

You Said, But I Say – Part 3

“You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

– Matthew 5:27-30

In John Bunyan's classic writing, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Faithful approach the town of Vanity, a place of merchandise; and within Vanity was Vanity Fair, providing entertainment for passing travelers. The people of the town were vain, caring for nothing but money, pleasure and fame. It was a place of gross immorality; gambling, cheating, lying, stealing, prostitution, murder and adultery. Christian and Faithful showed no interest in the town's merchandise nor did they even care to look upon it. When they were asked to buy, the pilgrims would stop their ears and say as the Psalmist, “Turn away my eyes from beholding vanity,” [Ps. 119:37] looking upward as if they belonged to another country.

Our Lord here continues his exposition of verse 20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” He lingers further in exposing the self-righteousness, tradition and carnal interpretations of Scripture by the Pharisees which they had accepted as truth from “them of old time.” [v.21] Jesus gives a series of illustrative examples that uncover the hypocrisy of keeping the letter of the law, but not the spirit: “[Christ], who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” [2Cor. 3:6]

As with the previous verses, the prohibition was not just against murder, but against anger within the heart and the insulting word. So here, the seventh commandment prohibited adultery, and yet, the Pharisees saw no more than the bare injunction, thus in their minds fulfilling the requirements of the law.

They understood the command that it was forbidden to lie with another man's wife [Lev. 20:10]; they understood the seriousness of the act and its corresponding penalty by reference to the woman taken in the act of adultery in John 8: “Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.” [v.5] Yet they narrowed the meaning of God's commands to pacify their conscience, missing the much broader scope; the connection between the inward affections and attitudes, and the impure action. Their interpretation was limited to the outward conduct with no consideration to the root of the action. They failed to see that God's commandments are “exceedingly broad”. [Ps. 119:96] Truly, as one man of God has stated, “God has an unbelievable ability to say an eternity of truth in an economy of words.”

As murder prohibits anger, so adultery includes the lustful look and imagination. Adultery violates the marriage covenant between a man and a woman. It brings defilement to the body and the soul. Well did the prophet Job say, “For [lust] is a fire that consumes to destruction.” [Job 31:12] Jesus declares here that the seventh commandment is broken by a secret though unexpressed desire; namely in this case, heart and mental adultery. The prohibition is not against looking at a woman, but looking lustfully. It is not the involuntary or incidental glance, but an intentional repeated gazing with the purpose of lusting to satisfy an evil desire.

Sin finds its entrance through “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life.” [1 Jn. 2:15] Sin begins when lust is stirred within us, then the imagination ponders the act to the point where the heart is enthralled and bound by chains that no human power can break. Note the condition of these persons mentioned by the Apostle: “Having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin.” [2Pe. 2:14] Matthew Henry comments appropriately, “The eye is both the inlet and the outlet of a great deal of wickedness of this kind. . . . What need have we, therefore, with holy Job, to ‘make a covenant with our eyes’ [Job 31:1] to make this bargain with them: that they should have the pleasure of beholding the light of the sun and the works of God, provided that they would never fasten or dwell upon anything that might occasion impure imaginations or desires; and under this penalty, that if they did, they must smart for it with penitential tears. What have we the covering of our eyes for, but to restrain corrupt glances and

to keep out defiling impressions?”

This brings us to Jesus' next comments. Heart adultery is the result of eye adultery. Because of the undisciplined eye, the imagination becomes inflamed resulting in deeds of shame. The eye, being a most precious member of the body, must be removed if it hinders our pursuit of holiness. The remedy is drastic and radical, because the repercussions are eternal. “Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God.” [1Cor. 6:9] (see also Gal. 5:19-22) If our eye or our hand causes us to stumble (“entices to sin” – Greek), it must be “torn out” and “cut off” metaphorically, not in the sense of mutilation, but mortification and self-denial. “Taking up the cross” to follow Christ means to reject sinful practices and passions so resolutely that we put them to death: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire.” [Col. 3:5] Why? “For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come.” [Col. 3:6]

Jesus' words may seem astonishingly harsh but, again, the consequences are disastrous and destructive. Consider again the words of Matthew Henry: “Such pretenses as these will scarcely be overcome by reason, and therefore must be argued against with the terrors of the Lord, and so they are here argued against.” This is the way of the Gospel, as A.W. Pink states, “that we conduct our hearers to Sinai before we lead them to Calvary, to make known the “severity of God” [Rom. 11:22] as well as His goodness, to declare the reality and awfulness of hell as well as the blessedness of heaven. . .”

Here is the simple interpretation: “If your eye causes you to sin because temptation comes to you through your eyes (things you see), then don't look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away and were now blind and could not see the objects that had previously caused you to sin. Similarly, if temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you go), then don't do it and don't go there!” This includes “planning out” with forethought how to fulfill evil desires, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” [Rom. 13:14]

An old writer expressed it all this way: “The fallen nature of man is like unto dry wood or tow, which will quickly burn as soon as fire touches it. As mariners at sea keep a constant watch to avoid rock and sands, so should we most warily avoid every occasion to sin. Self must be denied at all costs, constant watch kept over the heart, the first risings of corruption therein suppressed, temptations to sin shunned, the company of those who would be a snare unto us avoided. So there must be a constant seeking unto God for His grace, that we may be enabled so to walk in the Spirit that we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.”

Remember Lot's wife, Eve's looking on the forbidden fruit, Ham looking on His father's nakedness and fifty-thousand men looking into the ark of the Lord against God's revealed will. “Let your eyes look directly ahead, and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet, and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil.” [Prov. 4:25-27]