

Pluck out your eye

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[0 : 00] So the saying that we're looking at these tough sayings of Jesus I've taken it from the new international version.

tough sayings of Jesus and there's always the possibility that we can reduce it to something that's not tough I expect if we were clever with theology we could say it really means something else or exegesis, exegesis means looking at the exact words and their meaning and I'm sure we could be clever about that I've even brought my Greek New Testament because there's always a slender hope that you look into the original languages and it doesn't mean what everybody else thought it meant well don't pin your hopes on that too highly let's look at this, so it sounds tough and I think it actually is tough let's look at the so what we will do is look at the text what the text say and then I'll offer some comments and at some point probably open it up for your questions and observations and your comments but let's just look and see what Jesus said so we read in Matthew chapter 5 it's verses 29 and 30 that I'm thinking of

Matthew 5, 29 and 30 if your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out and throw it away it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell and if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell it's not me saying it it's what Jesus says we might take some comfort if it was just said once we say well that's a little bit of a blip however it is repeated Matthew 18 please look in your Bible to Matthew 18 slightly different context

Matthew 18 Jesus calls a little child to himself and he uses the likeness of a little child and says this is Christians are like little children they've got to be like little children and in verse 6 chapter 18 verse 6 he says if anyone causes of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung round his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea so this is causing someone else to sin that's how we get to this point and then Jesus says woe to the world because of things that cause people to sin such things must come but woe to the man through whom they come if your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire and if your eye causes you to sin gouge it out and throw it away it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell and we might say what a very barbaric idea of hell that's just the medieval church and pitchforks and all that sort of stuff but Jesus is the one who actually teaches about hell in these particular passages so that's what he said not only in Matthew's gospel but in Mark's gospel let's look at Mark chapter 9 similar to the Matthew passage the one that we just read

Mark chapter 9 verse 42 and if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied round his neck if your hand causes you to sin cut it off it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out and if your foot causes you to sin cut it off it is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell and if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched everyone will be salted with fire salt is good but if it loses its saltiness how can you make it salty again have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other and there is the slight hope we could say the last bit doesn't seem to connect very well don't know quite what he's talking about with salt so maybe we're not supposed to take very much notice of it but I don't think we can get away with that because even if we don't understand how the salt fits in the other bit is actually perfectly clear isn't it well we can take some comfort that it doesn't seem to be mentioned in Luke so take some comfort from that and in John's Gospel there doesn't seem to be anything similar in John's Gospel but in Romans

there does seem to be something rather similar

[6 : 40] Romans 8 verses 12 to 14 not exactly the same but it does mention the body and it does mention death violent action Romans 8 from verse 12 and he says therefore brothers we have an obligation but it is not to the sinful nature to live according to it for if you live according to the sinful nature you will die but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God the context is a bit more familiar doesn't quite have the brutality of cutting off your hand or gouging out your eye but it's not a million miles away is it it's saying this is the Christian life it's the Christian life in the power of the Spirit verse 14 and it's the Christian life that leads to life verse 14 it's the Christian life in relationship with God sorry that was verse 13 verse 14 those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God and it involves radical action contrary to what is what seems to be built into us in this physical world if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body yeah the actions of the body that seems to be what would otherwise come naturally to us that needs to be strangled needs to be fought against if you put to death the actions of the body you will live it's not a million miles away do you agree with me it's sort of in the same territory isn't it but it just sounds a little less threatening so I don't know whether that's got us any further forward

I would like to mention that Jesus is actually in many cases very positive about eyes and hands and feet and Jesus found people who were blind and he gave them back their sight and Jesus found people whose hands didn't work properly and he restored them to working and people who were lame and couldn't walk and Jesus set them on their feet again so I don't think Jesus is against people having eyes or against people having hands or against people having feet they're good things so let's allow ourselves the possibility that Jesus is speaking in a way at least which needs to be put into a context so don't go home and buy a meat cleaver or a skewer yet now let's look at the context so what I'd like to do is to go back to the Matthew passage and look at it a little bit more carefully and we can entertain the hope that if we look at it carefully it doesn't mean what it seems to mean but we'll just have to see won't we so we're in Matthew 5 so a helpful thing to do is look at the large context it's always helpful to put a saying into a context you wouldn't like people to take things you said out of context would you you'd want them to know but this is the situation in which I said it so let's look at

Jesus' sermon so I think the context of this is salvation by grace we were talking about that this morning salvation by grace he's not talking about earning our way to heaven by being brutal on ourselves he's saying the way to heaven is by casting ourselves on the mercy of God and coming to God trusting in him relying on him and that's why he begins by saying chapter 5 verse 3 blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven I think that's grace isn't it there's people who are saying Lord I know I'm such a sinner I get things wrong so often I really can't come to you all puffed up and say I thank you God I'm better than him and better than them more like the tax collector you remember in the story who came to God and hit himself on the chest and said God be merciful to me a sinner and Jesus said he went home right with God because he'd asked for mercy remember that and I think that's what Jesus is is referring to when he says blessed are the poor in spirit those are the people those are the people

I'm talking about and those are the people I'm talking to and then he says in verse 4 blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted I think he's he's on the line of people who say oh Lord my sin makes me weep I cannot be satisfied with myself as I am think of all the things that I've done that I'm to say that I wasn't proud of them would be an understatement I'm so sorry and I think Jesus is tapping into that blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted and he goes on blessed are the meek so I think this is salvation by grace that's the context that we're in would you agree with me on that so he's he's talking to people who are saved by grace and then I would like to focus in a little bit more he's talking about life in the kingdom if you look at chapter 5 verse 17 which we read

Jesus says do not think I've come to abolish the law of the prophets I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them and he talks about fulfilling the law in the kingdom of heaven verse 19 the kingdom of heaven and if you follow it right through to chapter 7 verse 12 which is near the end of the sermon he then says in everything do to others what you would have them do for this sums up the law and the prophets and it's like two bookends holding in a load of books in the middle do not think I've come to abolish the law of the prophets beginning this is the law and that this sums up the law and the prophets the end I think he's talking about what the life of the Christian ought to be like it

fulfills everything that the Bible says in the law and the prophet it fulfills it and Jesus says my people not only fulfill this but there's going to be a quality about their lives which exceeds merely rule keeping and pernicketyness about ticking boxes if you like verse 20 chapter 5 verse 20 [14:37] I tell you unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law you will not enter the kingdom of heaven so he's talking about salvation by grace and he's saying now this amazing salvation really touches people's lives and brings them into a spiritual place and a spiritual condition where there is a reality and a power at work within them which can't be touched by just ticking boxes and the law keeping of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law do you follow me on that he's saying there's a sort of a quality a quality a spiritual quality in the life of his people yeah you would be willing to follow me in that thought and then he having said having said my people saved in this way are going to live in really a supernatural remarkable way he then goes on to talk about some very practical things in terms of character or if you like in terms of living so that's why he talked about murder that's where in verse 21 so he talks about murder and he says okay if you want to do ticking the box have you imagine this on your tax form couldn't you please marital status tick that and then it's funny because my accountant sends me this and there's lots of boxes to tick and I'm never quite sure that

I've read it properly and got the right one and then the next box says are you blind I mean that's a proper question but I always feel it's rightly addressed to me you know and have you committed murder no have you committed murder in the last financial year no so you could say yes you could tick that couldn't you but Jesus says I'm actually interested in something that goes deeper than that I tell you there's something that goes on in your heart that might not get as far as murder but it's the same action in your heart anyone who is angry with his brother if you think I could just no that Jesus says well that's you know it's all of a peace really so that anger he says you're not to have that anger either do you see what I mean and he goes on to talk about making peace so he goes from murder we could tick that I haven't committed murder in the last financial year have I been angry a bit of a more of a searching question and then am I resolving issues with people and making peace see how he develops it so there's that bit then there's the bit that we're looking at which we'll come to in a moment then he talks about oaths verse 33 and you say

I'm not really quite sure what the oath bit is about and I say I'm not really quite sure either I think it's to do with the way people speak and the way they try and bring power into their words by linking their words with God or with Jesus and Mary or with all sorts of things and Jesus says there's something quite perverse about doing that we can leave that one then he talks about personal retribution in verses 38 to 42 you heard it said eye for eye tooth for tooth but I tell you don't take personal recrimination and then he broadens that out and says really what you're to be is generous if somebody wants to force you to go one mile go with them two miles go the extra mile so that's something about generosity and then see we're getting into deep water even if we're trying to make things simpler here the next bit he says love your enemies love your enemies love those annoying people love those people who you really profoundly disagree with love the people who have completely wacky political views etc and then he talks about giving money in chapter six but the bit that we so that's the context of it and the bit that we are looking at comes in where Jesus is talking about sexual ethics so verse 27 you heard this is about committing adultery and then in verse 31 and onwards it talks about divorce so it's Jesus that's saying these things this is the context in which he's saying it I don't know whether that makes it more or less palatable but that's what he says so we looked at the context and now let's look at the actual what he actually says we might as well look at the words and read them properly so verse 27 you have heard it was said do not commit adultery one of the ten commandments

Jesus is not going to undo this he's not going to say adultery is fine he's going to take it and intensify it and deepen it and fill it up just as he done with all the other things adultery is sexual union that breaks a covenant that the person had with somebody else or that you had with somebody else so it's covenant breaking sexual union and you might say well that's fine because I haven't committed adultery I'm just having sex with somebody who isn't anybody's wife and isn't my wife either I think Jesus would actually include that because that would be sexual union where there wasn't a covenant at all so don't take comfort in the fact that he just limited it to adultery so you say no I'm committed adultery I think he's actually taking that whole sexual ethic and intensifying it and deepening it because he says adultery is the outward thing

I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart and so he's now dealing with lust which is not the outward act but the inner desire and the active contemplation and at this point I can say that the rest of it is all male it's all he so the ladies can think well that's good for me because I don't have to pluck out my eye I don't have to cut off my hand because I don't look at women lustfully at least most of you are thinking that so breathe a sigh of relief okay well it's I don't know see what you think so ladies you're saying you don't have any inner desires or active contemplations of things that are wrong fair enough but Jesus here is saying blokes you haven't committed adultery but what's gone on in your in your thinking in your inner desire and he it's not the same thing as temptation

[22 : 29] I think it was Martin Luther who said you can't stop pigeons flying over your head but you can stop them making nests in your hair we can't stop temptations flitting around us but we can we're not to let the temptations make a home in our thinking and be welcome that's the point isn't it and he takes this lust and he locates this in the act of looking doesn't he verse 28 anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart so it's the look that is the trigger so it's the look and then and then and then and then and that's the context in which he says the look was the crucial point wasn't it so if you can what you need to do is stop at that point you need to attack that point and here's how to do it if your right eye literally stumbles you okay to trip you over if your right eye causes you to sin take it out so okay that's helpful the

Greek doesn't it the Greek just says take it out doesn't say gouge it out so the NIV put that in that was much more blood thirsty so we take a little bit of comfort from that so you just have to take your eye out take out your eye and throw it away if your notice the right eye your best eye eye if that's the one that does it notice he does say if if that's the problem if you can locate the source of the problem there then even if it was your right eye even if it's your best eye that's where you've got to take action I don't know is this making it more tame or is this or what this is what he's saying isn't it and similarly if your right hand causes you to sin verse 30 if your right hand causes you to sin if and your right hand for most people it's the best hand it's the important hand if that causes you to sin if that's the one that stumbles you what does he say cut it off and throw it away so

I notice that he's saying when he says right he means the best the key you know your most precious eye your best hand and the if seems to say if this is the precursor if this is the bit after this you're sinning then that's the bit you go for and you have to do it that's what he's saying and I think it's tough even if you say he's just speaking metaphorically let's have another look at what he actually says he gives a reason verse 29 and 30 both use the word better now I have to confess I only looked up one of these but let's assume they're both the same if it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell so I looked up better and it's sim ferro I'm sure that's helpful for us to know that it means the sim bit means together and the ferro presumably means to carry so it's a word which if you were to take it literally means to carry together so I suppose the idea it's helpfulness it's advantageous and I notice again here that

Jesus is not saying I want to spoil your fun I want to make life worse for you I want to make life miserable for you he's saying I want to make life better for you I want to bring to you something that's to your advantage and the point being if you agree with me on this that he's saying that a limited loss in this world is better than a total loss in the future that's the logic of it you agree with me I mean this is he either means this or it's complete nonsense this is what he means isn't it it's better to deliberately have a limited loss in this world than a total loss in the future that's the logic of it please notice the assumption behind it which is a tough one the assumption is that continued unchanged sin in our lives will take us to hell that's the assumption what

[28 : 48] Jesus says doesn't make sense without that assumption continued unchanged sin in our lives will take us to hell it's better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go to hell there's two alternatives either you carry on sinning and the whole body goes to hell or you make an attack on sin and you don't go to hell now again you see I would much rather say something that's inspiring and cheerful and happy but if I'm going to be true to what Jesus says I've got to say what he says and that's what he's saying isn't it you might say it's very primitive one of my ministerial colleagues in Linfield got a very he preached on hell and he got a very indignant letter from one of his parishioners saying dear reverend so and so you have been preaching medievalism we thought the church had escaped all that the Bible is a

God of love but Jesus is saying something different isn't he he's saying that sin is so serious that if it keeps hold of our lives unchecked unchecked unchanged untouched it will take men and women to hell I think it's very hard for us to give the full weight to what he says because it's so stark and so frightening so let's think of some applications or think how this might work out so let's think about pornography this is what Jesus has been talking about he's been talking about lust and he talks he seems to be at least in the first instance addressing this to men and men are very simple creatures sexually

I once saw a poster on an undergraduate wall which said the way you can tell whether a man is sexually aroused is to see whether he's breathing or not I think it's a little bit unkind but I think Jesus is aware as we are today that men are prone to lust and if it was true in those days in a very conservative society how much more true is it today where unclean unhelpful debasing pictures TV programs magazine magazines so frighteningly readily available so

I'm thinking TV I'm thinking websites I'm thinking magazines I don't know what your definition of pornography is would you say page 3 of the sun is pornographic if you say it's meant to be sexually arousing I think you'd probably be right I don't know what the correct definition of pornography is but Jesus is saying if that look causes you to sin you have got to find some way of stopping that so if you subscribe to the sun perhaps you ought to cut off your subscription or if you ought to find a way of turning off the computer what he's saying is you really have I say we we really have got to keep on at how to attack sin at its first stages

I don't think that's easy and if I could give you a nice easy way to do it I would I don't think Jesus is telling us that it's easy because he uses this tough metaphor he says it's like cutting off your right hand and I would venture to say that you can only cut off your right hand once but in this sort of warfare against sin it's something that needs to be done again and again and again it's a constantly moving battle maybe I'm being too graphic with this I don't know but that was one thought that came to my mind and then I thought perhaps what Jesus said might apply to what rather than cutting off your feet so you can't even go to work either would be to say

[34 : 59] I won't go that route I'll go a different way maybe that would be quite an easy way out and then I'm thinking could we would it be a legitimate thing to say maybe Jesus maybe this impinges on our relationships maybe there's a relationship in in our lives which is the trigger point for sin and we know that this person this relationship will get in the way between me and God and I suppose you could carry on but Jesus actually says tough things doesn't he if such and such if that's the cause of sin Jesus is saying there's a radical answer just stop at that first point it's tough isn't it and that if that's a correct application might be very costly might say you know a young woman might be saying this person is probably the only offer of marriage

I'm likely to get this person I have no security that this person is not going to lead me away from the Lord a very difficult decision that would be wouldn't it but I think Jesus is talking tough stuff well I've got one more thing to say but I'm going to stop at this point and ask whether you think this has made sense and whether you think this is going the right direction and what Jesus is saying so I'll stop for a minute any thoughts you're now going to be on national television or something like that yeah where you said unchanged sin in our lives will take us to hell well

I suppose I've been well it really struck me because I think it's true for well I never really thought it was true for Christians but there's definitely that sort of accounts through history where men become or humans become so evil that their remorse they have no remorse and it's almost as if God well it says like God it comes to a point where God hands them over and turns his back on them and doesn't allow them because everything that's good is God's presence and so I was struck by that and from watching because I watched 12 Years a Slave and looking at the plantation owners and not all of them were horrible men but they refused to listen to their consciences and some of them were corrupted by that and their conscience left them and they became monsters so that's

I find that interesting and devastating as well yes it is it is a frightening process of hardening that there is a downward spiral of refusing to listen to conscience and turning away from the Lord yeah that's that's right that's right so people can become more and more inhuman couldn't they here's another thought do you think that people could go to hell even if they were I don't know consultant gynecologists it's a very humane thing to be but if that person never dealt with I don't know selfishness short temper but that person would go to hell as well do you think as a non-Christian of course yeah well yeah this is another question so is there a get out clause which says if your right

hand causes you to sin throw it away if you're not a Christian but if you are a Christian if your right hand causes you to sin you don't have to worry because you're okay I'm not asking I'm not trying to make it awkward for you I'm just asking everybody that is there a get out clause it's interesting isn't it he I don't think he allows us to minimize the force of it by saying oh well that doesn't include us I think he says no you feel the force of this if you even if you say you're a Christian whatever you say let's put it down to real nitty gritty in your life are there things that you are failing to deal with oh goodness we all have ups and downs don't we you know we all struggle but he says no hang on if there are things that you are genuinely not failing that you are failing to deal with that will take you to hell I think that's what he's saying isn't it so we deal with it if you're a Christian you heed the warnings so Romans 8 says if if if if you live according to the sinful nature you will die but if by the spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live there are only two ways to do it you either live according to the sinful nature or you live contrary to the sinful nature and you attack the sinful nature and by the power of the spirit you put things in your life to death not saying people are going to be perfect not saying there won't be an ongoing struggle but at least you're fighting does that make sense

[42 : 01] I was saying I remember another quote alongside that Martin Luther quote about you can't stop the birds flung over your head but you can stop them making nests in your hair and it's Garrison Keillor who I think it was like a take off of the Southern Baptists if you didn't want to go to Minneapolis why did you get on the train and we use that frequently to teaching this to young people because you deliberately get on the train when you go the first step and what you're suggesting is that we hold ourselves back at the first step you don't have to get on the train and I heard a story actually and I don't remember it was George Verwa himself who was telling it but it was about him struggling with this issue of lustful looks and so on he was preaching he got up to preach and there was a girl sitting in the front row with a very low coat dress and he just said

I'm sorry I can't cope with this would you pass a cardigan forward so she can put a cardigan on and he was in effect plucking out his eye in that context he was doing if you didn't want to go to Minneapolis well don't get on the train cut it out at the first stage he didn't have to pluck out his eye what he needed was a cardigan for the girl to wear so it's the same practical step I see the logic of it practical steps yes yes I suppose he could have gone to another church and preached there instead any more thoughts a general comment I think about many of these sayings of Jesus is that in a sense I think they're meant to be impossible because he's actually saying your righteousness has got to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees he says I tell you the truth not the smallest letter or least stroke of a pen will be taken from the law until all is accomplished until all is accomplished and so

I think he's actually making us see that in the flesh it is impossible you couldn't do it could you there are very few people who could actually pluck out their eye or cut off their wrist you couldn't do it and I think in a sense it's meant to teach us to trust in the grace of Christ and to live by the spirit I'm sure what you say is right the idea is that I like that phrase actually if you don't want to go to Minneapolis don't get on the train yes and I'm sure that's what it means in practice but I think also it's deliberately meant to be impossible to illustrate the difficulty in fact of getting free from sin when you say it's meant to be impossible that means that we're meant to read it and say oh well this is so impossible we might as well disregard it altogether is that what no what I mean is it says we're meant to depend on God's grace and say only by the spirit can we put to death the deeds of the flesh with man it's impossible

I mean it's like the camel going he says I couldn't find the text but it's a similar thing where he says a rich man can't enter the kingdom of God it's easier to get a camel through the eye of the needle and he says with men it is impossible but with God nothing is impossible and I think that implicit in this is the idea that it's only through grace and through the spirit that these things can be done at all supernatural isn't it yes yeah thank you Steve well we'll sing in a moment shall we and then let me just offer you the one extra thought which was in the other texts which is like in Matthew 9 42 the connection is not so much what we I don't think it's so much have I given you the right reference no Mark 9 42 thank you yeah the reference there is not so much the effect it has directly on us but even more frightening thought the effect that we have on other people if if anyone who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large mill turned around his neck

I mean I agree with Steve he's using the language of extremes but it that's the language he's using and he's saying how awful if our sin messes up somebody else's life and causes them to sin I think that's it's such a what shall I say a daunting devastating thought yeah microphone thank you I think it was very helpful what you said about context and the fact that these particular points are set in that context of those particular verses because Jesus saying here is very direct and [47 : 54] I suppose it's a problem for all of us we look at the stuff either side of it so I don't have a problem with the oath business and I think I can keep my control of my temper and so forth and that balances my problem in the other area so we kind of evade the issue and say I've got a problem there but that's just my little problem the rest I'm pretty good at get by and really what Jesus is attacking is saying if you've got a problem in that area you've got to deal with that area rather than try to do a bargain yes yes it's a very what do I say to try and put into words the way that Jesus is not letting us off the hook is he he's not letting us off the hook and saying ah well really it doesn't matter too much it sounds as though it matters but it doesn't I think he is saying to us the spiritual life really is a serious one there are serious issues and you've got to be serious about them we've got to be serious about them it's a bit of a kick up the backside for us isn't it do you think I think it is um Thank you.