

Extinguishing the Embers

Matthew 5:27-30

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here. And friends, it's great to be with you. If you are a guest or visitor, welcome. We're glad that you join us this morning. We realize that there are many places that we could be this morning. On Sunday morning, there are many things that we could be doing, but we gather together because we realize and we recognize that the Bible, the very book that we're about to hear from, is the word of life. It is what we are in need of, not just this morning, but as we go about our days, as we go about our weeks. We need this book to instruct us in how we are to live. And so that's why we return again and again, to hear again God's message for his people about what it means to be his people and how we are to love him and love our neighbor. And so we're doing that this fall by looking at the Sermon on the Mount.

So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew chapter 5. Remember the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5 through 7. I promise we will get to chapter 6. We've been in Matthew 5 for a little while, but chapter 6 is coming in a couple weeks. I think maybe like four, but still it is out there. And if you've been with us, you know that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' teaching to his disciples about what it means to live in the kingdom of God. What are the qualities of the kingdom of God and what does he call his people to embody as we inhabit this kingdom? And this is important. This is important for us to know because there are all sorts of things that we hear in our world, right? All sorts of voices that are telling us how we're to live. We could think about the media. We could think about entertainment, our co-workers and our neighbors. We could think about just those little voices inside of our heads and the tug that we feel in our hearts. All of these things are presenting for us a vision of what life is to look like, of what life, what the good life should be.

And so some of these things are very benign, right? We can easily pass over them or we can affirm maybe some good things about them, but many of these voices that we hear in our world and in our own minds and in our own hearts can oftentimes be in complete opposition to God's word. And so that's why we need to know from God's word what his kingdom looks like and how it is that we're to live as members of that kingdom. And so this morning we come to Jesus's second of 6 antithesis statements. So we heard it last week for the first time. I say to you, or you have heard it said, but I say to you, right? So you're setting up these antitheses. And this morning is the second of the 6 antithetical statements.

And what he's talking about this morning is a kingdom sexual ethic. Now this is a word not only that his first hearers need to hear, but we need to hear it. Because we live in a sexualized world, right? I mean, sex is all around us. It's in our music, it's on social media, it's in commercials, it's in our entertainment, and it's in our minds. And so we need to hear what Jesus would have to tell us about what it means to live as faithful people with regard to our sexuality. And so let's read Matthew 5 beginning in verse 27. Jesus says:

“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 has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that as we come to this portion of your word that you would help us. That you would help us to see your truth, to see your grace, to see your beauty. That you would empower us by your spirit to throw off temptation, sin, and to cling to you. And that you would be with me as I preach and all of us as we listen. That, Father, that you would engage with us. And that you would allow what is said and done in these next few moments to bring you glory. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So I have a friend named Travis. And Travis has three children, two girls and a boy, just like me. So this really is about Travis, not me. I'm not Travis, by the way. But Travis' son had some friends over about a month or two ago. And his son and his friends decided that they wanted to have a fire pit in their backyard. No problem. Because Travis is a responsible father. He has taught all of his kids how they're supposed to do the fire pit. They get it out. It's one of those movable ones. They get it out. They make sure it's far enough away from the house and far enough away from the detached garage in their backyard. And they set up the wood. And they make sure they have everything. And they're doing it properly and safely and all these sorts of things. So Travis is like, absolutely, you can have a fire. So his son and his friends, they have a fire. They enjoy some time together. They roast things, you know, marshmallows, hot dogs. Maybe they're just burning, right? Because that's what boys do. They like to burn things.

So the fire is over. It's out. And it's time for them to just kind of clean up and go inside. And so they do that. Travis' son has been taught exactly what he's supposed to do and how he's supposed to clean it up. And so he takes the ashes that are out and he sticks them in the trash can and sticks the trash can inside the detached garage where it's supposed to go so it will be ready to be taken to the curb on the next trash pickup day. And he goes inside with his buddies. And his buddies decide it's time to go home. And so Travis' son, being responsible, goes outside to make sure everything's cleaned up. Everyone's asleep except Travis. He's in the basement. And his son goes out. And to his shock, what he sees is smoke billowing out of their garage. And he looks through the window of the garage and he sees fire erupting out of the trash can. And so very quickly, he grabs the hose and he puts it out, right? And he calls his dad and his dad comes out and he pulls the trash can out from the garage. And they get it away so that it's safe. But a fire erupted.

Now, Travis' son did everything he was supposed to do. He did everything he was supposed to do. He did everything his dad had told him to do. He made sure that everything was put away properly except buried deep in the ashes where he had not seen were just a few little embers. Just a couple of embers that he thought were completely extinguished. He thought they were completely out, but there they were. And with just a little bit of oxygen to keep them hot, those embers caught fire and fire erupted and destruction ensued. Tools were ruined. Travis, my friend, his drill press is toast. It's gone. And the wall on their garage has fire damage. And other things were lost. And if they hadn't have checked, the entire garage would have gone down in flames. All from a few embers. I mean, that's remarkable to think about, isn't it? They were buried in the ash. They couldn't be seen. He couldn't feel any heat

from them. But there they were. And with just a little bit of fuel, a little bit of oxygen, a little bit of kindling, they erupted into a destructive fire.

Untended Embers

And that's what Jesus is telling us about lust. He's saying that it's like an untended ember. That's what we see in verse 28. Jesus says, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Now, just to make sure that we know that Jesus is meaning this very seriously and that this is very significant, he goes on to say, if your right eye causes you to sin or your right hand causes you to sin, gouge it out. Cut it off. I'm going to talk in a minute a little bit more about what that means. But for now, we see that Jesus is saying that desire, that lustful thoughts, that they have destructive potential. So much so that he says, gouge out your eye, cut off your hand.

He's warning us about the danger of lust in these untended embers. So, what is lust? What is Jesus talking about? Well, Jesus isn't talking about acknowledging beauty or attraction. In fact, the Bible has absolutely no problem talking about beauty, right? We see this in Old Testament stories. David was called handsome and Abigail was called beautiful. So, there's no problem with acknowledging beauty, acknowledging attraction. That is not what Jesus is talking about. No, lust is something completely different. The Greek word here means to desire, to long for, to yearn for something that is not yours. It is the greedy consuming of another person for our own pleasure.

That's what lust is. It's the greedy consuming of a person who is not ours for our own pleasure. You see, the purpose of lustful thought or a lustful glance is to stir one's own selfish, sexual desire apart from the other person. It is a way of consuming that person for our own desires. And this is completely contrary to the Bible. Louis Smedes, the Christian ethicist, speaking about sex outside of marriage, physical sex, as well as lustful desires, he said, "it is a life-uniting act without a life-uniting intention." A life-uniting act without a life-uniting intention. You see, God created and gave sex to his creation, to his people, as a way of uniting a man and a woman together, to unite them as one. That's what we see in Genesis chapter 2, right? When Adam and Eve are given to one another, we're told that a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

I mean, that is an amazing thing to hear. They will become one. There is no other relationship that is described in that way. And that oneness, that unity comes through sexual union. And God intended that in the context of marriage. A life-uniting act with a life-uniting intention. But to lust, to lust is to desire someone sexually that is not your spouse, and is completely contrary to what God has intended for his people. But maybe you're sitting there and you're thinking, well, what's really the problem? I mean, why is this an issue? Why is Jesus making this an issue? I mean, to lust, right? Lust is just hidden in our minds, and it's hidden away in our private moments. I mean, who would ever know? What's it going to hurt? I mean, in our culture, they would simply say that this is another example of repressive Christian stuffiness. And our world would tell us, if it feels good, if only for a moment, how bad can it really be? I mean, who will it hurt?

So, Russell Brand is a comedian, an actor, an influencer. Maybe some of you are familiar with him. I do have to tell you, I don't think I've watched anything that he's ever made, and I don't think I've heard any of his stand-up, his comedic work, so I am not commending him, okay? I don't know if I should or not, but I'm just telling you, I'm not, okay? But Russell

Brand was baptized in 2022. He made a profession of faith, and he was baptized. But before he made a profession of faith and was baptized and became a Christian, he embodied all the stereotypical qualities of a secular entertainer. So, all the hedonism that we might associate with a secular entertainer, he embodied completely, and this is by his own witness, his own testimony. He was into partying and alcohol and women. And in 2015, before he became a Christian, he was doing some self-reflecting upon himself and the way that he engages with his sexual desires. And he posted a video on YouTube talking about this, and he was talking about his use of pornography. And this is what he said, remember, not a believer, very into hedonistic behaviors. He said his use of pornography, his lust that was manifesting itself in this way, diminished his trust in relationships. It questioned his hope for a monogamous relationship. It made him lonely, and it diminished, not enhanced his joy. But you might say, but it was just him. It was just his phone, his computer, it was just on his television, was just buried in his thoughts. Who was it hurting? Russell Brand would say it was hurting him, and it was hurting all of his relationships.

And y'all, there are all sorts of studies that are out there now that are describing this very thing, not just by Christians, but the New York Times recently had an article talking about the detriment, the pain that comes through pornography. You see, these lustful desires, these manifestations, the manifestation of these lustful desires through the use of things like pornography is eroding the soul. And y'all, this isn't just a male problem. I came across a statistic this past week that showed that 41% of women will look at pornography this year. It's not just a male problem, it is a human problem. John Owen, the Puritan theologian, said "if you leave an ember untended, it will bring down the whole house. If we leave the ember burning, it will engulf your soul." Now, look, I'm not making a mountain out of a molehill here. This isn't just pastoral hyperbole. Not that pastors do that. I'm simply expressing what Jesus says when he said it is better that you should lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Dousing the Embers

You see, what Jesus is saying is that this is a matter of our souls. So, what do we do with these burning embers? How do we put them out? How do we douse them? How do we make sure that they have been snuffed out completely? Well, Jesus tells us we flee from temptation. We see it in verses 29 through 30. "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." Now, I will tell you, throughout church history, there have been people who have believed that we are to take this statement by Jesus literally. One of these people was a man named Origen.

Origen was a church father. Origen was very interesting. He had some good things to say. He had some peculiar things to say. But Origen thought this was to be taken literally. And so, to deal with his lustful desires, he actually rolled himself around on spikes and bristles and thorns naked, thinking that would get rid of them. When that didn't work, Origen, taking this literally, castrated himself. Now, he later realized that Jesus was speaking metaphorically and he regretted what he did. Because he realized what we should all realize. That a one-eyed woman can still lust. And a one-armed man can destroy. And even a blind person still has their thoughts.

So, y'all, don't be like Origen. Okay? Now, the point that Jesus is making isn't that we would take this literally. But the point that he's making is that we may need to take seemingly drastic measures to resist temptation and sin. And so, he's using this extreme principle to drive the principle home. Because, friends, it is so easy for us to justify our sin. And not just our sin, but to justify our flirtation with sin. And so, Jesus is hitting this home. He's telling us a single ember can erupt into fire. And so, we have to put it out completely.

John Owen, again, said, "be killing sin or it will be killing you." And so, in order to flee from temptation, some of us might need to put software on our computers or blocks on our routers or make different choices regarding the form of entertainment that we take in. That for the sake of our thoughts and our hearts and our souls, we may need to get a dumb phone. Do y'all know what a dumb phone is? They still make them. Dumb phones are what we had like a decade ago. Maybe long, I forget how long ago, right? Like I've had my smartphone for so long. A dumb phone, all it does is make phone calls and send text messages. Amazing, right? It flips open. It's incredible. But it has no access to the internet. And no accessibility to social media. And so, some of us, maybe some of you, in order for the sake of your hearts, might need to put away that smartphone.

I mean, if a phone causes you to stumble, isn't it better to lose connectedness than to flame the sin of temptation in our hearts? Absolutely. You see, we douse the embers by fleeing from temptation. But that's not all we do. You see, that just kind of moves us into this place almost like of neutrality, right? This neutral position between sin and between righteousness. And God wants us to actually move into a place of righteousness, to embody his kingdom. And we embody his kingdom, not simply by not sinning, but by actually embracing his kingdom ethic. You see, some would conclude that if lust is the problem, then the problem ultimately is sex. And so, there are some who have concluded that the way that we deal with this is we adopt an ascetic posture toward sex where it's only engaged in for the sake of procreation. And while logically that makes sense, the reality is that we'll only fan the flame. It doesn't put it out. Because the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, speaking to husbands and wives said, "do not deprive one another." Why? So that temptation would not be open. So that the devil would not have an opportunity.

So, we douse the ember of lust, not by disregarding sex completely, but instead by embracing a biblical sexual ethic. And the biblical sexual ethic is that sex is a good and beautiful thing in the context of marriage. I mean, think again about Genesis 2. Adam was alone. That's what we're told, right? That Adam was made in God's image and God breathed his life into him. And Adam was there. And we're told that this creation of Adam was on the sixth day. And at the end of every day, we have this refrain, it was good. God created the heavens and the earth. At the end of day one, it was good. God created on day two. At the end, it was good. And at the end of day six, before the end of day six, after God created Adam, we have the first not good in creation. It was not good for Adam to be alone. And so God looked for a helper for him, right? And there was no helper. The beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, they weren't what Adam needed to satisfy his aloneness. So God made Eve. And God presented Eve to Adam. And we're told that they were naked and unashamed. They were naked and unashamed. And when Adam saw his wife, what did he do? He sang her a love song. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man."

They were naked and unashamed and became one flesh. You see, friends, the Bible doesn't have a problem with sex and desire, right? I've said this before, like Song of Solomon. I

mean, that is a book all about sexual desire for one's spouse. The Bible has no problem with it. But the Bible puts it in its proper context and its proper place. You see, God has given us, intended us to give ourselves in this way to our spouse and only our spouse. Because y'all, we're not horcruxes. Do y'all remember what a horcrux is? So if you've read Harry Potter, you know exactly what it is. If you haven't, I'm sorry to spoil it, but we're beyond statute of limitations now, right? Harry Potter's been out for a while. If you haven't read it, you're probably not. But a horcrux was this thing that Voldemort had used, right, that he had devised to keep himself alive forever. Voldemort's the evil person, okay? He's the bad guy. He's the embodiment of evil, and he doesn't want to die. He wants to live for eternity. And so what he does is he takes bits of his soul and he puts them in these different things so that if his body is ever destroyed, he can rise again because his soul still is intact, portions of it.

So he sticks in an amulet and a diary and even his pet snake Nagini. And it sounds like a great plan, except for the fact that every time he puts a portion of his soul in a different thing, he's dividing his soul, and he's becoming a little less human because his soul is divided. And the Bible tells us that every time we have a sexual encounter, we are giving a portion of ourselves to that other person. And y'all, we're not horcruxes. It's not who we are. It is giving a portion of ourselves to another, and that is only diluting the intimacy that is supposed to be reserved for our spouse.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul talks about being joined with a prostitute, and what he invokes is becoming one with them. And that is to be limited only to our spouse. You see, friends, we douse the embers of lust by seeing sex as a beautiful gift God has given in the context of marriage, but also this means that we treat those who are not our spouse as brothers and sisters in the Lord. See, that's the other part of this biblical sexual ethic. It's that we actually treat one another not as things to be consumed, but as things to be honored, as people to be treated with dignity, because we're the body of Christ. We are the family of God.

That's what we're called in 1 Timothy 3, in Ephesians 2, in Galatians 6. We are the household of God, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the Lord. And so one way that we embody this sexual ethic is by treating one another like brothers and sisters. And this is very different than the way in which the world treats men and women. The Avett brothers have this beautiful song called *True Sadness*, and in the middle of this song they sing about this girl named Angela, and they say Angela became a target as soon as her beauty was seen by young men who tried to reduce her down to a scene on an X-rated screen. Is she not more than the curve of her hips? Is she not more than the shine on her lips? And of course, the church's answer to that is yes. Yes.

Men and women are made in the image of God, the Imago Dei. And we live that out by being a community that sees and treats one another as sisters and brothers. And y'all, that is beautiful because it is honoring what God has made us to be. And it is honoring one another, and it is not treating one another as things that we objectify and are for our consumption, but actually are partners in the gospel. That is what it treats one another like. And y'all, that is a beautiful community. I mean, don't we all want to be part of a community where we are received, and we are welcomed, and we are loved, and we are honored, and we are treated with dignity and grace? And that is the people of God. That is what we are to embody as we live out what it means to be in the kingdom. Friends, that is a beautiful picture of God's sexual ethic. That is what God is giving us.

And maybe you hear that, and you think too that that is a beautiful picture, a picture of purity that is appealing and enticing. And maybe you reflect on your life, and you realize that maybe you haven't fled temptation, but you've embraced it. That you've given lip service to a biblical ethic, but then you've quickly disregarded it. Then instead of feeling like you've lived like a kingdom person, you've actually lived like a person of the world. Because friends, the problem of lust, the problem of sexual immorality, it's not just out there, right? It lives within our own hearts. And so, for those of us who maybe are feeling this, feeling guilt, feeling shame, feeling overwhelming sense of our brokenness, friends, hear again the assurance of pardon. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. That's what God says about us. If you're resting in Christ and trusting in him, that's what he says about you. That you are a new creation. That's who you are. That the old, it has been forgiven. It is under God's grace. That his grace is sufficient. It is sufficient.

It is sufficient to pardon you of your sin, and is sufficient to allow you to move forward in purity. Because you see, becoming new creations doesn't mean that we are now free to sin any way that we desire, to live any way that we desire. No. In Titus chapter 2, we're told that the grace of God brings salvation, and it appears to all men. And what does it do? It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live a self-controlled, upright, and godly life in this present age. You see, if Christ has redeemed you, has redeemed you from your sin, even your sexual sin, then he is also working to purify you. That is the beauty of the gospel. You see, kingdom people aren't people without sin. Kingdom people aren't people who will never sin again. Kingdom people are those who know that we come under the grace of the King, and that we live in light of that grace. And so I invite you, friends, to return to that grace again and again. And in returning to that grace, flee from temptation and embrace what God's Word tells us about what it means to embody a sexual ethic and rest in Christ. Amen.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have revealed a better way for us to live. A way that is not of our flesh, a way that is not of this world, but that is a way of your goodness and your beauty. God, we thank you that you warn us of the danger of lust, of sexual immorality, that you warn us of it and that you do so, so that we would not be given into it. And so we ask by your Spirit that you would empower us, strengthen us to flee from temptation, strengthen us to see one another as brothers and sisters, strengthen us to rest in your grace and to walk in your truth. We are thankful, Father, for your Spirit that convicts us and leads us in that truth. And so we pray that you would help us to walk in his Spirit, that we would walk by your Spirit and that we would hold firm to the purity that you have called us to.