

## **How to Avoid Sexual Sin** *Matthew 5:27-30 / 1 Cor 6:18-20*

We thought the Rob Bell video (Flame) would be a helpful way to start thinking about our subject this evening because, as you saw, in it Rob explains so clearly what God's ideal is for us when it comes to love and sex - that there are to be these three strands that express the three aspects of love - Raya (brotherly love), Ahava (the commitment) and Dod (erotic love). So what we're going to be thinking about this evening as we talk about sexual sin is how we can avoid destroying this ideal that Rob talks about and that God wants for every couple as they grow together.

Over the years I've given a number of talks about sex to young people but it struck me that it's good for us as a church – no matter whether we're younger or older, or in a relationship, or single or married – to be thinking about this together as all of us have to live out our faith in the context of a society that is saturated with sexual imagery and sexual expectations.

A government report came out in February this year in which serious concern was expressed about the level of exposure young people have to sexual imagery. The report said:

The "drip-drip" exposure was distorting young people's perceptions of themselves, encouraging boys to become fixated on being macho and dominant, while girls in turn presented themselves as sexually available and permissive.

Added to that we are now in a society where people are expected to be sexually active at an increasingly early age and at an early stage in a relationship, and because couples now tend to cohabit before they get married, if indeed they do get married, it actually becomes much harder to measure true commitment in a relationship. So the whole connection between sex and commitment has got very confused.

And with all the boundaries gone, to talk about 'sexual sin' just doesn't mean anything to most people. It doesn't mean anything because any sex is ok as long as it's consensual and doesn't hurt anyone. And an obvious consequence is that adultery is no longer considered a serious matter.

Sometimes we get 'Hello' magazine. And in almost every edition the reader is taken to the luxurious house of a celebrity who may well have recently walked out of a marriage and is there are in the first flush of a brand new relationship. And the article invariably wishes them all the best and congratulates them on 'having at last found true love.' The destruction of the family left behind, and the fact that adultery may well have been involved, of course, just isn't mentioned

And adultery seems to be everywhere. It features in the story lines of films and TV shows, in the lives of politicians, celebrities and royalty. You can even pay for phone services which make cheating on your partner easier by creating the impression you are in a meeting or stuck in traffic. And the result of all this is that the expectation that marriage partners will be faithful to one another starts to decline.

The dictionary defines adultery as '*sexual unfaithfulness of a husband or wife*' and it was something expressly forbidden in the seventh commandment. And as Jesus addresses

adultery in Matthew 5, he does so in the context of the Old Testament law. He says he's not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it in a deeper way. And as we said last week that, with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wants his disciples to understand the heart attitudes that lie behind the law. So last week, we took the commandment 'Do not Kill' and thought about the connection with anger, which is something we all have to deal with.

So here, as Jesus takes the commandment 'Do not commit adultery' he's saying, 'Let's have a look at the heart attitude behind that – and that's lust. So let's just read once more what he says (vv. 27,28). Ouch! (I think I may have been guilty of that just once or twice!) So what is Jesus saying here?

Well, the word he uses for 'woman' almost always refers to a married woman, so Jesus isn't talking about when you pass someone in the street and you think 'she's alright, or 'he's alright.' To find someone attractive is normal – as Steve Chalke used to say; 'there is nothing wrong with having good eyesight! But it's the lingering gaze that allows room for fantasies and ultimately leads to the desire to sleep with someone that is not your husband or wife. That's what Jesus is referring to.

And he goes on to say that this desire must be dealt with ruthlessly, so in v. 29 he says (read). What he means here is that we have to take radical steps to prevent ourselves from falling into this kind of sin. Why is he so strong about this? Simply because, misplaced sex, like misplaced anger is very destructive. Like fire, once it is out of control it will destroy everything in its path. And I'm sure all of us could share stories of the pain we've suffered or those in our family have suffered due to misplaced sex.

I remember my brother years ago breaking to us the news that his girlfriend was expecting his child. We didn't even know he had a girlfriend as they had only known each other a few months. They were both 25 and they decided to marry and within two years the marriage was in serious trouble. The separation and divorce that followed was painful and messy complicated by financial disputes, my brother's affairs with other women and a little boy growing up in an atmosphere of conflict, insecurity and tension.

He would be dropped off to be looked after by this relative and that relative while his mother worked, and then there were the rainy afternoons in McDonalds with a dad who had no stable base to take him to on the days when it was his turn to be with him. And my brother would say without any hesitation that those were the worst seven years of his life.

And the story began with sexual desire out of control. It wasn't adultery because neither were married, but there was lust and sexual sin that later did lead to adultery, and many lives were affected.

And that's why the Bible speaks so much about sexual purity and the need for sex to be within a context of mutual trust and commitment where children can be raised and where the joy of physical union can be expressed in a way that is constructive and beneficial – in short a relationship of marriage between husband and wife. The Anglican wedding service puts it like this:

'With delight and tenderness husband and wife may know each other in love, and through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives.'  
Ahava, Raya and Dod.

And once formed, this union must be honoured and protected by honesty and faithfulness – the very two things, of course that adultery undermines. Because it is not just the act that causes the damage, but the web of lies and deception that almost always accompanies it. This means that the trust between husband and wife is dealt a deadly blow. It's the one act that will destroy the fabric of a marriage more quickly than any other. And that's why it was taken so seriously under Old Testament Law. Recovery is possible, but it is usually slow and painful.

So Jesus says in these verses, *'We have to get to the heart attitude behind the act of adultery, which is one of lust – that's what we need to deal with.'* So let's think about lust for a moment. What is lust?

The dictionary defines lust as, *'a strong physical desire to have sex – and this is the key thing – usually without associated feelings of love or affection'*. So 'Dod' without 'Raya' and 'Ahava'. And for many, men and women, married or single to get lust under control can be a life long battle. The apostle Peter in his letter describes lust as *'bodily passions that war against your soul'* (1Pet. 2:11) and clearly Jesus understands the power of lust because of the advice he gives for dealing with it in verses 29 and 30 (if your eye causes you to sin ...).

Now Jesus doesn't mean this to be interpreted literally. Origen, a third century scholar who was obviously struggling in this area unfortunately did take this literally and castrated himself, but this practise was outlawed in the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. No, Jesus is saying simply that mustn't flirt with sin but deal drastically with it. And it's not that we can't appreciate beauty; we can. Bishop Taylor Smith said he enjoyed looking at pretty women, but he would always turn his enjoyment into prayer. He would thank God or making her beautiful and pray she would be given extra strength for the temptation!

But it's when we find ourselves being led into temptation that we need to take action and Jesus draws attention to three areas where we have to exercise self control.

1. Firstly he mentions the eyes and what we look at. A good example of this kind of control is found in Job 31:1: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look upon a woman lustfully". There's the story of a man who was battling with lust and he said to a friend that he felt that it was sometimes like two tigers fighting each other in his heart. He said one was the tiger of lust and the other was the tiger of holiness. And his friend asked him, 'which one usually wins?' and he replied, 'It depends which one I feed.'

And that is the key question. Which tiger are you going to feed?

Now I know this is probably more for men than for women, as men are more visually stimulated, but in our world which is saturated by sexual imagery we do need to be very disciplined. And the truth is that the lowering of society's standards combined with new technology means we're living in a war zone. I found this on the web page of two Christian guys from the States who write specifically for their generation and this is what they wrote:

On August 9th, 1995, Netscape, the first mainstream web-browser, went public; and the world has never been the same. But the incredible benefits provided by the Internet are accompanied by lethal dangers. It took three years for the Internet to even begin to take off, but there were already 14 million pornographic Web pages. From 1998 to 2003 that number jumped to 260 million; a 2,000% increase in just five years.

Technology presents tremendous new challenges to Christian character, and I strongly believe that it is foolish for my generation to assume that the next ten years will be the same as the last ten. If we think technology has peaked and that things will remain largely the same with just a few added "conveniences," we are gravely mistaken.

Now the problem is I can't throw my computer out. I use the Internet for the news, for weather, for purchasing things, for preparing sermons. It's a part of my life just as it is a part of yours. Yet I know that temptation is just a couple of mouse clicks away. And there will be a number of people here now who battle daily with the temptation of pornography.

And pornography is basically four things:

- deceptive (in that it lead you into a fantasy world with no bearing on reality that promises you everything but can't deliver),
- addictive (you start off and you think you can control it but you can't and it takes hold of you),
- destructive (it harms concentration, it can ruin relationships, and it's also ultimately destructive for those who are being filmed and photographed).
- pervasive (it's everywhere and it's instantly accessible).

And no previous generation has had to deal with this level of temptation in this area. And if you are struggling, I just want to reassure you that the Lord knows, he does not condemn you, but he wants to set you free and you can be set free.

2. Secondly Jesus mentions our hands. We need to watch what we pick up to read, what we type into a search engine or even how we use our hands to touch another person. Non-sexual touch is good and healthy but we need to realise the potential of touch to open doors to temptation.

Thirdly, in Matthew 18:8, Jesus mentions the feet and we need to make sure that our feet don't lead us into sin. There maybe certain areas of town, or places of entertainment that we should avoid going to. And our feet will probably be our strongest ally in simply walking away from a place or a person that we know is going to cause us to stumble. Genesis 39 says, '*but Joseph escaped and ran outside*' when Potiphar's wife was determined to lead him into sexual sin.

And it's so important that we know ourselves and stay away from temptation. Could my current emotional need lead me to pursue a friendship that isn't appropriate? It's great to have friends of the opposite sex but we need to be careful what we share, the depth to which we share and where we share it. Many an affair has happened because an inappropriate emotional bond was formed that then led to physical contact, so we need to be aware of ourselves and act wisely to avoid these situations occurring.

So those are the three areas that Jesus says we need to get under control.

Now, just a brief word to those in your teens and twenties who aren't yet married: if you can get sexual desire under control now; if you will allow Jesus to be Lord of this area of your life as much as any other, it will make a huge difference later on when you do find someone you love and you commit to them in marriage. Because marriage won't mean the end of all your

struggles in that area. At various times you will find that habits formed during this period of your life will make all the difference as you go through marriage and different challenges and situations arise.

Now, to draw things to a close, if we do fall into sexual sin, what do we do?

Firstly, be brutally honest about what has happened. In David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51 he makes no justifications, rather he acknowledges what he has done, calls sin a sin and decides to turn from it. Now this is extremely difficult. On two occasions I've seen men, both mature Christians unable to take this step. Both had taken the decision to cover up what they had done in order not to hurt their wives, and both admitted what they had done only when they were discovered. But there is no other way forward other than by being completely honest. Because even if the sin is never discovered the relationship suffers, because you can't live a double life. And this will be the hardest step to take if you want to walk away from pornography as well. But there is no other way.

Secondly, receive forgiveness. Sexual sin is not the worst sin and it is not an unforgivable sin. And where there has been true repentance there can be true forgiveness. Confidence can be restored, relationships can recover – even if our actions have hurt many people – and we don't need to go through our lives under a shadow of guilt and shame.

Thirdly, we need to find someone we can confide in for support. And you may even find that the person you confide in is struggling with the same issues. They may not have fallen in the same way, but they may well relate to what you are going through. Too many men in particular, suffer in silence due to embarrassment when they could really be offering mutual support. Jack, this morning, was sharing about 'carrying one another's burdens' and this is an area where we really should. We need to find someone who will accept us as we are; who will help us to establish wise boundaries, who will ask us honest questions, and who will then pray with us regularly as we determine to lead a life that honours God.

Let's pray ...