

The Problem of Lust

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 June 2025

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Amen. So as we begin this very direct teaching of Jesus, let me ask you a question. Could you do what a guy called Aaron Ralston did? Maybe that name is familiar to some of you, if you've watched, if you made your way through the story 127 hours, he was the mountaineer who found his arm trapped in a canyon in Utah. And as time went on, he was alone, he was isolated, he ran out of supplies, the sun was beating down on him, and he came to that point of decision.

And his decision was to take out his pocket knife to cut off his own arm. He chose to live. Could you do it? Would you do it? Sounds horrific, doesn't it? What does Jesus say to us in our text today? He says, as his followers, you and I should want to live. We should choose life, and that means we should be willing to do whatever it takes. We should cut off whatever it takes so that we would live. So our particular focus, as Jesus brings us here, is the topic of lust and sexual sin, but it applies more widely, I think. But we're going to think about it specifically.

Sinclair Ferguson has a book on the Sermon on the Mount with the subtitle, Kingdom Life in a Fallen World, acknowledging the tension that there is for the follower of Jesus living in a world with very different values. And maybe here we find the tension is particularly real.

We live in a very permissive society. There is unlimited access to pornography. We live in a time when the ideas of commitment and covenant are increasingly becoming foreign concepts. How do we live as followers of King Jesus in a fallen world?

[2 : 10] And Jesus tackles this problem head on. He gets again right to the heart of the law. What's God's intention in the law? And so in his teaching, he says to us, remember, adultery is more than you think.

Adultery includes looking with lust. The heart is again the target. Or in verse 32, recognize that wrongful divorce makes other people the victims of adultery. Adultery is more than you think, Jesus says. But he also says to us, using those graphic pictures in 29 and 30, adultery is worse than you think. You're sandwiched in between. Here's two examples of adultery of the heart. There are these pictures of mutilation. To say to us, sin is that serious. We must be killing sin lest it kill us.

So we've got two big ideas we're going to think about as Jesus tackles the problem of lust. The first is that we would love and choose faithfulness. And the second, that we would hate and kill sin.

So first, this idea of loving and choosing faithfulness. When we come to this teaching, what's clear is that the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, they're very much in target for Jesus. And there's two ways that they have been going wrong and leading other people into wrong.

Firstly, they're turning the law into a simple tick box exercise. You know, don't commit adultery. So they would say, you know, so long as you don't hop into bed with somebody, you're okay with that commandment. Surface level. Jesus. Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully is already committed adultery with it in his heart. Jesus always targets the heart. So they go wrong by making it superficial.

[4 : 07] But they also make it wrong because their starting point is wrong. They ignore God's heart and God's design. Their interest is basically, you know, how can I sort of say somebody is guilty of indecency so I can get rid of my wife? And they're ignoring God's good design. Even when it comes to the law, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. That was intended as a safeguard for women, recognizing the hardness of men's hearts. But what's happened is the Pharisees are turning this indecency clause into an escape clause. What's the lowest bar? And so people were actually discussing in Jesus' day, is it okay if my wife serves me an unacceptable meal? Is that a basis for kicking her out the door? And so Jesus targets the false teachers and their false teaching because it's despising God's heart for marriage. Their teaching on the law is impacting others' lives.

They've forgotten God's grace, so they're guilty of despising God's good plan. They're ignoring God's good design for covenant and faithfulness, and they're rejecting God's good laws.

And so Jesus wants to talk about loving and choosing faithfulness. Recognizing our hearts are always in danger. We need to hear what Jesus says.

Jesus, again, in chapter 19, returns to the question on divorce and permission. It seems to be one of the big issues, hot-button topics of his day, and he's questioned. And when he's questioned on the grounds for divorce, what Jesus does is he says, let's not talk about divorce, let's talk about marriage. Let's go back to the way God designed life. Let's return to the idea of marriage as God's good gift, as an act of his grace. And so he takes them back to Adam and to Eve. Marriage is a good gift.

The good gift of true companionship. The good gift of covenant love. The good gift of permanent union. The good gift of covenant love. The good gift of covenant love. The good gift of marriage. [6 : 28] And so Jesus wants the thinking in his day, he wants our thinking to be shaped by God's plan and God's design. Ideas of marriage and faithfulness. Not how close to the line of sin can I walk, which is very much the attitude of the Pharisees trying to get permissions, but how close to God's design for faithfulness can I walk?

Verse 28, anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. The heart of the adultery command is a matter of the human heart. But do you notice that Jesus does something else? He recognizes that often what leads us towards adultery in our heart begins with our eyes.

There's that point where Jesus teaches that the eye is the lamp of the body. What it lets in, if your eye lets in light, then your whole body is going to be light. But if your eye lets in darkness, your whole body is going to be filled with darkness. What the eye sees and desires, the heart follows, Jesus teaches.

And so he's calling us to choose faithfulness, both as a heart issue and an eye issue. It's sort of challenging and practical, I think. It's important that we recognize as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, he is challenging directly, in the first place, his own culture.

Because the culture that was happening there, even within religious society, was to create an easy divorce culture. And there was also their own version of toxic masculinity that basically said, well, men are in charge and we can dispose of women as we like. Jesus challenges that head on with God's Word. Of course, there are similar challenges for our day. But think about our own culture's view of sex and how different it is to the Bible. For many people, the idea of sex is it's linked to transaction.

[8 : 40] It's all about being a consumer and about consumption. It's my body, it's my needs, it's my gratification, zero idea of commitment. We have hookup culture and all the apps that accompany it. But for the Bible and for Jesus, sex is covenantal. It is a good gift from God within a particular context, the context of lifelong committed marriage between one man and one woman, where each is for the other, where the context is self-giving, not selfish. So one view destroys and devalues ideas of love and faithfulness, with a trail of guilt and brokenness that often follows. Whereas Jesus' view creates the security stability and stability, the foundation for marriage, for family life, for society.

But as Jesus connects our hearts with our eyes, Jesus' words also challenge our viewing habits in a very deliberate way. To think for each one of us about the TV, the movies that we consume, what we watch on our phones, and especially in our days, we recognize the danger of pornography.

There is an idea, and sometimes it even floats around in Christian circles, well, my viewing doesn't hurt anyone, so it's okay, surely. Do we hear how Jesus' words in verse 28 explodes the idea?

As he says to us, any immorality by anyone, recognized women are included in this as well, any immorality by anyone, even if done in secret, even if it's just in our hearts, is heart adultery and is serious sin.

And I do think in particular we need to be aware of the porn industry, what that's doing within our society, within Christian society, as it exploits and abuses and dehumanizes.

[10 : 56] It corrodes relationships. It harms children. It creates a toxic culture. It traps people in addiction.

It leaves people in a spiral of shame and guilt and drags people away from God. Heart adultery, Jesus says, is a serious thing.

Lives have been ruined. Ministries have been ruined. Families have been ruined. And so to love and to choose faithfulness is going to involve us swimming against the tide of culture, to have a heart that will choose loyalty and love to Jesus, will involve us praying for one another, and maybe especially for our younger people and especially our younger men.

Because the danger is real. How can you and I seek to be faithful in this area? We have an invitation all the time in the Bible to choose a love that is selfless, not a love that is selfish.

Let me just read 1 Corinthians 13 verses 4 to 7 to hear what love truly is. Love is patient. Love is kind.

[12 : 20] It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Lust does not do that. Pornography does not do that. We are invited to choose love as the better way. So if we're married in our marriages, we have to guard our eyes, and we have to guard our hearts to only have eyes for our spouses.

That we would deliberately both enjoy and protect God's good gift. But all of us, if we're following Jesus, we have this first responsibility to be faithful to God, to honor what God honors.

Significant, I think, that in the Bible, there is that sin of spiritual adultery. We come across all the time in the Old Testament. God is faithful to His people, but what do His people do?

[13 : 35] They look to some other God for their security and for their joy and for their life. And how does God describe it? He describes it as unfaithfulness, as adultery.

In the kingdom of God, our heart is to be towards God. He is the one we look to for our life. Maybe we need to realize that lust is a worship issue.

In that moment, we find ourselves being invited to consider, do I think this thing, this image, this person has greater weight and value in my life than Jesus does?

It's a worship issue. And maybe one of the best ways that we can fight against lust and live with faithfulness is to think of Jesus.

In that imagery that the Bible gives us, where He is the bridegroom and we are the bride, and think of Jesus, He has spiritually united Himself to us.

[14 : 38] He willingly and gladly shares His life and shares His grace with us. He comes to live in us and with us. He loves us. He is eternally committed to us.

Love Jesus. Love Jesus. Love faithfulness. The second thing, and this takes us to those middle verses, that we are called to hate and kill sin.

Back to Aaron Ralston in Utah. What would you and I do to live? Well, in a sense, Jesus supplies our Christian answer.

As He takes us right into the heart of the spiritual battle against sin, if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It's better for you to lose an eye or a hand or one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Now, of course, Jesus here is not talking literally and physically.

[15 : 44] Some people through church history have gone down that road. But we understand if we remove our right eye, the problem is we still have a left eye. And Jesus, places like Mark 7, reminds us that ultimately the heart is the heart of the problem.

We can't cut our heart out. So what does Jesus mean when He talks about gouging out our eye or cutting off our hands? There's a Bible teacher called John Stott who's very helpful on what Jesus means.

So he says, It's not physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. If there are things that I see or things that I do or places I go that are leading me into temptation and into sin, what should I do?

What should we do? We should cut them off. Don't look. Don't do it. Don't go. Don't go.

Act as if we were blinded. Act as if we were maimed towards that particular temptation to lust or any other temptation. John Stott also says this.

[17 : 05] We are to become culturally maimed in order to preserve our purity. And what he has in view there is that we as Christians should be willing not to participate in parts of our culture that are regarded as normal by others.

We should be willing to be thought of as weird and different if it means being obedient to Jesus and His command. Websites we won't visit.

Apps we won't use. Shows we won't watch. Even if everyone else does and it leaves us out of conversations and leaves us being seen as odd. It's the necessary radical surgery to cut off what would tempt us to sin.

Part of this involves us knowing ourselves. Our temptations are all different. Our temperaments are all different. When should you switch off your phone and be far away from it?

When do you need to take care when you are by yourself? What are the scenes and images that you need to fast forward or simply shut down the laptop on?

[18 : 23] We need to know ourselves. There's a great road safety advert. I don't know if it's still running in Scotland. I think the strap line was drive like your granny's in the car.

I think we understand the logic of that. And we would also understand the logic if we would apply it to watching and doing.

And that can work. But for a Christian we have something much more powerful even than you watch and do like your granny's beside you.

As Christians we are called to live with the fear of the Lord. To understand the God of the universe. Our creator. He sees. He knows. He has saved and he loves us. And in response. We don't want to do anything to disobey him and to bring him displeasure.

[19 : 21] And even better. Because we know he's a good father and he's loved us that much. We do not want to dishonor him. Live with the fear of the Lord.

It's a great way to hate our sin. Jesus makes a very real connection for us in these verses. That lust of the eyes produces adultery in the heart.

And adultery unrepented of can lead us to hell. And Jesus warns us so that we would choose to live. Moral amputation is better than eternal destruction.

And so Jesus calls us towards what older theologians would call the mortification of sin. The idea of putting sin to death.

So I want to be really practical in terms of giving us guidelines. How is it as followers of Jesus that we can day by day hate and kill sin? How can we choose life and faithfulness?

[20 : 31] If you're here today and you're not a Christian. But you're aware that this is a problem in your life. Understand that we can't simply click our fingers and bring change. Moral resolve isn't going to bring change.

We can't roll up our sleeves to deal with our sin and temptation. Your greatest need is to be reborn. To be saved by Jesus. And then in his power we fight sin.

But here's four things for you and I to take away in terms of how do we enter into this spiritual battle of killing sin. First, remember your new identity.

As Jesus begins his sermon on the mount, he begins with the Beatitudes. And Beatitude 1, chapter 5, verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Here's our starting point. We belong to a different kingdom. We have Jesus as our king. We have come to know God's grace. Jesus is our Lord and Savior. All the time we are faced with the danger of spiritual amnesia.

[21 : 35] We forget who we belong to. We forget that we are in Jesus. And if we do that, we lose sight of his presence and his power and his promises.

We disconnect from the power supply of God's grace. We disconnect our worship on a Sunday from the habits we take into the week.

And so the New Testament is full of reminders of our identity. So we read one of them in Colossians 3. Remember, you are in Christ. That's your spiritual location. This is your new and true identity.

And united with Jesus, dead to sin. We are in Christ. We are in Christ. Free to fight. Promise of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of his word. His present grace. We have a new heart, a new desire, and a new power. So you and I can, in Jesus, say no to sin and yes to faithfulness.

[22 : 34] Ephesians 1 is another beautiful place to go. Every spiritual blessing is ours in Christ Jesus. So with Jesus, you and I can change.

We can be transformed. We are being remade into his image. Remember your new identity. Secondly, recognize your enemy.

Jesus, in just a few words, shows us just how deadly sin is. The fact that sin runs deep. It's a heart issue. And the Bible will tell us that sin is an enemy that Jesus has defeated, but sin continues to fight.

Satan continues to fight. Two things I was thinking about to do with sin in this regard. Sin lies. Sin tells lies.

I've been listening to a podcast on the Titanic. The Titanic's last two hours, the two hours before it hit the iceberg, it was surrounded.

[23 : 42] They didn't know it, but they were surrounded 360 degrees by massive, like 200 feet icebergs. And one of the things that was doing was it was creating a unique set of weather conditions because the cold air was kind of blowing right over them.

So observers on the deck, survivors spoke about the sea looking like they'd never seen it before, totally beautiful like glass. And as they looked up into the sky, the people on deck before they hit the iceberg said, it looked like there was more light than there was darkness in the sky.

And because of these tiny ice crystals that were formed in the air but were passing over the boat, as they looked up and they looked at the lamp decks, they saw tiny rainbows arced around.

They'd never had a more beautiful crossing. And yet within two hours, death and destruction.

Beauty turns to horror.

And sin does that. Sin promises, oh, this is going to be beautiful and wonderful and joyful. All it reveals is what's on the surface.

[24 : 50] It doesn't show what lies beneath like the iceberg. It doesn't want to tell us about the guilt that follows, the destruction sin brings, the consequences that often we have to live with for the rest of our lives.

Sin lies. Sin loves the dark. Bizarrely, I learned some things about mold.

Mold's a horrible object. So is sin. Like mold grows best in the dark and is only killed by direct sunlight in many cases.

So sin loves to live in the dark. And it justifies those secret sins that we hide in the dark. And it also makes us live with guilty secrets and imagine all that we'll ever have is darkness, leading us into despair.

What do we need? We need to bring sin into the light. As James chapter 5 says, we need to confess our sin and not cover up our sin.

[26 : 04] We need to bring our sin into the light of God's Word and the gospel where we discover there is a Savior, there is forgiveness, there is redemption. We need to bring our sin into the light.

Perhaps that looks like sharing it with a trusted friend. We need to expose ourselves to the promise of His grace. And we also need to think.

Think about the path that sin would lead us on. It saves pleasure. It leads to destruction. If we give ourselves over to sin, we are following a path that's leading us away from God, leading us away from the joy of communion with God.

And ultimately, as Jesus says, sin can lead us all the way to hell. So we need to learn to follow in our minds the path that sin would take us on so we don't go a step further.

To weigh lust and the balance compared to all that Jesus offers. We also need to learn to remove temptations. In a sense, that's what verses 29 and 30 are about.

[27 : 17] It's the radical surgery that Jesus commands. We need to actually take steps to blind ourselves to certain sights and certain images. That's why so many Christians use computing software like Covenant Eyes.

We need to stop certain behaviors. Perhaps that's going to be scrolling and clicking late at night. Perhaps it's about when and where we find ourselves at certain times of the day.

We need to guard our hearts by getting rid of sources of temptation. And then positively, we need to run to Jesus.

Jesus offers wonderful promises even within the Beatitudes. The second Beatitude. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

When we feel that guilt and sorrow over our sin as a follower of Jesus, we do so knowing there is comfort in the gospel, there is hope of forgiveness beyond our loss.

[28 : 19] Further down, the fourth Beatitude. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Those appetites and desires, they can be replaced.

We can find our hearts filled by Jesus and His love. We run to Jesus because we understand that He came to rescue us.

Jesus, the one and only perfectly pure person who ever lived, the one who shows us, here's what perfect love looks like, here's what perfect faithfulness to God the Father looks like, and here is what it looks like for me to wage war on sin, to go the way of the cross.

And as we run to Jesus, as we look to Jesus, we recognize that He willingly was loaded up with our sin, including our sexual sin. And when we're trusting in Him, we believe that He has paid the price in full, so that by His grace we are saved and we are set free.

And so we know as we come to Jesus, and in Christ we are not alone in the battle against sin.

We're not beyond hope when we find ourselves guilty of sin.

[29 : 31] There is real power in the gospel, in a Savior who forgives and restores and transforms. How can you and I beat our love of lust, our temptation, whatever that looks like?

We need to learn to replace it with a better love, that we would fill our hearts and our minds with Jesus. Let love for Christ Jesus squeeze out our love for the world, our love for lust.

We need to remember our first love, to rediscover Christ's grace for you and I. As we realize the depth of our sin, we understand again and again.

That's why Jesus came. Jesus has won a victory. Remember Jesus' words, those who've been forgiven much, they love much.

So we keep returning to Christ and His cross, that we would let grace be truly amazing to us, that we would see God's pure, faithful, forgiving, committed love be demonstrated to us at the cross of Christ.

[30 : 40] And understand that, that's where the power of change comes from. So may God give each of us grace and help, so that you and I, we would choose to live.

Let's pray together.