

“You Shall Not Commit Adultery” (Matt. 5:27–30)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In his teaching on the Sixth Commandment against murder, our Lord exposed the root of murder in our hearts that takes the form of anger. Though we often rationalize and excuse our anger, Jesus insists that the root of anger is connected to the fruit of murder. In the same way, Jesus now exposes the root of adultery, which takes the form of lust that stirs in our hearts. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemns even the slightest inclinations—the first stirring, the slightest tug—of sexual desire toward someone who is not our spouse. Here, the blinding light of the law grows even brighter. Nevertheless, our Lord also hints at the comfort of the gospel, since *Jesus came to purify our desires*.

Forbidding Adultery (Matt. 5:27–28)

As he did with the Sixth Commandment against murder, Jesus begins this next section by citing the Seventh Commandment against adultery (v. 27). Furthermore, just as Jesus criticized the traditional teaching of the rabbis that restricted the implications of the Sixth Commandment to outward murder, Jesus now criticizes the teaching that restricts the implications of the Seventh Commandment to physical adultery. Much more, the Seventh Commandment requires “pure and holy affections of the heart.”¹ The failure to grasp the full significance of the Seventh Commandment is perhaps less understandable than with the Sixth Commandment, since the Tenth Commandment makes it clear that even coveting your neighbor’s wife is sin (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21).² What Jesus intends to demonstrate, however, is that even the Seventh Commandment by itself deals with these questions of the heart.³

Whose Lust?

So, Jesus teaches that desiring the wife of a neighbor is not merely coveting, but rather adultery of the heart: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (v. 28). Bible scholars have extensively debated two issues about what exactly Jesus is describing here. First, many (most?) scholars take Jesus as describing the lust in the man’s heart in this scenario;⁴ however, a few interpret the phrase πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν (*pros to epithumēsai autēn*) as suggesting that the man’s sin is in his efforts trying to get the woman to lust after

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:290.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 302.

³ “This might be deduced from the tenth commandment, but Jesus finds it also in this one.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 118.)

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 226; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 302; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 236; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 204.

him: “so as to get her to lust.”⁵ The reason for this difference has to do with the word πρὸς (*pros*), a preposition that generally means “near” or “facing,” such as “facing the sea” (Mark 4:1).⁶ This word is also used to describe “relationships that are *friendly* (e.g., Jn 6:37 [2x]; 2Co 3:16; Gal 6:10; Eph 3:14; 1Th 5:14) or *hostile* (“against”; e.g., Ac 6:1; 1Co 6:1; Eph 6:12 [5x]; Col 2:23).”⁷

Here in Matthew 5:28, the word πρὸς is connected to a verb (“to desire/lust”) and a pronoun (“her”). Those who take this as a reference to the man’s lust understand the pronoun to be the direct object: he is lusting toward *her*. The others take this as the subject: he is trying to cause *her* to lust. In my judgment, the better case is with the simpler explanation: the sin Jesus describes here is in the man’s lust toward the woman. Donald Hagner argues that the sense of getting the woman to lust after the man “goes against both Matthean usage and the normal sense of a man lusting after the woman.”⁸ R. T. France gives a further, technical explanation.⁹

Result or Purpose?

The second debate about the sin that Jesus describes has to do with the phrase as a whole: does this describe the man’s purpose/intention *for* looking, or does this describe the result that arises *from* looking? Here, many (most?) commentators take the former sense of purpose, which is captured in the ESV’s translation of the verse: “everyone who looks at a woman *with lustful intent*...”.¹⁰ Two important technical resources suggest that the latter sense of result, rather than purpose. The first resource is Murray J. Harris’s widely renowned *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* classifies this as a result, rather than purpose, citing a similar use of πρὸς to describe result in John 11:4: “This illness does not *lead to* [πρὸς] death.”¹¹ The second resource is the standard New Testament Greek lexicon, by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (BDAG), which classifies this phrase as “of the result that follows a set of circumstances (so that),” and translates the phrase as “one who looks at a woman with sinful desire.”¹²

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 184. Carson is following Klaus Haacker, “Der Rechtsatz Jesu zum Thema Ehebruch,” *BZ* 21 (1977): 113–16.

⁶ Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 189.

⁷ Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament*, 189.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 120.

⁹ “The suggestion that the accusative αὐτήν [*autēn*] should be understood as marking the subject rather than the object of the verb, producing the translation ‘so that she lusts’...depends on the fact that ἐπιθυμέω [*epithumeō*] normally takes a genitive of object; but there are numerous instances of its use with the accusative, particular in the LXX, and the alternative translation has an oddly oblique effect which fits uncomfortably in this context.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 192 n. 47.)

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 226; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 108–09; Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 120; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 236.

¹¹ cf., Murray cites Matt. 6:1 as purpose: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people *in order to be seen by them* [πρὸς + infinitive verb + preposition].” (Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament*, 189.)

¹² Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 874.

Ultimately, I think that the context drives us to recognize that Jesus is speaking of *result*, rather than only *purpose*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is revealing the full scope of the requirements of the law. So, it is not only a violation of the Seventh Commandment to commit physical adultery (although that is included), but even sexually desiring (i.e., lusting after) a man’s wife is already the sin of adultery—adultery of the heart. So far, both sides in this second debate are agreed. The question, then, is whether such lust is sin *only* if it is purposefully, intentionally, and volitionally chosen. In such a case, a man with lust burning in his heart would *choose* to look at a woman to inflame his lust even further, whether by “checking out” a woman in the same room, or by seeking pornography. Again, both sides in this second debate would agree that Jesus’ words condemn such actions as adultery of the heart.

The debate, then, has to do with whether a man, minding his own business, happens to look up and sees a woman, so that unbidden, unchosen, undesired lust begins to rise in his heart. If he has not intentionally consciously, intentionally chosen to lust after the woman, are those first stirrings of desire in his heart sin? Or, does this only become adultery of the heart when his gaze lingers longer than it should, or when he returns for another look?

The Doctrine of Concupiscence

This question deals with that is called the doctrine of concupiscence. *Concupiscence* is the Latin word for *desire* or *lust* (*concupiscentia*), and, in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, this is the word that translates this key phrase in our passage: “ad concupiscendum eam” (“unto desiring/lusting after her”). This is also the Latin word that translates the word for “covet” in the Tenth Commandment (“Non concupisces...” [“You shall not covet...”]; Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). Theologians have extensively debated the nature of concupiscence. Thus, *concupiscence* describes sinful desires, or desires that incline toward sin. The question that theologians have debated for centuries has to do with whether concupiscence *in itself* is sin, or whether concupiscence does not *become* sin until the will consents to the sin that concupiscence desires.

In fact, this was one of the most important questions in the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church was very clear that concupiscence was not sin until the will consented to the desires within our souls. At the Council of Trent in 1546, the Roman Catholic Church formalized the view that affirms concupiscence as “of sin” and “inclining to sin,” but that rejects any sense that concupiscence is “truly and properly sin”:

But this holy synod confesses and is sensible, that in the baptized there remains concupiscence, or an incentive (to sin); which, whereas it is left for our exercise, **cannot injure those who consent not**, but resist manfully by the grace of Jesus Christ; yea, he who shall have striven lawfully shall be crowned. **This concupiscence, which the apostle sometimes calls sin, the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood it to be called sin, as being truly and properly sin in those born again, but because it is of sin, and inclines to sin.**¹³

¹³ Council of Trent, Session 5, First Decree Concerning Original Sin, #5. <<http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch5.htm>>. Accessed March 29, 2022.

It is astonishing to see the Roman Catholic Church acknowledge that Paul (“the Apostle”) *calls* concupiscence sin, but then immediately state that the Roman Catholic Church has never understood concupiscence to *be* sin. One of the passages this council is considering is Romans 7:7: “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet [Vulg: ‘concupiscentiam’] if that law had not said, ‘You shall not covet [Vulg: ‘Non concupisces’].” Paul says that he would not have known the nature of sin unless the law had declared that concupiscence is sin. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church denies the very point that Paul is making!

Protestants recognized, however, that if we deny what the Bible says about sin, we cannot understand what the Bible teaches about the gospel. So, echoing the words that the Roman Catholic Church had used to deny that concupiscence is “truly and properly sin,” the Westminster Confession of Faith declares this about our concupiscence: “This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin” (WCF 6.5). More recently, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) published a study report on the question of same-sex sexual attraction that explored the implications of this doctrine. In the section on concupiscence, the report stated this:

We affirm that impure thoughts and desires arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will are still sin. We reject the Roman Catholic understanding of concupiscence whereby disordered desires that afflict us due to the Fall do not become sin without a consenting act of the will. These desires within us are not mere weaknesses or inclinations to sin but are themselves idolatrous and sinful.

Nevertheless, we recognize that many persons who experience same-sex attraction describe their desires as arising in them unbidden and unwanted. We also recognize that the presence of same-sex attraction is often owing to many factors, which always include our own sin nature and may include being sinned against in the past. As with any sinful pattern or propensity—which may include disordered desires, extramarital lust, pornographic addictions, and all abusive sexual behavior—the actions of others, though never finally determinative, can be significant and influential. This should move us to compassion and understanding. Moreover, it is true for all of us that sin can be both unchosen bondage and idolatrous rebellion at the same time. We all experience sin, at times, as a kind of voluntary servitude (Rom. 7:13–20).¹⁴

We must not, then, limit Jesus’ words to intentional lust alone. It is spiritually dangerous to suggest that Jesus only condemned conscious acts of the will. While it is true that we should not make a *further* decision to stoke our imaginations toward lust, Jesus is saying that the first stirrings of concupiscent desire are *already* truly and properly sin. The one who sees another person (other than

¹⁴ “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019–2020),” 8–9. <<https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf>>. Accessed March 29, 2022.

his/her spouse) and feels unbidden, unchosen sexual desire arising in his heart, has *already* committed adultery in his heart.

The classic biblical example of this is in the story of David and Bathsheba. David was not intending on seeing Bathsheba bathing from the roof of his palace, but he saw that she was “very beautiful [lit, ‘good’]” (2 Sam. 11:2). In the style of biblical narrative, the narrator leaves David’s concupiscent lust unstated in order to, ironically, give special emphasis to it in a technique called “gapping.”¹⁵ In other words, the narrator makes David’s sinful lust the focal point precisely by ignoring (“gapping”) that elephant in the room. Ultimately, David goes on to steal Uriah’s wife (Eighth Commandment), in order to commit physical adultery (Seventh Commandment), which he tries intentionally to cover up (Ninth Commandment), but that ultimate leads him to commit intentional murder when his plans are foiled (Sixth Commandment). Nevertheless, all of those sins began with a look that led adulterous covetousness to arise *unintentionally* in his heart (Seventh and Tenth Commandments). Jesus, therefore, is condemning any look that *results* in lust, and not just looks where the *purpose* is lust.

Fighting Sexual Sin (Matt. 5:29–30)

In view of the severity of lust, Jesus urges extreme measures: “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. 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” (v. 29–30). This is a challenging message because Jesus’ meaning is so clear: we must do whatever it takes to avoid the sin of adultery. It would be better even to cut off members of the body rather than be thrown, body and soul, into hell forever.

Still, this passage always raises the major question: is Jesus really calling us to mutilate our bodies for the sake of the kingdom? There are two unsatisfying ways of answering this question. The first is to insist against a non-literal interpretation: “The point of these admonitions is clear without pressing for a literal understanding of the words.”¹⁶ This approach seems to make some sense in that it relieves the difficulty of such a horrifying duty. This approach does not work well, though, when we remember the overall point that Jesus is making throughout this section: the requirements of the law reach infinitely further than any of us would imagine. If it is true that anger renders us liable to the death penalty (Matt. 5:22), is it so outlandish to believe that we should rather cut out our eyes and cut off our hands rather than go to hell? We cannot smooth out this passage simply by wishing away its offensiveness. We need a better explanation for what Jesus is saying than to simply wave the difficulties away as “non-literal.”

¹⁵ “Bathsheba’s beauty is presented in the narrator’s impersonal style—‘And the woman was very good-looking’—even though it is the protagonist’s emotions that matter at this point, since they cause and explain his actions. Instead of finding the inner life specified in the interests of plot coherence, the reader can only infer their general drift from the plot (in light of ‘David sent and inquired about the woman and...sent messengers and took her’).” (Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, ISBL 453 [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996], 197.)

¹⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 121.

Still, it is also an unsatisfying interpretation of this passage to do precisely what Jesus suggests here. We never read in the Bible anywhere else of people gouging out their eyes to prevent themselves from lusting. In the only passage that comes even close to suggesting such an action, Paul commends the people of Galatia for their *willingness* to gouge out their eyes for his sake—but with an acknowledgement that it would not have helped anything (“if possible”), and that they did *not* ultimately do such a thing (“you would have”; Gal. 4:15). Clearly, the application of what Jesus says is not for us to gouge out our eyes or to cut off our hands. What, then, should we do with this passage?

To begin, while it is not satisfying to label this as “non-literal,” it is right to recognize that the *literal* (i.e., plain, natural) sense of this passage is a form of speech called hyperbole. As hyperbole, the meaning is “that whatever hinders us from yielding that obedience to God which he requires in his law, ought to be cut off.”¹⁷ It is here, however, that Jesus is pressing us to think through *what* must be cut off in order to eliminate hindrances from obedience to God. If it were possible to eliminate the sin of lust by cutting out our right eye, or by cutting off our right hand, wouldn’t that be a sensible thing to do?: “No man hesitates to have a virulently diseased part of his body amputated by the surgeon in order that he may not lose his life.”¹⁸

The question, of course, is not whether we *would* amputate gangrenous sin before it spread to kill the whole body. The question is whether the amputation of a member of the body would effectively accomplish that goal. Of course, as Jesus intends us to see, such an action *would not* solve our problems, since it is “quite possible to be blind or crippled and still lust.”¹⁹ Jesus may even be hinting at this conclusion in the way he advocates for cutting out/off only the *right* eye and the *right* hand, since the left eye and the left hand would still be capable of leading us into sin all by themselves.²⁰ As Jesus made clear in v. 28, the problem of lust is not primarily a problem of the *body*, but of the *heart*.

I think John Nolland is on the right track, then, when he writes this:

But perhaps the question of literalism is not quite the right one. The challenge is to go to whatever extreme are necessary to eliminate sin. By taking up dramatic and extreme instances, the text urges such a level of seriousness about avoiding sin that there will be unrestrained commitment to use all possible means to avoid it (with no particular interest in distinguishing between strategies that relate to the inner life, the physical body, or the arrangement of the external circumstances of life). The goal is what is important here, not the means.²¹

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:291.

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 227.

¹⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 109.

²⁰ “All excuses which blame the body and man’s bodily nature as though these creations of God make lust and other sins inevitable, a mere function of our bodily being, just the course of nature, end in the absurdities of successive amputations until the whole body is thrown.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 228.)

²¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 239.

While it is unhelpful to label this passage as “non-literal,” it is fair to ask whether a literal application is what Jesus (literally) intends. So, when we recognize that the proposed solution would not solve the problem, we see that Jesus is making two points in a deeply profound way: (1) we must do everything possible to avoid sin; and (2) bodily discipline—or even mutilation—cannot ultimately solve our problem, since the true roots of sin go all the way down into the heart. It is with the heart that Jesus insists we must deal, not the body alone.

Of course, while we cannot heal our hearts by the mutilation of our own bodies, we must never forget that Jesus came to heal our hearts through the mutilation of *his* own body. Gouging out our eyes, or cutting off our hands, could never cleanse the impurities of our hearts; however, Jesus’ broken body and shed blood is the only way to purify our souls. Jesus came to do whatever it takes to purify our desires—even at the sacrifice of his own body at the cross.

Discussion Questions

1. When Jesus condemns lust in v. 28, what difference does it make to understand whether Jesus is describing the man’s purpose/intention *for* looking, or a result that arises *from* looking? If Jesus is only forbidding purposeful looks of lust, what would that imply about lust that arises unbidden and unintentionally within our hearts? What is your own attitude toward the lust that arises unbidden and unintentionally within your heart?
2. What is the doctrine of concupiscence? Where are some of the places that the Scriptures teach about the coveting/lust/desire of concupiscence? When does the Roman Catholic Church believe that concupiscence becomes sin? Why did the Protestant Reformers reject this view of concupiscence? What does the Bible teach about when concupiscence becomes sin, as summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith 6.5? What practical difference does this make?
3. When Jesus teaches that we should gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands, why is it an unsatisfactory explanation of this passage to state that we shouldn’t take this “literally”? Why, then, is it also an unsatisfactory explanation to do exactly what Jesus says? In the context of Jesus’ teaching about the sinfulness of the heart, would mutilating our right eye or right hand help? What does Jesus literally mean when he employs this hyperbolic figure of speech?
4. What does the mutilation of the body that Jesus speaks of here remind us about how Jesus’ own body was mutilated for us? Why does the broken body of Jesus heal us in a way that cutting out our eyes or cutting off our hands would not? What does it mean to repent from our desires—even our unbidden, unchosen, non-volitional desires? Why is this so critical in the life of the believer? Where might you need to become more vigilant in fighting sin and following Christ?