

The King's Sermon

Getting to the Heart of Lust (Matthew 5:27-30)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 4, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we'll be addressing a mature topic, so I want to give parents with children in the congregation a heads up. I hope you're already talking about sex and the dangers of lust with your kids, even at a young age. I hope you're the first to talk to them about it. If you're not the first, then who knows who will be and what they'll say. But if you haven't initiated these talks, and you want to be the first voice on this subject for your kids, then while I pray, feel free to take them over to our children's program. I'll leave it to your judgment. **[PRAY]**

- ❖ As we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, we came across the most important verse in the entire sermon. In chapter 5:20, Jesus tells his disciples that if their righteousness doesn't exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, they'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.
 - ▶ And by that he means if you settle for a righteousness that's nothing more than surface-level behaviors and ignore a heart-level obedience to the Word of God, then you're deluding yourself. If all you're concerned about is not breaking God's law and you've never examined your own heart and whether it reflects the heart of God's law, then Jesus says you're fooling yourself if think you're in God's kingdom.
 - The Christian is the one who has been born anew with a new heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness of the heart. Does that describe you?

- ❖ **In last week's passage we were confronted with the question of whether our hearts are marked and motivated by anger.** The scribes and Pharisees taught that you're righteous and in the clear as long as you don't violate the sixth commandment and commit murder.
 - ▶ But Jesus said to harbor anger or bitterness towards someone is just as sinful as killing them. Because all the elements of a genuine act of murder would be found in your heart. Your heart would be no different than an actual murderer's heart.

- ❖ Well as convicting as that passage was, today's just presses harder. In Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus raises the issue of adultery, which is the seventh commandment. The scribes and Pharisees say you're keeping the commandment as long as you don't sleep with someone you're not married to. You can think about it. Fantasize over it. Get right up to the edge of temptation. **But as long as you don't cross that line and actually cheat on your spouse – you're good.**
 - ▶ Now to that kind of self-justifying moralism, Jesus responds, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent as already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*
 - Let's be honest. **Like the scribes and Pharisees, we are just as prone to self-justify.** We are just as quick to commend ourselves for not going all the way. As long as we didn't involve others. As long as we caused no one any harm. Then we go on secretly indulging our lusts and gratifying our flesh.

- ❖ This passage is uncomfortable. Let it convict you as God so wills. As we study it, I'm going to ask three questions: **What is lust? Why should we fight our lust? And how do we fight it?** With those questions in mind, I've divided this message into three sections: 1) The horrible nature of lust. 2) The severe consequences of lust. 3) The vigilant fight against lust.

The Horrible Nature of Lust

- ❖ So let's begin by considering the horrible nature of lust. That'll help us answer what it is. **If you start in v27, Jesus makes it clear what lust is *not*. Lust is not just adultery in the flesh.** Jesus says that anyone who looks at someone with lustful intent has already committed adultery with that person in his or her heart. If you've ever looked at someone lustfully – even if you've never talked to them, never touched them, never met them because you're watching them on a screen – Jesus calls you an adulterer!
 - ▶ **His point is that lust is *not* just an action. Lust is something in the heart that leads to such action.** It's called "adultery in the heart" because, when you entertain lust, the elements of a genuine act of adultery are present in the heart even if it never turns into action.

- ❖ This is important to stress because, when we talk about lust, we're usually just focused on sinful actions, whether it be committing adultery, having premarital sex, watching pornography, reading sexually-charged romance novels, etc. **So in our fight for purity we often focus on curbing these behaviors or avoiding external stimuli.**
 - ▶ But even if you manage to avoid these things – even if you gouge out both eyes and cut off both hands and remove all opportunity to see what you shouldn't see or do what you shouldn't do – you can still possess a heart full of lust. **Any sexual practice that's immoral *in action* is immoral simply *in thought or desire*.**

- ❖ **So don't find any comfort in the fact that you haven't crossed any lines.** That you haven't acted upon your lustful desires. Yes, to this point you may have resisted temptation. But you should still be asking yourself, "Why am I tempted?"
 - ▶ I'm so glad that you didn't do it. But don't you want to know why you wanted to do it? Don't stop at the surface. Examine your heart, your motives. Try to identify and root out the intent – the lustful *intent*. **Having lustful desires of the heart, even if they're never acted upon, should still gravely concern you.** That's Jesus's point.

- ❖ But please don't get the wrong impression here. **Lust certainly involves our desires, but lust is *not* merely the presence of sexual desire or sexual attraction.** It would be a misinterpretation of Jesus's teaching to suggest that sexual desire is inherently sinful. **Sex is not this dirty thing.**
 - ▶ It's regrettable when the Church treats it as taboo. If you're a husband you ought to have sexual desire for your wife. And if you're a single man, it's understandable if you have sexual desires for your girlfriend or the girl you're interested in.
 - **Sexual desire itself is not necessarily sinful. It's what you do with those desires.** Do you surrender them to God and to his design for those desires to be satisfied within the covenant of marriage? Or do you begin to illicitly indulge those desires?

- ❖ **Bottom line, lust is going beyond God’s good boundaries for sexual expression to try to enjoy the gift elsewhere, outside the boundaries.** Josh Harris, in his book *Not Even a Hint* writes, *"To lust is to want what you don't have and weren't meant to have. Lust goes beyond attraction, an appreciation of beauty, or even a healthy desire for sex – it makes these desires more important than God. Lust wants to go outside God's guidelines to find satisfaction."*¹
- ❖ Think about that. This makes lust that much worse, that much more horrible. Lust is not just a sin committed against your own body or against another person. Lust is ultimately a sin committed against God. On one hand, it perverts God’s good design in creation and transgresses clear boundaries that he set.
 - ▶ **And at the same time, lust is a cheap attempt to satisfy your heart apart from God and his good design.** To lust after another is communicating that that lewd image you see on the screen or that fleeting sexual pleasure is somehow of greater worth and satisfaction than God himself – than walking with him in holy faith and obedience. Do you see how lust insults God?
- ❖ *So what is the true, horrible, nature of lust? Lust is a gross offense we commit against an all-wise, all-satisfying, holy God when we crave sexually that which he has forbidden in his Word.* Lust says, “I don't trust that God is wise in his design for sex to only be enjoyed within marriage, and I don't trust that God is more satisfying than the temporary titillations of the flesh.” Lust says you don't trust God.

The Severe Consequences of Lust

- ❖ If that’s true, then the consequences of lust are far greater than we might think. **If lust is ultimately a sin against God, then we’re going to face divine consequences, eternal consequences.** This leads to our second point: The severe consequences of lust. This will help us answer the question of why we should fight lust. What are the consequences if we give up the fight and make peace with our lust?
- ❖ But before we consider divine consequences, let’s acknowledge the ways in which lust is a sin against our own bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18). Of course there’s always the danger of a sexually-transmitted disease or an unplanned pregnancy, but lust does more than that. **Study after study is showing how the rampant accessibility and usage of pornography actually stunts your emotional development and even causes the rewiring of your brain.**² Pornography users have a harder time relating to and experiencing intimacy with real people.
 - ▶ That leads us to the social consequences of lust. Lust causes us to sin against others in a variety of ways. **We end up dehumanizing people, objectifying them, treating them as object for our selfish pleasure.** And when we commit sexual sins with others, we arguably commit theft. We steal their innocence, and thereby break not only the seventh but the eighth commandment. Our lust can deeply wound others.

¹ Joshua Harris, *Not Even a Hint: Guarding Your Heart Against Lust*, pg. 18.

² See online: <http://archives.relevantmagazine.com/life/whole-life/features/29332-this-is-your-brain-on-porn>

- ❖ I believe Jesus would affirm the various personal and social consequences of our lust, but in our text he raises the stakes and zeroes in on divine, eternal consequences. Listen to vv29-30 again, *"²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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."*
- ❖ In 2003, while hiking solo in the badlands of Utah, **Aron Ralston** found himself deep inside a canyon, with his right arm pinned down by a huge boulder. With only meager amounts of food and water, somehow he survived a whole week. But knowing help was not coming and that he was going to die of thirst or starvation, he decided to amputate his arm with a blunt utility tool. After sawing off his right forearm, he rappelled down a cliff, walked a couple of miles, found other hikers who called for help, and still managed to climb aboard the rescue copter on his own strength.
 - ▶ I tell this story for this reason: **Consider the extreme measures that Aron Ralston took in order to save his life.** To do something like cutting off your own arm takes radical courage and blood-earnest seriousness! **And that's the exact same attitude and intensity that Jesus commands in our fight against lust.**
- ❖ *Why should we be so serious in fighting our lust? Because in our fight, the stakes are far greater than what Aron Ralston faced.* The worse that could happen to him was death. But if we don't fight lust we face something far worse, namely hell.
 - ▶ That's what Jesus said. He said it's better to lose a body part than for your whole body to go into hell. **He's saying it's better to fight with an intensity that leads you to cut off an arm if that's what it takes to stay pure – than to go to hell in one piece.** It's better to be a cripple in this life than to lose everything in the next.
- ❖ These words are sobering. **Jesus is saying if you do not resolve to fight lust with extreme prejudice, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.** If you make peace with your lust, if you're content with filling your mind with pornography, if you have no problem indulging your sexual fantasies, if you know what Scripture says about having sex outside marriage but you could care less, then very likely you're not a Christian.
 - ▶ **It's not because those who are able to resist their lusts are more worthy of salvation.** It's not as if they've earned their way into heaven. No, that goes against the very grain of the gospel of grace.
- ❖ No one is saved by their purity – by the purity of your own life. **No, the gospel says that you're saved by someone else's purity.** Christianity says you're saved by the pure life and sin-atonement death of Jesus the Son of God.
 - ▶ **You're saved by grace alone, but it's not a grace that leaves you alone.** That leaves you as-is. It's a saving grace that transforms you. You're reborn. You're a new creation, the old is gone, the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:17)

- ❖ **Friends, this new nature you receive in Christ is hostile to sin. If you're a Christian, you have a new nature that cannot abide peacefully with sin.** You're constantly at war. As Paul says in Galatians 5:17, *"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other."* **If you've been reborn by the Spirit, if he resides in you, then you are in constant battle against the sinful desires of the flesh.**
 - ▶ So why should you fight lust? **Because to *not* fight – to put down your arms and wave the white flag – is to prove that you have yet to be born again of the Spirit** – that you don't yet have a new nature, that you're still dead in your sins, and still condemned to face the horrors of hell. Is there any greater motivation to fight?
- ❖ Ask yourself: ***Do I even want to fight my lust? Do I even care about purity? Or have I made peace with lust?*** If you no longer feel the shame or guilt, then be very concerned for your hardening heart. Do not leave this place without asking someone to pray for you – that your heart would not be further hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The Vigilant Fight Against Lust

- ❖ But I want to be optimistic and assume that all of you desire to be pure in body, mind, and heart. That you want to be holy as God is holy. That you want to never give up and to keep fighting your lust. So what do we do? How do we fight? This leads to our third and final point: The vigilant fight against lust. Look back at vv29-30. Jesus tells us what to do. He says, *"If your right eye [or right hand] causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away."*
- ❖ In ancient times, the right eye or right hand was considered more precious than your left eye or left hand. **So Jesus' point is: If the most precious thing you have is causing you to sin, then get rid of it. Cut it off if you have to. It's not worth keeping if you leads you to lust.**
 - ▶ Now in the early church, some took Jesus quite literally and went so far as to castrate themselves. The third-century theologian Origen would be the best known example. Sadly these early Christians missed our Lord's point. To mutilate your flesh as a means to fight your lustful desires is to fail in exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.
- ❖ **Jesus' approach to fighting lust does not promote mutilation but mortification.** Not mutilation of the flesh but mortification of our indwelling sin. And again that means if the most precious thing you have is a very source of temptation to lust, then do whatever it takes to get rid of it, cut it off, mortify it, put it to death. It's not worth it.
 - ▶ **Some people know that, for them, unfettered, unguarded, unaccountable access to the Internet is a huge source of temptation for lust.** They know what it does to them. They know they can't resist. And yet they do nothing about it! They don't take any measures to cut off the source of temptation.
 - Is unfettered Internet access that precious to you? Is it that inconvenient to install accountability software? To switch back to a dumb phone? Do you realize what's at stake? Jesus says to do whatever it takes.

- ❖ There's no denying that the pursuit of purity is going to require some sacrifices. **You'll probably have to place self-restrictions on your freedom to partake in any and every form of entertainment and pop culture.** Yes, you might be the one guy in the office who doesn't watch *that* show. You might be the one girl who hasn't seen *that* movie.
 - ▶ Most of you know I'm a big *Lord of the Rings* fan. I've read the book and seen all the movies multiple times. So a while back I had friends tell me if you love LotR then you're going to love *Game of Thrones*. It's got kings and castles, knights and dragons, and epic battle scenes. But when I was told there would be scenes of graphic nudity, that did it for me. I decided I was going to be that guy who has never seen an episode of *Game of Thrones*. But I'm okay with that. **I'm at peace with being out of the loop because I refuse to make peace with my lust.** You can call it legalism. I call it gouging out my right eye. I call it fighting my lust.

- ❖ Now I realize some of you feel like you've already gone to extreme measures. You've cut off a lot of accessibility to pornography or to sexually-charged forms of entertainment. You've ended that unhealthy relationship that crossed too many lines. You've sought accountability with other believers.
 - ▶ **And you feel like you've made some progress, but then it just took one unguarded moment to fall right back into your sinful habits.** So you find yourself stuck in this cycle – going around and around and really not getting any further in the fight. *What's going on? Why the lack of real progress?*

- ❖ **Perhaps it's because you're not fighting your lust with the right weapon.** If you walk into a knife fight with a spoon, you're asking for it. And even if you have a knife, it won't help in a gun fight. What I mean is this: **I think most people try to fight lust with self-imposed rules and self-discipline.** I won't watch this show. I won't surf the web at this hour. I won't text that person. We won't cross this line. Those are the rules. And now it's all about self-discipline and perhaps some accountability.

- ❖ Now don't get me wrong. I do find that commendable. But self-imposed rules and self-discipline *alone* are lousy weapons against lust. **That's because lust does not fight you with rules. It doesn't try to impress upon you a sense of obligation to obey.** No one ever surfs the web and hears the voice of temptation saying, "*It is your duty to look at porn.*"
 - ▶ **Lust doesn't try to twist your arm and compel you to obey. No, it entices you.** It dangles promises of pleasure – if you only feed it. **Lust says to you that you'll miss out on some great pleasure if you take the narrow road of purity.** It promises you instant gratification and easy-access satisfaction.

- ❖ So here's the problem: If we try to fight lust with mere rules, mere discipline, and a mere sense of duty, we're going to find ourselves outgunned and outmatched. **Lust is fighting us with fire but we're fighting back with squirt guns.** We need to fight fire with fire.

- ▶ We need to fight promises with greater promises, pleasures with greater pleasures. **We need to pit the promised pleasures of lust up against the promised pleasure of walking with Jesus in purity.** Real progress in purity happens when we start to see how the pleasures of lust are inferior and fleeting compared to the superior, lasting pleasures found in a relationship with Christ.

- ❖ I've told the story before about a particular king who had a great quarrel with his younger brother. The brother gathered an army and eventually overthrew the king. But instead of killing him, he threw the king in a dungeon.
 - ▶ But this isn't your normal dungeon. This dungeon has a slightly-smaller-than-normal door with no lock and open windows all around. The king can walk out of that dungeon and into freedom if he wanted.

- ❖ But he couldn't leave because this king was extremely fat. In a sense, he's enslaved to the love of food. Knowing this weakness, every day his young brother tells a servant to deliver to the king a banquet of his favorite foods.
 - ▶ If the king would just stop eating, he'll lose enough weight to fit through that door. But sadly his pleasure for food is greater than his pleasure for anything else beyond those walls. **Freedom is available, but he's enslaved by his own inordinate desires.**
 - No amount of guilt-tripping is going to help. You won't be able to reason with him. He knows the right thing to do. But he can't do it because he's enslaved – not by bars but by his own inordinate desires.

- ❖ **But imagine there's a lover waiting for him on the outside.** Imagine he was lied to and told that his wife – the beautiful queen whom he loves dearly – was killed during the coup. So the king was basically drowning his sorrows away with food.
 - ▶ But imagine someone gets the message to him that your queen lives. She's not dead. She's waiting for you on the outside. **If you hold out the promise of a sweet reunion with the love of his life, hold out the pleasures of intimacy with her, then this king will gladly forgo his favorite foods.** He'll starve himself and drop those pounds until he can squeeze out that door and make a beeline for his wife.

- ❖ Friends, the gospel says that, as sinners, we're enslaved. **We are slaves to sin – not bound by chains or bars – but by our own inordinate desires.** Freedom is available in Christ. It's right there. There's no one causing you to feed your lust. You indulge your lust because it feels good, and you've fooled yourself into thinking that that pleasure is as good as it gets.
 - ▶ When you're enslaved like this. No amount of guilt-tripping is going to help. You can't be reasoned with. You know the right thing to do. And for a spell you might be able to do it by sheer will-power. **But in the end, you fall back into your sinful habits because, to the appetite of your heart, the taste of lust is so sweet.**

- ❖ **True freedom is found by fighting fire with fire – pitting pleasure against pleasure.** By discovering in the gospel, the superior promises of holy pleasure to be experienced in walking closely with Christ.
 - ▶ **And as your spiritual appetite is raised and refined, you'll notice that lust starts to taste more and more bitter and being close to Jesus tastes sweeter and sweeter.** That's what you need to be praying for: "Lord, raise and refine the appetite of my heart." That's how you're going to walk away from lust and enjoy the freedom you have in Christ.

- ❖ But of course that presumes you've already repented of your lust and turned to Jesus, trusting in the purity of his life and not your own. **Your chains are gone; you've been set free; lust no longer has no decisive hold on you – but only if you're in Christ.** Only if you're in a saving relationship with him. If you've never told God that you're a sinner in need of his mercy and his Spirit to come and make you new, then I invite you to cry out to him today. Jesus stands ready to save you.