a man who couldn't control his sexual urges so members of the community cut off his lips with a machete. Several tribes in Africa routinely circumcise girls so they can never derive any pleasure from sex, and therefore will never be tempted to be promiscuous.

But is mutilation the answer? Let's assume Jesus wanted us to take Him literally. If I gouged my right eye because I looked and lusted, what would prevent me from looking with my left eye? Even if I plucked out both of my eyes, how would that help? I had a friend in college who struggled intensely with lust, and he was blind from birth. And how would cutting my hand off insure my purity?

No. The problem isn't body parts. Jesus was using a figure of speech called *hyperbole* to show that adultery, even *mental* adultery, is serious enough for people to go to hell. Hyperbole is intentional exaggeration to make a point, and is never meant to be taken literally. In using hyperbole Jesus is showing us that God's standard of righteousness is much higher than previously imagined. God is not merely concerned with outward conformity to a rule; He's not just concerned with behavioral compliance. He's concerned with what is going on in our hearts and minds. He wants us to be pure through and through.

That's why lust is adultery in God's eyes. It's mental adultery, and it is serious even if no one else knows about it. What is really important is that God knows about it, and it is unacceptable to Him. In fact, it is so serious that we ought to do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, even if it means going to extreme measures.

Lust is serious enough for a person to go to hell. That's why Jesus would say, "It's better to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand and enter the kingdom of God maimed,

than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” In other words, you can be thrown into hell for the sin of lust, so you’d better do whatever it takes to keep from lusting—even if you have to resort to drastic measures.

Do you see that in the text? Or do you think I am I reading more into what Jesus said or meant here? I don’t think I am. I have tried to be objective and careful in my interpretation of this passage. So if it’s true that lust is adultery in God’s sight and is so serious that we ought to do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, what does this mean for us? How do we obey Jesus’ words?

I want to emphasize two things in answering these questions. First, remember that Jesus was describing the ethics of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount, telling us what God’s true standards of righteousness are, and what God expects from His people. Those standards and expectations were much higher than anyone thought, including the Pharisees, who were thought to be the most righteous people on earth. But Jesus just got through saying that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees they would not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Which means that He was intentionally creating a crisis in the heart of every person who was in that audience. Because when He said, Lust is adultery and is serious enough to go to hell, every person over the age of fifteen would have said, “Uh oh. I’m guilty! I deserve to go to hell.”

That’s what Jesus wanted. He wanted people to admit that they did not measure up to God’s standards and, therefore, deserved eternal condemnation. He also wanted them to come to the conclusion that it was impossible to measure up to God’s standards and that *no one* stood a chance of earning a place in heaven.

And that’s the main reason Jesus came to this earth. He came because everyone is guilty of breaking God’s laws—there is no one righteous, not even one. So the only possible way people could get into the kingdom was if God made another way. And He did. *Jesus* was that way. For He not only came to tell people what God’s standard of righteousness is, He came to actually meet those standards in His own life with His own thoughts, attitudes, words, and behavior. Jesus obeyed God’s law perfectly, not just the letter of the law but the intent—not just outwardly, but inwardly.

He never once lusted after another woman, even though He was tempted to do so. He was pure, through and through. And because of that He was qualified to be our Savior. He was given the right to be our Substitute.

God’s holiness demands perfection, and because Jesus was perfect He satisfied God’s demand. So when He died on the cross He took our sins in His body—every perverted, lustful thought—and experienced the punishment for those sins that we deserved, so that we wouldn’t have to be punished. And He made it possible for us to be perfectly righteous in God’s sight by legally transferring His righteousness to us, so that when we put our hope in Jesus and what He did for us on the cross, we stand before God in His righteousness—which is the sole basis for our acceptance by Him, and the sole basis for admission into the kingdom of heaven.

But, just because Jesus made our sin His responsibility doesn’t mean that we don’t have any responsibility to deal with sin. Because not only did Jesus transfer His righteousness to us when we put our faith in what He did for us on the cross, He caused us to be born again—He made us new creatures with new capabilities. First, we are no longer under sin’s dominion; that is, we are no longer controlled by its power. We have a new

operating system, the Holy Spirit, who enables us to overcome temptation—all temptation, including lust. And we can live in victory over those temptations. In other words, overcoming temptation can be a pattern of life. If we take advantage of all that God has provided for us in our new creature status and identity (namely, by walking under the influence of the Spirit), we will *not* live a life of continually giving in to temptation.

But it's not automatic. The Holy Spirit doesn't resist temptation for us. That's our job. And that requires vigilance. Jesus knows how powerful lust can be, which is why He used hyperbole when He told us how to overcome. So when He said that lust is so serious that we must do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, even if it means going to extreme measures, He's calling us to vigilance and obedience. He's telling us to make some choices.

And in a society that is so saturated with sensuality, in a society where exposure to eroticism is so easy and immediate, obeying Jesus will, of necessity, require making choices to do some radical things.

For example, if you have a hard time resisting temptation that is accessible through your smart phone, either get some fool-proof filters for that thing or get rid of it. Get a flip phone, or a phone that doesn't have the internet. You say, "But I need my smart phone to do this and this... I'd be lost without it."

This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of obeying Jesus. What is more important to you? Obeying and pleasing your Master, Jesus, the One who died for you, or continually falling into temptation? You know Jesus' answer to that question. Lust is adultery in God's eyes and is so serious that we ought to do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, even if it means going to extreme measures.

If you cannot resist the temptation to watch things on television that arouse sexual desire and cause you to stumble, get rid of your cable subscription or your satellite. Or throw away your television. Lust is adultery in God's eyes and so serious that we should do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, even if it means going to extreme measures.

If you can't go to the beach without lusting, don't plan a vacation in Hawaii. Go to Minnesota...in the winter. If you cannot go to the gym without lusting, cancel your membership and choose another way to stay fit.

You might be saying, "C'mon Stan. This sounds so legalistic and simplistic. You're just dealing with external behavioral fixes; you're not really getting at the root cause of this problem."

I want to make it clear that I'm not saying that behavioral modifications can ensure that a person will be pure in his/her heart. I think for many people there are some heart issues that need to be addressed, even issues that are the result of trauma and hurt that have come through no fault of the person who is now struggling. For others there are brain chemistry issues that need to be addressed. And if that is the case, going to extreme measures to overcome this problem might involve going to counseling, getting involved in a recovery program, or something else.

Again, Jesus said whatever it takes.

Let's be honest. Many of us struggle in this area. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I know the statistics. 68% of men in churches have a habitual problem with pornography, and the percentage for women is increasing. If you are one of those who do, please know that you are not alone. Please know that it does no good to beat yourself up over this. And please know that there is help, and there is victory.

And while all of us would love (and have probably prayed) for Jesus to instantly remove any impure sexual desire, we need to at least plan for the fact that this may be a lifelong struggle, for which we need daily vigilance.

I heard a story about Dr. Robert Criswell, the godly pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, who at a men's prayer meeting on a Saturday morning, at the age of eighty, prayed, "Lord, keep me from becoming a dirty old man."

That's a good prayer.

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“Capturing Your Imagination Matthew 5:27-30

Main Idea: Lust is adultery in God’s eyes and is so serious that we ought to do whatever it takes to keep from lusting, even if it means going to extreme measures

Clarifying “You shall not commit adultery” (27-28)

The traditional understanding (“You have heard that it was said...”)

Why God gave this law
To uphold the sanctity of marriage

To protect the mystical union of *one flesh*

The intended meaning (“Lust is adultery”)

Clues from the grammar

The present tense of “looks at”

An infinitive with the preposition “pros”

Meaning of the word

Overcoming mental adultery (29-30)

Jesus’ use of hyperbole (exaggeration)

The meaning and application

Lust is serious enough to go to hell

Lust is so serious that a person should do whatever it takes to keep from lusting