

Sermon on the Mount: Adultery on Two Levels

by J. Glyn Owen

Jesus teaches that adultery can take place on two levels: physical and in the heart, and requires heart purity and holiness.

Duration: 58:27

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:25-27, Matthew 5:27-30, Matthew 26:26-28

Topics: "Sermon on the Mount"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher addresses the issue of people going through the motions of becoming Christians without truly understanding the realities of it. He emphasizes that even education and knowledge of the truth of God are not enough to save us, as it must reach the depths of our hearts. The preacher then focuses on the seventh commandment, discussing the popular understanding of it among the Jews of Jesus' time and how Jesus corrects their inadequate interpretation. He concludes by reminding the audience that the grace of God meets the needs of every sinner and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers salvation to all.

Transcript

Looking around the congregation this morning, I notice two or three here who've not been able to be among us for some time, and it's very good to see you out particularly. Some of you have been unwell, some of you have been rendered immobile, and you're out with us on this, should I say, lovely summer's morning, summer and midwinter. It certainly is a lovely day and we're so glad to have you.

And there are visitors among us, we're delighted to have you likewise, as Mr. MacLeod has already indicated. May I underscore the invitation to the gathering on Friday evening, the Christmas play entitled, Who Stole Christmas? I guess most of us knew that Christmas had been stolen, didn't you? Oh yes. And if you want to know who stole Christmas, Friday night's the night.

Now I would like to ask you to come with me again this morning to further challenging words in the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to read as the basis of our meditation verses 27 to 30 in chapter 5, and you will find it helpful, I'm quite sure, if you have your New Testament open before you. Matthew chapter 5, a passage that begins with verse 27.

You have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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.

Adultery on two levels. The consistent reading and exposition of Scripture will involve us sooner or later in every phase and every aspect of life. The Word of God is most realistic and most all embracing.

It covers everything in this life and it relates to all we need to know about the next. So that if we read it carefully and if we expound it with any reasonable thoroughness and consistency, over a period of time we have to deal with every issue under the sun. And so we come this morning to something that we might not normally choose to speak about, but something which is found in the Word of God and something which is written large across the face of society.

Something which needs to be addressed and something I trust we can with some measure of delicacy look at prayerfully this morning. Recognizing the importance of the sexual and emotional aspects of every normal life, Scripture addresses this issue too. Now let's say as we come to this that there are of course sins of the spirit as well as sins of the flesh.

And if you have been with us as we've been moving through the Beatitudes you will have noticed I'm quite sure that there the burden of our Lord's teaching has to deal with the sins of the spirit. Particularly the spirit of pride, feeling that we are something very special and that we have a right in the sight of God and we can make it on our own. And right at the beginning of the Beatitudes our Lord pricks our bubble and he says no no, blessed are the bankrupt, the poor in spirit.

And he goes on throughout the Beatitudes to deal with sins of the spirit. And he will come back to that again before we're through in this very chapter 5 and on into chapter 6. He has much to say about the sins of the spirit. Well here this morning we have to take up the subject of adultery.

And it may be distasteful to some of you good people here, particularly that we have to deal with it publicly. Well now it is in Holy Writ, it is in the Word of God, it is expounded by the Son of God. And so it can be faced and it can be discussed and it can be considered in the power of the Spirit to our eternal profit.

And I ask you inwardly in our hearts to pray with me that we shall profit from it rather than otherwise this morning. One other thing I want to say by way of introduction is this. It would be a terrifying thing for a preacher to have to go into a subject like this without being reminded right at the outset that the grace of God meets the need of every sinner.

That when the Bible exposes our sins it does not do so in order to delight in our undoing and our mere exposure. And part of the wonder of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to me is this, that it is a gospel that meets us right where we are. Now you may never have committed physical adultery.

I think you will be challenged as we come to this passage this morning to consider whether you have been an adulterer in your heart. But before we come to that, the gospel way of salvation is usually enunciated at the end of a message. Well I want to do it at the beginning.

And I want you to know that whatever the Lord may show you to be your need today, the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ shed on the cross, the mercy of God in his Savior is sufficient to meet

every need and every exigency. I would like you to come to this text with me remembering the words of the hymn, or rather the truth behind the words of the hymn. You know it very well.

There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. Now let's look at it. What have we before us in this amazing passage? There are three things I want to look at.

The first, rather briefly, and the last two with a little more time I trust. First of all we're going to look at the conception of the seventh commandment that was popular among the Jews of our Lord's day. Secondly, we shall look at the correction of that inadequate understanding of the commandment, the correction of it by Jesus.

And thirdly, we shall look at some consequences accruing from that correction, consequences that we ourselves have to face. Now first of all then, the conception of the seventh commandment popularly abroad among the Jews of our Lord's day. You have heard that it was said, says Jesus, do not commit adultery.

Now Jesus is here quoting of course, as you will be quite aware, he is quoting directly from the seventh commandment. And you will find a record of that in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 14, or in Deuteronomy chapter 5 and verse 18. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

That is a word of God that has not changed, that has not been modified over the years. It is a word of God to his human creatures and to his people. Jesus then is here quoting from the Decalogue, from the Ten Commandments.

The New American Webster Dictionary defines adultery in these words, illicit relations between a married person and another than his lawful spouse. Illicit relations between a married person and another than his lawful spouse. Now apart from making it clear that the adulterer may be male or female, that definition seems quite adequate, it seems to me.

Another word is used sometimes in Scripture with regards to sexual sins, the word fornication. And if you are trying to understand what the Scriptures have to say about this subject, you will sooner or later come across that word. That sometimes includes adultery.

There are a number of passages, I think over a dozen of them, where it includes adultery. Though fornication usually refers to illicit sexual relations between unmarried people outside a wedlock, where intercourse is prohibited according to Scripture. Adultery, however, let me repeat, implies that at least one of the parties involved in physical intercourse is married, whilst the other person is not his or her rightful spouse.

That is what makes it adultery. Now whereas many of our contemporaries see no wrong whatsoever in adultery, and some even believe that it's a mark of adulthood. You've probably heard the play on the words.

They say that the one belongs to the other. If you're an adult, you've grown up, you don't confine yourselves to the limits set by the Old Testament or the New. You don't need these anymore, you've grown up, you've become an adult.

Well, God has forbidden it from the beginning of time. And our Lord Jesus Christ ratified that in day and for his day and age, and assured his disciples that the word still holds, or still held, and it still does today. The Christian Church has always considered God's revealed order to involve an exclusive relationship between one man and one wife, and no one must intrude.

No one has power to break that relationship. If he or she does intrude where he or she shouldn't, adultery is the consequence. For either party in a marriage to break that bond by having sexual relations with someone else is to commit adultery.

And God clearly prohibits it. Now in the Old Testament you will remember this was a capital offense. It was, it was, it was meted with death.

It was treated like the most serious thing you could do in society. And that was because, of course, the consciousness of God was more real among his people in those days. In Jesus' day, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were not backward when it pleased them.

Mind you, they didn't regularly do it. But when it pleased them, as in John chapter 8 verses 1 to 11, they would bring a woman who had ostensibly been caught in the very act of adultery, they would bring her even into the temple and into the presence of the Savior and say, we've caught her in the act. And with great glee they required that he carry out the law of Moses and stone her.

He agreed with her, of course, with them, of course, that the act, if she had been thus found guilty, was reprehensible. And he turned to them and he says, now whoever is without sin among you, be the first to cast the first stone. I know, I know, he says, this is what the Old Testament says.

And whoever is among sin, without sin among you, start off the business. And do you remember what happened, of course? The light of the world shone into the darkness of their souls, and they went out sneakily, one after the other. For he had brought into their consciousness the awareness of the fact that they had no right to stone her, even though the Old Testament required it.

And Jesus told her, go and sin no more. The marriage bond between two people is not to be desecrated by the invasion of any third party into it. Those of you who are married, I suggest to you that the moment you see any third party more than reasonably interested in you, cut it short.

Nevertheless, that view of adultery was inadequate, says Jesus. And so we come to the second point, Jesus' correction of that inadequate view. That was all right as far as it went, but listen to his words.

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Our Lord now introduces into the picture a still more serious and far-reaching factor, and a very challenging one. He says that adultery can take place on another level altogether than the physical.

You see, the Pharisees prided themselves. They'd not committed physical adultery. They'd not invaded the precincts of marriage at any given time, and come between a man and his wife.

And so they said, we're innocent. No one can point the finger at us. We've never committed adultery.

And so they felt so proud about it. They'd achieved something. But here is something that completely disturbs them.

Jesus says, to look at a woman lustfully, you've already committed adultery in your heart, and it is no less culpable and reprehensible on that account. True, of course, the damage done by committing adultery in your heart rather than physically, the damage done is less. Socially, imaginary excursions into the realms of sexual fantasy and gratification do not add to the number of fatherless children roaming our streets, or lonely single parents.

Commit adultery in your imagination, and you don't have that kind of consequence to deal with. Nevertheless, in the sight of God, we're on the same level. Adultery in the heart is as serious as adultery physically.

And here our Lord brings us all down into the place of real self-examination, and bids us look at ourselves in the light of His Word, and of the standard set for us. In the words of verse 28, and the rest of the passage now before us then, the King of the realm, let's get this clear, let's get the context, let's get the backdrop. The King of the kingdom, He's come to establish the kingdom of God.

His servants are His subjects. He is now telling us something about the mandate, the manifesto of that kingdom. And He's writing into the manifesto of His kingdom the fact that not only is adultery wrong on the physical level, it is wrong on this other level too.

The righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees requires of us, as David says it in Psalm 51, Anyone, says Jesus, who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Now Jesus' correction was in line with the tenth commandment, the tenth commandment. Those of ancient times, as well as their scribal and pharisaic successors in Jesus' day, were quite right about adultery as far as they went.

It is wrong to commit adultery, the physical act. The physical act of intercourse between a married person and anyone other than his or her lawful spouse is wrong in the sight of God. I'm repeating it.

I hope you'll bear with me. God has gone on record as warning us against it. That is wrong.

Nevertheless, to confine adultery to the physical act alone does not do justice to the law of God. Even the ten commandments, if we read them through and studied them carefully, requires more. For the tenth commandment says that we shouldn't covet our neighbor's wife, not covet her.

You shouldn't in your heart of hearts allow your emotions to fix on a man or a woman betrothed to another. You have no right as a creature to fall in love, as we say, as if we couldn't. We couldn't avoid it.

With anyone who is wedded to another person, a married person is out of bounds for any one of us. The tenth commandment said that even to covet a wife, the wife of another, is wrong. Moreover, you know, the prophets had something to say about this and many other things that come into this larger category.

When they often stressed to the Jewish people that it was not enough to be circumcised physically to bear the physical mark of circumcision in the flesh. And if you remember the prophets, if you read them, as I hope you do, you will discover that over and over again they were telling Israel, look, they would say, you must be circumcised of heart, heart circumcision, so that your heart is turned toward the Lord and your heart marks you out as a man or a woman of God. And not just the fact that you have circumcision in the body.

In verse 28, therefore, Jesus corrects that inadequate representation of the divine intent as expressed in the law as a whole. And with all his profound personal authority, he assures his followers that it was all too possible to commit adultery in the imagination, in the mind, in the heart. Now we owe it to Jesus, of course.

And we owe it to ourselves not to misconstrue his words. It'd be very easy to do that. You need to read carefully here.

Note very carefully that Jesus did not say, and he did not suggest, that looking at a woman, or a man for that matter, is necessarily evil. He did not say that looking at the human body, the male or the female, is necessarily evil. To the pure, says Paul, all things are pure.

It is not impossible to admire the beauty of the marvelously made human body, male or female, and remain pure in the act. It is not impossible by the grace of God. If it were not for that, then you and I would virtually have to go out of this world, if we wanted to be pure.

The sin is not in the looking, but in the lusting. You say, what's the difference? Well, the difference is this. If you know something about the power of the grace of God in your soul, you can admire the physical frame of male or female, and that can be legitimate, and that can be pure.

But if you allow the vision of that body to entice you, and you seek, and you desire in your soul to use that body to gratify your lust, and in your imagination you go through these acts, that is sin in the sight of God. That is sin in the sight of God. You've already committed it.

It's gone on. Dr. D. A. Carson, who once, more than once probably, but at least once in recent times, spoke at our summer fellowship gathering here. He writes as follows.

This is not a prohibition of the normal attraction which exists between men and women, but of the deep-seated lust which consumes and devours, which in imagination attacks and rapes, which mentally contemplates and then commits adultery. If our society is easing off from the prohibition of adultery, how much more does it cater to our sexual lusts? Our advertisements sell by sexual titillation. Our bookstores fill their racks with both the salacious and the perverted.

The vast majority of pop songs focus on man-woman relations, usually in terms of satisfying sex, physical desire, infidelity, and the like. Into this society, Jesus speaks his piercing word. Anyone who looks after a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart.

Now, Jesus' correction became the basis of the whole New Testament teaching about sexual morality. The apostles of Christ taught an ethic and a gospel which was in principle altogether unlike anything taught by the scribes and the Pharisees. And it was altogether different in many ways, but specifically now in this respect.

It required heart purity and not just behavioral consistency on the levels of decency. Of course, it required behavior that was consistent, but it required something deeper. It required heart purity.

It wasn't adequate just to do the right thing, and be in the right place, and say the right shibboleths. Something deeper, something greater was required. Holiness in the heart.

The Pharisees taught that we should be content with external adherence to the law. Jesus requires something different, something beyond that. To the Pharisees, if you tithe your belongings, if you said your set prayers, if you kept the feasts and the Sabbath day regularly from sunset, from sunrise to sunset, I nearly put it the other way around, but if you kept the set feasts and you did the right things and you were in the right places, then all's well.

No one expects any more of you. Jesus said, don't you believe it. God looks at the heart.

Man judges with the eyes. God looks at the heart. There is no holiness in scripture which is not holiness of heart.

And Jesus wrote this, his correction, let me repeat, into the manifesto of his kingdom and under the reign of Jesus to this very day, this is the normative principle. Just therefore as he previously taught that anger was incipient murder, murder in the bud, so now does Jesus teach that a lustful look is incipient adultery. As far as the inner person of the heart is concerned, he or she can commit the act in imagination.

Indeed, I think we ought to go beyond that and say there would be few if any physical acts of adultery had they not been already practiced, gone through in the heart. That's what Jesus said, out of the heart of man comes forth adultery. Adultery has generally taken place in the heart before it becomes a physical reality.

It's been practiced in the imagination. It's been thought of. It's been decided.

I'm going to gratify myself. Then comes the act. Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornication, and the rest of them.

Mark 7, 20 to 23. Now these words, brothers and sisters, I don't need to tell you, these words are terribly challenging. See, if I was reading from the newspaper this morning, which of course couldn't be possible.

Newspaper wouldn't have anything like this, anything of this order for us to read from it anyway. But assuming that it did, or I was reading from a Christian journal, well now, you and I could shake our heads and say, well that's so-and-so's view. And I hope none of you will dare say this is the view of a man in the pulpit this morning.

It happens to be my view, but that's not the important thing. This is the king speaking. This is your lord speaking.

This is the savior talking. This is the incarnate lord addressing the subjects of his kingdom. And you can't quarrel with this, my brother or sister, without quarreling with a king.

This is serious. The prevailing conception of the seventh commandment, the personal correction of it by Jesus. Some considerations of this correction.

Verses 29 to 30. If your right eye causes you to sin, what? Did I get that right? If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

And in each case, it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Now that's not me speaking, that's my lord and yours, Christian. Our lord makes it very clear that his correction of the pharisaic view of adultery has enormous consequences.

The language of these verses is terribly strong. Jesus speaks out of a sense of peril. He is in dead earnest here, you know.

And he's in dead earnest because he sees where it leads. And he doesn't want us to face the danger to which he refers. Now there are two things I want to say.

Under this last heading. The first, it is really to take up something to which we've already referred. Not because of lack of other material, there's much more that could be said.

But I think this is the most important thing to say. The need for heart purity is paramount. The need for purity of heart is paramount.

An impeccable life does not really count for anything in the sight of God unless it is the expression of a purity of soul within. Men may be content with visible adherence to the law. God who reads our hearts requires the heart in the action and consistent with the action.

Now we see the genius and uniqueness of the Christian faith in this, as in other areas. Not only are its demands greater you notice, I have to stress this again today. Some people tell us that the law was terrifying in its demands and when you come to the New Testament it's much easier.

Well they've never read the Sermon on the Mount, that's all I know. This is far more demanding than anything you read or hear on Sinai slopes. It is more demanding because it is repeated.

It is a repetition by the God incarnate of what was implicit in the 10th commandment, thou shalt not covet. But now he makes it explicit and he applies it and he drives it home and it becomes part of the manifesto of his kingdom. And so it has all the weight of God the Father and God the Son behind it and it applies to our Christian era and age without any question whatsoever.

But we see the genius and the uniqueness of the Christian faith here. Its demands are greater, but you see, part of the glory of our gospel is this, though its demands are greater, its provisions are adequate. There is provision in the gospel promised in the New Testament and prefigured, fulfilled in Christ and declared by the Apostle.

There is sufficiency in the gospel to meet all the requirements of God. There are certain features you know inbuilt into the predictions of the Old Testament which underline what I am feebly trying to say now. You and I are fairly familiar with the habit of going back to the Old Testament and seeing how a savior was promised, a messiah, the messiah.

And then we trace the messianic passages through and we say they were fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. That's fine. I hope we do more of it at Christmas time.

But now listen, there's a slight variation of that. Not only is that so, but in the Old Testament we are told what kind of salvation to expect from the promised savior. And unless the gospel preached by men in the New Testament era comes up to that which is prophesied about the gospel that was to come, then it is short of the reality.

What were the characteristics of the gospel promised in the Old Testament? Now for brevity's sake I'm going to confine myself to a nutshell. I just want to refer to two or three main things made very, very clear, for example, by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Both of them announced that the new covenant that

God would eventually make with men would consist of certain things very specifically, very specifically.

Now if you want the record it's found in Jeremiah 31 verses 31 to 34 and in Ezekiel 36 verses 25 to 27. Let me read the Ezekiel passage to you. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, says God, and you will be clean.

And I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit in you and I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws.

Now my friends listen. On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus when he had taken the bread took the cup. Do you remember what he said? This is the new covenant in my blood.

What did you say Jesus? This is it. This is what? This is the gospel that was promised. This is the salvation that was covenanted.

This is the day of the new covenant in my blood, what the prophets promised, the kind of salvation that was to come, as well as the kind of Savior. The kind of salvation that was to come is here in me. Well you say what is that kind of salvation? It's the kind of salvation that gives men a cleansed heart.

The kind of salvation that takes away the old carnal heart that we've had from Adam, that takes us down to sin and shame, takes away the heart of stone that is hard towards God, and gives us a new heart of flesh, sensitive towards God. Over and above that, that gives us the spirit of God to indwell our new hearts and constrains us to walk in his law. That's the gospel.

So that whenever God commands anything, you see, he gives us a heart inclined to do it, and the spirit to enable us to do it. And this is the gospel. And if the gospel does not do that, then my friends, it's not the gospel.

And any experience that knows nothing of this is not Christian experience. Now this is serious. Someone told me only yesterday on the telephone, that he'd walked to the front to the altar, as he put it, at least nine times, but he still isn't sure what it's all about.

And he says, I don't know what it was for. Oh my dear people, we're living in a terrible day, when men and women are sometimes going through the motions of what they deem constitutes becoming a Christian, but they've not got down to the realities of it. And there are those who are leading them astray.

This is the gospel promised. He breaks the power of cancelled sin. He sets the prisoner free.

Time was when people said that education can do everything you need. I don't say that anymore. At least I don't meet them.

Education can do much for us. But we find today that some of our most educated people are the greatest of rebels, morally. Masters within their own field, but in their own hearts, lost, degraded, and degrading.

No, no, no, no. Listen, not even having the truth of God in our minds, educating our minds, even that does not save us. It's got to get deeper.

It's got to reach the heart. It's got to transform the inner man. He must be born again.

If any man be in Christ, there is a new creation. Old things are passed away. Behold, everything has become new.

We must not therefore be content with any head knowledge even of the truth. Now the other thing I wanted to say, and with this I shall be closing. Having been inwardly cleansed and renewed by the Spirit of God, after that we shall still have to guard ourselves against the entrance of polluting influence or influences reaching inwards into our souls via the sight of the eye, or the hearing of the ear, or the taste of the mouth, or the touch of the hand, or whatever.

See that's what Jesus had in mind when he said, if your right eye causes you to sin, cut it out, cut it away. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off, throw it away. What's he getting at? Well now, mark the hypothetical considerations there.

Notice please, it's very important to get this rightly. If, that's hypothetical. This is not a general statement addressed to everybody.

Christian, you've got to get rid of your right hand, or your left hand, or your right eye, or your left eye. That's not what he's saying. It all hangs on an if, a hypothetical case.

If your right eye causes you to sin, do your eyes cause you to sin? Do you sin because of what you're looking at? Do you find sin invading your soul through your eyes? Is your soul impure because of what you look at or read? That's the kind of thing he's got in mind. If your right eye causes you to sin, if your right hand causes you to sin, that's the hypothetical consideration here. The same principle would hold, of course, if it were your right ear, or your left ear for that matter, or your mouth, or whatever.

Now, the Greek verb for cause you to sin is a very, very graphic one. I've been reading again the different expositions of this in order to try and make it clear, and I have concluded that so much is involved in this. I just want to give it to you as best I can, very briefly.

The Greek verb for cause you to sin is, in both verses, comes from a root, meaning stick of a bait, the stick of a bait. Now, we're in the same environment as we were in when I was talking to the kids this morning. People trying to catch something or other in a trap or in a cage.

It refers to that part of a trap, the stick or the arm, whatever you call it, on which you put the bait to entice a little creature into a cage or into a trap, okay? And it's the same little lever that sets go the mechanism that closes the trap when once the little creatures come in. Scandalon, that's the word. It sets off the mechanism that closes the door of the trap or the cage once the animal is inside, you see.

Now, says one of our great Greek scholars of the last number of years, he says, behind the use of that language by our Lord, there are two important pictures dominating his mind of necessity, if he used this word meaningfully and deliberately, as we believe he did. The first is of a hidden stone on a path. You can't see it, but you're going on the path and there's a hidden stone there, and if you go on the way you're going to do, you're going to kick against it and you're going to trip.

Or a variant of that is this. Somebody has put a string across your path and has deliberately put it there, and if you go on the way you're going, you're going to trip again, you're going to catch in the cord, and you're going to tumble over. That's one picture.

Something on the path against which you're going to trip. But now notice a second dominant picture in the mind, as it were, when you thoughtfully use this word is this. It's that of a pit dug a little bit ahead of you.

It may have been covered by some branches or some turf or other, you don't see it, you're walking down the path, you trip and you throw yourself, you go hurtling into the pit. The scandal on is what trips a man and sends him crashing into the pit, crashing into destruction. In the words of Jesus, brothers and sisters, let me say it to be honest, it is going crashing to hell.

Jesus says that we must be prepared to cut off any limb that could cause us to trip and send us hurtling to hell. Better a mutilated body in this world, he says, than a scarless one in hell. The cost of such mutilation is not excessive, whether it's gouging out the eye or cutting off the right hand.

The cost, the pain, is not excessive when you consider what you're saving yourself from, says Jesus. Now, did our Lord mean that we should literally do that? Did he mean that we should literally cut off our right hand or gouge out our right eyes or right ear or whatever you have? Well, there are those who've understood it like that. Or again, of Alexandria, living towards the end of the second century and into the third, he believed that literally, and he practiced it, and he practiced it.

He became an extreme ascetic. He went for months and months and hardly slept more than a couple of hours, maybe half an hour a night, sometimes more. On long stretches, he wouldn't sleep, and he wouldn't eat, and he wouldn't drink, and people didn't know how he was alive.

What kept him alive? He was an extreme ascetic, denying himself not only possessions but all comforts of the body, and he finally got himself castrated so that he would not be sexually tempted. He cut everything off. Now, whatever you say about him, his heart was right with God, for he was prepared to pay any price not to sin.

Oh, for that spirit in my heart and yours. But to return to our Lord's words, gouging out one's right eye still leaves me with a left one, doesn't it? And cutting off my right hand still leaves me with another one, a left one. And you see, I can as well lust with my one left eye as I could with the right one, or the two of them.

And I can touch the illicit thing. I can put my hand on a woman who is wedded to another man, and I can tantalize her. I know exactly what to do.

And my left hand can do it just as my right can. So actually, tearing away the right eye or the right hand doesn't really deal with it ultimately. So we conclude, and particularly from a passage in Matthew chapter 18, I can't go there now, that probably Jesus did not mean us to take it literally, but he did mean us to take it realistically.

And what he was really saying is this. Look here. In order to get rid of sin from your lives, you must cut away every conceivable thing.

You must break from every conceivable avenue whereby sin from the outside comes, or temptation comes from the outside, and entices the sin of your soul, and you dishonor your Lord. Whatever causes us to stumble morally should be tackled with urgency and determination. I believe that is what our Lord is saying.

Let me quote to you from William Hendrickson, who has got a very pungent word here. He says, Dilly dallying is deadly. Halfway measures work havoc.

The surgery must be radical. Right at this very moment, he says, and without any vacillation, that obscene book needs to be burned. That scandalous picture needs to be destroyed.

That soul-destroying film needs to be condemned. That sinister yet intimate social tie has to be broken, and the baneful habit discarded. Cut off the avenues into your soul that become the agents of the devil, and stir sin in your innermost being.

Cut them off. Jesus therefore warns us twice over of this danger. Elsewhere we read that even parents, even children, who stand between us and our Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to him, we should be prepared to leave them, to forsake them.

Even children, even parents. No one, nothing is to be allowed to pollute the heart and turn it away from living acceptably to God. Now I close.

I believe that this is the right interpretation of this, and you'll find it in Paul's teaching on the mortification of the flesh. You can follow it through in Romans chapter 8, verse 13 for example. If you live according to the sinful nature, says Paul, you will die.

But if by the spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. That's right. Do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature, or as the King James puts it, make no provision for the flesh to satisfy the lust thereof.

Make no provision for it. Or as he puts it in writing to the Colossians, put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. Put them all to death, says Paul.

Treat them as if they were dead and don't live for them. Don't respond to them. Close your life to them.

Don't let them bring their influences into your soul. And yet my friends, we must say, all this negative side requires the positive. You and I need, according to the whole picture of the Sermon on the Mount, not only to tear things away from us and to get rid of those things that bring impurity into our souls and dishonor into our lives, but we need the power of the Spirit of God in our hearts, flooding us, empowering us, ennobling us, bringing the graces of heaven to glow and to grow within us, and bringing the grace of God over and over again, daily renewing us after His image.

We need the power of the Spirit. We need the love of God in our hearts. We need the spiritual positives to complement this very challenging negative.

As I conclude, I must ask these questions. Why should I deal thus ruthlessly with occasions to sin, with the things that cause me to sin? One, because if you're a Christian, you live not for time but for eternity. This is part and parcel of the Christian teaching and the Christian conviction that this present time is only the vestibule of eternity, and that's where you're going to live.

All this is but the beginning of it, and as a man or a woman who means to live with God forever and ever and ever, you mustn't let this little bit of time and its transient oddities and beliefs and aberrations of mind and of principle, you mustn't be dominated by this. You're going to live for eternity with God, and you and I have always got to remember that. I've got eternity in my heart.

Therefore, I don't need to finish the sentence. Neither must we live for ourselves alone. We must live for others and for the glory of God in this world, and because of that, we have to be prepared to pay the price.

Says Paul to the Corinthians, you are not your own. You were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, both of which belong to him.

Brothers and sisters, I know you have come under the power of this word as I have. Has he been pointing out to you what's hanging on the walls of your imagination? The things you indulge in quietly and nobody else knows, only you and he. See, we're all on common ground here.

Some of us may never have committed physical adultery, but on this level, heaven only knows. But the grace of God, the grace of God, the pardoning mercy of Christ, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, God brings to us into another morning service and says, receive it from me. Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord.

For your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. God says that, and he who has begun a good work in you will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift and his unrivaled grace. Let us pray. Father, you alone know where we are, and we ask that by your infinite grace, you will make clear to us that you can come just where we are and lift our burdens, cleanse our sins, pardon our transgressions, renew your Spirit's work within us, and grant us yet again a new beginning.

O Lord, who makest all things new, breathe on us today. Breathe on us breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do. For Jesus' sake, amen.

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