

From C1 to T7: Avoiding Lust

Matthew 5:27-30

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Several months ago, I was listening to a radio station that attracts listeners by allowing them to play armchair therapists.

It works like this:

A caller phones in with a problem and the disk jockey moderates the responses of other callers. He tries to help by summing up the opinions of those calling in and leaves the caller with some final words of advice. Sometimes the one seeking advice seems more confused than helped.

On this day a woman called to explain that even though she had a wonderful husband and a wonderful life, she had made a mistake and she didn't know whether she should tell her husband about it or not.

One night after drinking too much wine, she began Facebooking with a man and the conversation became flirty. It ended with the man extending an invitation to meet him somewhere for a meal, which she said she couldn't do. To make matters worse, her husband knew this man.

She was guilt ridden and she was seeking advice on whether to tell her husband what had taken place. As you might imagine, the advice this woman got was from A to Z.

Few married women in Old Testament times had much of an opportunity to cheat on their husbands or even become flirty with another man.

Most were dependent on their husbands for their very existence. They were considered their husband's property, but he could divorce her for practically any reason. The relationship was far from equitable.

Perhaps you have never noticed it, but the language in the Ten Commandments regarding the relationship between a husband and a wife woman is explained in masculine terms.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex. 20:17)

Think about it. A wife could not covet "your neighbor's wife," or any of HIS property. She wasn't even allowed to own any property. This commandment was given with the men in mind.

In addition, there was a double standard in those days when it came to being committed to one person in the marriage.

A husband could take on the responsibility for a concubine. In other words, he could have more than one wife. He could also frequent a professional prostitute.

Men could practice an open sexual life without fear of reprisals either legally or morally.

This was not true for their wives or their concubines. They could be killed for engaging in similar activities.

So, in the Old Testament, adultery for a male was defined as having sexual relations with a woman who was the property of another man.

Adultery for a married woman (or for a concubine) was having sexual relations with anyone that was not her husband. When this happened, rarely was it at the woman's initiative. Life didn't give her that much opportunity.

While the definition of adultery was different, the punishment for adultery for men and women was the same. Leviticus 20:10 states that "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death."

Even with such a harsh penalty, adultery still occurred.

By the time Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, definitions of adultery had begun to change. Women were still considered property, polygamy was still legal, and prostitution was still practiced and was legal. However, adultery had shifted to mean any sexual relationship outside of marriage, even for a man.

Men were finally being held to a higher standard, but apparently the change was still slow, as evidenced in the story told by Matthew about the time the woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus and thrown at his feet.

Her accusers told Jesus that the Law of Moses said that she should be stoned for her actions and they asked Jesus what he thought should be done. But oddly, the man involved wasn't brought to Jesus, only the woman. A double standard seems to be at work.

Jesus' response was a response that not only protected the woman physically, it redeemed her spiritually. He showed compassion to her, while challenging her to live without sin, and he exposed the hypocrisy of her accusers.

He bent down and wrote something in the sand before he said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Could he have written the names of some of the women these self-righteous men had committed adultery with. What would cause a stone to drop quicker than that?

When Jesus sat on the mountainside and delivered his famous message, he made the most startling announcement about what constituted adultery.

I'd like to use this model of a spine to help you remember what Jesus said. The vertebrae in our necks are called cervical and are numbered C1-C7. The vertebrae in our pelvic area are called sacral and are numbered S1-S5.

To put it bluntly, we usually think of adultery happening around the sacral area of the body, but Jesus has taught us that adultery can happen above C1 and then it gets lodged somewhere around T7 or T8 in the thoracic region, which is where the heart is located.

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (5:28 NIV).

Listen to the verse in the New Century Version: *"But I tell you that if anyone looks at a woman and wants to sin sexually with her, in his mind he has already done that sin with the woman"* (5:28 New Century Version).

Again, do you notice the masculine language in this text? Jesus' words were directed toward a male audience.

Perhaps this is because he's speaking primarily to his disciples with others were listening in. Or perhaps it reflects that this sin was still primarily a man's sin in Jesus' day. They had more opportunity to take advantage of women and did.

While sexual assault is still mostly a man's crime, lust works both ways. Still, the use of pornography is more pronounced among men than women. Men objectify women more than women objectify men, making them objects to be used and discarded instead of cherished and loved. Rape and sexual assault are predominately male crimes.

Even so, the gap has closed a lot in the area of lust. Jesus has reminded us that inappropriate relationships begin above C1 and that happens in the minds of men and women. Perhaps the gap has always been narrow because who is to say what happens is a person's mind? Only God knows, but God does know.

It is in our minds and in our thoughts where sin takes root and germinates. When we allow these thoughts to become lodged in our hearts, relationships are easily damaged or destroyed.

This is the reason these words of Jesus are so important in protecting us from temptation and from starting down a slippery slope where passion overrides common sense and causes lifelong pain.

"29 If your right eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

So the woman who called in to the radio station was focusing on how she was going to explain this issue to her husband. Should she even tell him?

My guess is that her husband knew about her Facebooking episode before he got home that day because that's what happens when you phone in to a radio station for marriage advice. Someone's going to recognize you.

The more important issue for her should have been in restoring trust in her relationship with her husband and deciding how she was going to protect herself from repeating her mistake in the future. She should have been working on a plan to demonstrate to him that she could be trusted in the future with her vows.

Without that, she was on a slippery slope toward being in another man's arms in the future. Unless she cut out the cancer cells that are growing, one day they will metastasize.

None of the radio callers suggested it, but perhaps she needs to cut out the wine, which in excess apparently causes her to say or do things that she would otherwise not do.

Perhaps she needs to cut out Facebook, which is a benign source of connecting with friends for some, but for many people has been a gateway for hooking up with people in sinful ways.

When radical surgery is recommended people are shocked. We are shocked when we are asked to do surgery on our own lives. We discover how much we love our vices. The problem is that we are often blind to how we end up in the messes we get in.

In addition to surgery, this woman needs to add some spice to her marriage. We grow out of love with people just like we grow in love with them. Physical intimacy is usually the end result of emotional intimacy, which may be missing in her life.

Just as the mind is the place where adultery starts, it is also the place where intimacy starts and unconditional love blooms. Lasting love also moves from C1 to T7.

Finally, remember there is a difference between recognizing physical beauty or handsomeness of another person and desiring to sin with that person sexually.

The latter requires radical surgery. The former acknowledges that you are still a normal human being.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus prayed, "Lead us not into temptation." In order not to be led into temptation, you need to have some alarm bells go off in your mind and acknowledge when you are in a situation where temptation is real for you.

The best way for this sin from going to the cervical to the sacral or from C1 to T7 is to recognize the danger the temptation represents to us and stay away.

A wealthy couple desired to employ a chauffeur. The lady of the house advertised, the applicants were screened, and four suitable candidates were brought before her for the final selection. She called the prospective chauffeurs to her balcony and pointed out a brick wall alongside the driveway.

Then she asked the men, "How close do you think you could come to that wall without scratching my car?" The first man felt he could drive within a foot of the wall without damaging the car. The second felt sure he could come within six inches. The third believed he could get within three inches. The fourth candidate said, "I do not know how close I could come to the wall without damaging your car. Instead, I would try to stay as far away from that wall as I could." He got the job.

Staying away from "the wall" is a good plan for anyone seeking to establish boundaries which can keep one sexually pure. Recognize lust for what it is—a sinful desire of the flesh that leads one further and further away from the holiness of God.

This morning, if you are struggling, God will help deliver you, restore you, and forgive you.

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