**March 20, 2022 Matthew 5:27-30**

***Accepting Responsibility***

**Scripture:** *Matthew 5:27-30 NRSV*

*(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 lust 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; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (30)And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.*

**Notes:**

1. What exactly is ***Lust***.
   1. ***Coveting*** is a sinful desire to have something that is not yours.
   2. ***Lust*** is linked to ***coveting***, it can only lead to sin.
   3. Jesus is ***humanizing*** women in a culture that is ***dehumanizing***.
   4. Jesus shifts focus from women to the ***covetous*** acts of ***men***.
2. There must be ***responsibility*** for sin.
   1. These words are intended to ***prevent*** a tragic act.
   2. Jesus’s words show the lengths to which someone should go to ***prevent*** inflicting their ***sin*** upon others.
   3. If ***desires*** lead you to ***victimize*** others, do *whatever* you need to keep that from happening.
3. Where can we find ***accountability***?
   1. We must create spaces for people to talk about their ***struggles***.
   2. We are ***responsible*** for our own sins and consequences.
   3. The kingdom of God includes women and men as ***equals***.
   4. Offering ***grace*** does not mean forgoing consequences.
4. ***Living*** in the Kingdom of God.
   1. Citizens of the kingdom of God exhibit the ***fruit*** of the Spirit, and the ***love*** of Christ.
   2. What do sexual ethics look like for those who seek to ***love*** God, and to ***love*** our neighbors as ourselves?
   3. Realize they are about what it means to be a ***disciple*** of ***Jesus***.
5. These verses are not meant to ***shame***.
   1. These verses are about ***living*** as citizen of the kingdom of God.
   2. Allow these words to challenge us to be better ***disciples***.
   3. Take the time to ***examine*** our hearts carefully, so we may ***faithfully*** live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

**Script:**

We live in a society that never wants to take responsibility for their actions. We look at the violence in our country over the past few years, and what we see are people who are not happy with their place in this world, striking out at those who have more than they do, and somehow trying to blame all of their woes on everybody else. They accept very little if any responsibility for their station in life on their own choices.

I myself have been there. I have faced issues in my life that I tried to place the responsibility on others. I was caught doing something once, and I tried to get out of it by saying I was just doing what everybody else was doing, when in fact I knew what I was doing was not right. I have neglected to do the right things resulting in bad experiences and I tried to blame it on coincidence. But if I had done what was right, things would have turned out different. I carry the baggage of my poor choices around with me and I now realize my mistakes and hope that I am able to accept responsibility for them.

What do you find when you look into your past? We all have baggage, things we carry with us from our past, things that influence many things we feel and do. I admit I have baggage, much of it comes from experiences in my childhood, experiences in my teen years, some comes from my college experiences, and then there are the things I experienced in my young adulthood. My baggage is unique to only me. And while I may have similar experiences as others, the way they have shaped me is unique, and I carry this baggage with me, everywhere that I go. It influences how I respond to situations, and how I feel emotionally about these experiences.

We come to texts like todays with all of our baggage. Our baggage often makes these things hard to read. Sometimes we automatically shut down because of how the words have been used to perpetuate damaging patriarchal ideas about modesty. This baggage can cause us to look at this text through a lens of unnecessary, yet still very real debilitating shame. Sometimes we come to a text like today’s, with an overwhelming sense of guilt; guilt over things we’ve done, or the ways we’ve failed. Maybe it’s something from a distant past that is still close enough to cause unease. Sometimes we come to this text with immense anger, because we carry the baggage of watching a marriage fall apart due to adultery. Or maybe because we are a child who was born from an affair, which makes it so hard to read this text without feeling some sort of weight.

The truth is, this is a text that is hard to separate from our baggage, but we should try because there is something here for us to wrestle with, something that is important for us to know. And maybe it is even more important for us to wrestle with *because* of the ways it has been misused, so we can discover the way this passage should truly be; about restoration, love, and respecting the image of God in others. If we take the time to work through this text and what it truly means, maybe we can begin to unpack the unnecessary baggage we’ve been carrying as well. Turn with me to Matthew 5:27-30 and join me in the reading of our gospel passage today.

*Matthew 5:27-30 NRSV (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 lust 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; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (30)And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.*

Jesus speaks to us and mentions Lust, what exactly is Lust? The Greek word translated as “lust” here is *epithymēsai*. It is a verb, not a noun. We typically use nouns and adjectives to describe emotions, but a verb describing the action of lusting emphasizes the fact that it is more than just having certain feelings or emotions. In fact, the root of the word is the same root as the word for “covet,” which is a strong, sinful desire to have something that does not belong to you, and often the willingness to do whatever it takes to get it. Our culture often thinks of lust as the beginning of love, but that is a mistake. If lust is linked to coveting as the Greek root implies, then lust cannot lead to love; it can only lead to sin.

Reexamining what lust means is incredibly important; especially when it is used for deconstructing the baggage we bring to this text. Jesus is trying to humanize women in a culture that often dehumanizes them. A helpful story for us, in wrestling with this text, is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery in John 8. The religious leaders bring a woman to be stoned for committing adultery. We all know it takes at least two people to commit adultery, yet only the woman is held accountable according to this text. Where is the man? Jesus says the famous words, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” and in response, the leaders drop their stones; but they don’t just drop their stones, they also walk away, perhaps in shame.

Another helpful story to contextualize this text is the Old Testament story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. While there are many complex ethical questions worthy of attention in this story, what’s important today is the fact that Judah knowingly has sex with a woman he presumes is a prostitute, then when he finds out about the pregnancy of his daughter-in-law, he wants to have her burned to death for her adultery. He only backs down after discovering the children are his, from his own sin. This Old Testament story illustrates once again how a patriarchal society is eager to lay blame solely at the feet of women for the sin of adultery.

Matthew 5 seeks to emphasize the shared responsibility of men in adultery, in a culture that has a tendency to scapegoat women. These are just a couple of examples, but there are other biblical examples as well. Patriarchal societies often hold women responsible for the sexual ethics of the men around them. In Matthew 5 Jesus shifts that focus from women to the covetous act of male lust toward women. Jesus is calling men to stop treating the women around them as mere objects.

There must be responsibility for sin. Jesus states “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.” These seem like incredibly harsh words, and they are often interpreted as exaggeration, but when we examine them in the context of the definition of lust, they seem far less exaggerative. These are drastic words intended to prevent a tragic act. Coveting another human (lust), leads down a path toward rape or other forms of sexual violence, abuse, manipulation, and control. Jesus’s harsh words here show the lengths to which someone should go in order to prevent inflicting their own sin upon others.

While the exaggeration isn’t meant to be taken literally, the meaning behind it absolutely is: if your desires are leading you to victimize others, do *whatever* you need to do to keep that from happening. This is one area where we struggle as a culture. Instead of helping people find freedom from their sin, we often cause them to push their desires down deeper, repressing them, pretending they don’t exist. Then we are caught off guard when our “heroes” are found caught up in sexual sin even though we haven’t created any sort of “eye-gouging” systems for them.

Where is their accountability? Who can they talk to when their temptation is so great? We must create spaces for people to talk about the places they are struggling, in order to address the root of the problem. These spaces include accountability systems, mental health resources, systems of corporate confession, encouraging true repentance, and systems of restitution. A culture must be created and fostered, a culture that humanizes others and roots out the type of toxicity that leads to lust in the first place.

We have struggled with this in the past, it is evidenced by our tendency to blame victims. Modesty culture that focuses on women is an example. All we need to do is look at, the way women are shamed and blamed for certain sexual ethics; while their male counterparts are applauded and celebrated for the exact same actions. Once again, this is not new, these patterns and systems are evident in biblical narratives too. It’s important to note that the blame for lust lies with the one who is lusting, not the objects or victims of that lust. This verse is speaking to the sinner: “gouge out your eye,” *not* “ask your victim to cover up.” This is an incredibly important distinction. We are responsible for our own sins. We are responsible for the consequences of our actions. If we take following Jesus seriously, we will do what we can to care for others. Jesus affirms repeatedly, with both his words and his actions throughout the Gospels, that women aren’t objects or worth less than men, but are created equally in the image of God. Thus, they should be treated with the same respect and dignity as men. Galatians 3:28 is a helpful reminder for us here. The kingdom of God includes women and men together, as equals.

Lent is a season that is designed to “gouge out eyes.” It is a time of self-reflection and examination to root out sin that often goes overlooked. It’s important for us to take time to examine ourselves to find where there is sin, and remove it. Fasting, prayer, and Bible reading all help with this, but so do times in community, counseling, and discipleship groups. When we find sin, it is important not to ignore it but to confess it. Often we view confession as being between us and Jesus, but we also need to rediscover and reaffirm the value of corporate confession. When sin is allowed to be private, it has space to fester and grow. Find others with whom you can confess your sin.

When others confess their sin to us, it’s important to be gracious but also not to ignore it. We can forgive and be gracious as we seek wholeness and wellness for others. If someone needs counseling, whether spiritual or mental health, that needs to be addressed. At times, there are deep consequences for sin. If lust has caused someone to harm another person or could cause someone to harm another person, that needs to be directly addressed.

It is our responsibility to prevent and keep people safe, as much as is within our power. There are numerous and terrible stories of the way sexual sin has been the downfall of Christians because of secrecy, dishonesty, and a lack of confessional spaces. These sins, once exposed, must not be dealt with secretly, and there *must* be consequences. Victims live with immense consequences. We must not protect those who create victims. Offering grace does not mean forgoing consequences. This passage is consistent with the message about living in the Kingdom of God.

It’s important to read this text in light of Jesus’s larger sermon in Matthew 5–7, which is all about what it means to live as a citizen of the kingdom of God. Citizens of the kingdom of God exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. Citizens of the kingdom of God live lives of love.

Sexual ethics is also part of the kingdom of God. These verses are not meant to be separated from the larger conversation a conversation about living in the kingdom of God. The sexual ethic commanded by Jesus includes keeping covenants, and adultery goes against the covenant of marriage. But at the same time, Jesus’s sexual ethic, and what he commands for citizens of the kingdom of God, is broader than fidelity in marriage. It is centered around the humanity of others, respecting others, taking responsibility for our own sin, viewing others as humans worthy of dignity rather than as objects to be obtained and conquered.

The kingdom of God values people over individual desires. It could be said that the qualities of the Beatitudes could even fit here. What do sexual ethics look like for someone who is meek? What do sexual ethics look like for someone who is pure of heart? What do sexual ethics look like for someone who is merciful? What do sexual ethics look like for someone who seeks to be a peacemaker? The greatest and second-greatest commandments from a few verses earlier should be applied here too. What do sexual ethics look like for those of us who seek to love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves? With this kingdom-of-God view in mind, these verses bloom into something more than just a quick comment more than keeping our sexual thoughts and actions in check. Instead, we realize they are about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

These verses are not meant to shame. They are not meant to give more control to a group of people who already have a lot of control. These verses are about how we live in light of the kingdom of God; as citizens of the kingdom of God, the love and respect we extend to those around us, and the responsibility we must accept for our own sin.

Lent is the perfect season to work through these hard words, to unpack the baggage of our past that is brought up from these words, and allow these words to challenge us to be better disciples. Where has your sin taken you in the past? Has that sin been addressed? Have you taken accountability for your sin, and, have you asked Jesus to forgive you of this sin?

May we take the time to examine our hearts carefully, exposing the sin from our past to the light of day, the light of Christ, so that we may more faithfully live as citizens of the kingdom of God in every aspect of our life.