

The Sermon on the Mount

Matt 5:21-48: The *antitheses*, part 2

- The word “looks” in 5:28’s “everyone who looks at a woman with lust” is in the present tense. In Greek, the present tense often has a sense of continuous action, so this verse probably refers “not to noticing a person’s beauty, but to imbibing it, meditating on it, seeking to possess it.”¹
- While some ancient Mediterranean cultures saw lust as natural, Jewish writers didn’t think much of it. For instance, Job 31:1-2: “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I look upon a virgin? What would be my portion from God above, and my heritage from the Almighty on high?” Some Jewish writers went as far as Jesus did in condemning it as the equivalent to adultery, as in the Testament of Issachar 7:2: “Except my wife I have not known any woman. I never committed fornication by the uplifting of my eyes” (written in the first or second century AD). In a culture where married women were expected to wear head covering so as not to tempt men, Jesus went beyond contemporary thought by placing the responsibility for the lust on the man, not the woman (Keener, 187).

Lust and adultery

1. Jesus articulates an important principle, one so important Matthew repeats it in 18:8-9: That we are not merely to try not to sin, we are to try to stay the hell away from sin—to “deal drastically with sin. We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling a little of it around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out” [Carson, 46]. Stott adds:

“To obey this command of Jesus will involve for many of us a certain ‘maiming’. We shall have to eliminate from our lives certain things which (though some may be innocent in themselves) either are, or could be easily become, sources of temptation. In his own metaphorical language we may find ourselves without eyes, hands or feet. That is, we shall deliberately decline to read certain literature, see certain films, visit certain exhibitions. If we do this, we shall be regarded by some of our contemporaries as narrow-minded untaught Philistines. ‘What?’ they will say to us incredulously, ‘you’ve not read such and such a book? You’ve not seen such and such a film? Why, you’re not educated, man!’ ...The only question is whether, for the sake of this gain, we are willing to bear that loss and endure that ridicule.”²

- a. How have you found it helpful to voluntarily limit what you see, where you go or what you do?
 - b. The Jews of Jesus’ day famously sought to “build a fence around the wall” by surrounding it with restrictions and laws to prevent one from getting too near violating the law proper. How does Jesus’ apparent raising of the bar in the Antitheses differ from this approach?
2. In his sermon, “Living the Proclaimed Reign of God” [*Interpretation*, 47, 152-8 (1993)], Stanley Hauerwas argues that the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be lived out in community:

¹ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 189.

² *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 91.

All the so-called "hard" sayings of the Sermon are designed to remind us that we cannot live without depending on the support and trust of others. We are told not to lay up treasure for ourselves, so we must learn to share. We are told not to be anxious, not to try to ensure our future, thus making it necessary to rely on one another for our food, our clothing, and our housing. We are told not to judge, thereby requiring that we live honestly and truthfully with one another. Such a people have no need to parade their piety because they know in a fundamental sense it is not theirs. Rather, the piety of the community capable of hearing and living by the Sermon is that which knows the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is possible only when a people have learned that their righteousness is a gift that God gives them through making them learn to serve one another.

Surely this is also the necessary presupposition for understanding the antitheses in Matthew 5. To be capable of living chastely, to marry without recourse to divorce, to live without the necessity of oaths, to refrain from returning evil with evil, to learn to love the enemy is surely impossible for isolated individuals. As individuals we can no more act in these ways than we can will not to be anxious. For the very attempt to will not to be anxious only creates anxiety. To be free of anxiety is possible only when we find ourselves part of a community that is constituted by such a compelling adventure that we forget our fears in the joy of the new age. (155-56)

- a. What reason or reasons does Hauerwas give for reading the Sermon as focusing on a community rather than an individual?
 - b. Is there any community which has successfully embodied the community Hauerwas is describing? Do the Anabaptists, or cloistered clergy, or the first Puritans fit the bill?
 - c. Hauerwas quotes from Matthew 18, where Jesus describes the way the Church is to practice discipline. At the same time, he asserts that the community which is faithful to Matthew 18 also enables its members to "not resist an evil person," and hand over one's cloak to the person suing for a tunic. How does Hauerwas see these coexisting?
 - d. Is there any aspect of the Sermon on the Mount which our church community (or small-group community) helps us to live out?
3. For all the controversy associated with the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Antitheses, there are close parallels in Paul's epistles. Whereas in the Antitheses Jesus directs his disciple toward a lifestyle which follows the spirit of the law, Paul in Galatians describes the fruit of such a lifestyle: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," contrasted to the "works of the flesh": "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." Like Jesus, Paul spells out the eternal consequences of the latter: "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Similarly, where Jesus warns that it is better to pluck out your eye than to retain it but go to hell, Paul too condemns sexual immorality: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)," and warns, "On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient."

So much for the similarities. How are Paul's and Jesus' articulation of life by the Spirit (of the law) different? In what way might this be because of their different audiences, Matthew writing with an eye toward Jewish converts, and Paul writing to Gentile Christians being pressured by Jewish converts? What else might explain the differences?

4. How did Luther, the Anabaptists, Aquinas and Bonhoeffer interpret these passages? What historical interpreter do you most agree with?
5. *Divorce and Remarriage*: Deut 24:1-4 says that a man who divorces his wife cannot remarry her, no matter how weak the justification for divorce:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...

This wording led some to think that Deut was not just condemning remarriage but permitting divorce for being "displeasing" to her husband, or "indecent." This in turn led to a debate between two prominent first-century rabbis, Shammai and Hillel:

- A. The House of Shammai says, "A man should divorce his wife *only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity*,
- B. "since it is said, Because he has found in her indecency in anything (Deut 24:1)."
- C. And the House of Hillel say, "*Even if she spoiled his dish*,
- D. "since it is said, Because he has found in her indecency in anything."
- E. R. Aquiba says, "*Even if he found someone else prettier than she*,
- F. "since it is said, And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes (Deut 24:1)."

(*Mishnah*, Gittin tractate, 9:10; emphasis added). Though some, like Shammai, advocated divorce only for infidelity, they nevertheless viewed other divorces as legitimate. And both Hillel and Shammai taught that divorce was *required* for marital infidelity.

- a. Read Mt 19: 1-12. How did Jesus' teaching differ from Hillel's and Shammai's?
- b. Just as vv. 22 and 28 don't prohibit all forms of anger or sexual desire, and "just as the exceptions to Jesus' commands there are more implicit than explicit, so also v. 32 most likely does not reflect a consideration of every conceivable legitimate or illegitimate ground for divorce. Instead Jesus is responding to a specific debate in first-century Judaism. At least Paul seems to have recognized Jesus' words as not comprehensive, since in 1 Cor 7:15 he introduces a second legitimate ground for divorce that Jesus never mentions." (Blomberg, 111-2.)

Thinking particularly of the spirit of the law, and not the letter, what are valid grounds for divorce, grounds which don't make those divorced adulterers upon remarriage, in the language of this passage?

- c. In many modern churches divorces often follow this template:
 - i. A husband leaves his wife;
 - ii. The husband quickly leaves the local church;
 - iii. The church may attempt to meet with him, or encourage counseling or even threaten discipline, but says and does nothing publicly;
 - iv. The leadership meets privately with the wife to offer support;

v. The wife, lacking any public or corporate support, also leaves the local church.

However they are thought of, these divorces are effectively no-fault crimes, and the victims, whether wives or children, are left without support or affirmation when they need it most.

How might we improve on this process? Do other churches you've known handle this differently? Are there any churches which handle divorce well?



Fun fact: According to early rabbinic teaching, a man unable to do so himself could call for someone else to write the writ of divorce for him. But there were restrictions placed on this practice: *m. Git.* 6:6: “A. He who had been cast into a pit and said, ‘Whoever hears his [my] voice—let him write a writ of divorce for his [my] wife’—B. lo, these should write and deliver it to her. C. A healthy man who said, ‘Write a write of divorce for my wife’— D. his intention was to tease her.”

Fun quote: “Love has become a mixture of physical desire and vague sentimentality; marriage has become a provisional sexual union to be terminated when this pathetic, pygmy love dissolves.” (Carson, 49.)