

High Fidelity

Matthew 5:27-32

Jesus follows his teaching on murder with an equally challenging set of commands on the subject of sexual purity. Once again, he takes one of the Ten Commandments and expands its scope from outward compliance to inner attitudes. It's not enough to say that we have refrained from the actual act of adultery. Even to look at someone with lust amounts to the committing of adultery in our hearts.

Those who first listened to Jesus' teaching may have been surprised by an implicit shift in responsibility. Writing on this passage, Craig Keener notes that, 'Jewish men expected married Jewish women to wear head coverings to prevent lust (single women were exempt, since they needed to find a husband). Jewish writers often warned of women as dangerous because they could invite lust, but Jesus placed the responsibility for lust on the person doing the lusting (5:28).'¹

In Matthew 5:29,30 Jesus tells his disciples about how determined they must be to remove the possibility of temptation in their lives. None of us in 2019 would follow the example of the church father Origen who famously castrated himself in what he understood to be direct obedience to these verses. Instead, we choose to take from the verses a principle about getting rid of what might hinder us but we need to be careful to make sure that as we do so we do not deny the serious nature of the warning Jesus gives here. The phrase "cause to stumble" occurs on a number of occasions in Matthew's Gospel, sometimes suggesting the possibility of teaching which causes offence (e.g. Matt 13:57) but other times referring to that which could actually prevent someone from being saved by God (e.g. Matt 18:6).

In verses 31 and 32, we find a third example of Jesus' new interpretation of the law. This one does not directly address one of the Ten Commandments, but, instead, legislation found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which 'is not concerned with rightness or wrongness of divorce in itself, nor with permissible causes of divorce, but only with the aftermath of a divorce which is assumed to have taken place.'²

Craig Keener provides a helpful commentary on these verses, noting that Jesus was seeking to remove any sense of complacency about the issue of divorce. 'In practice, the early Christians immediately began to qualify Jesus' divorce saying; other principles of Jesus, such as not condemning the innocent (12:7) or the principle of mercy (23:23), would have forced them to do so in some circumstances. For instance, when confronted by Christians wanting to divorce unbelieving spouses, Paul used Jesus' saying to forbid their design, but noted that if instead the spouse left, the believer was "not bound" (1 Cor 7:15).'³

¹ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1999, 187

² RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 206

³ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1999, 191

For discussion

1. Commenting on this passage Gerard Kelly suggests that, 'Of all the rooms in the house, the bedroom is the last we invite God into... sexuality is seen as an arena of inviolable personal rights... Not so, says Jesus. Your sexuality, as much as any other aspect of your life, is up for healing and renewal in the coming kingdom of grace.'⁴ Do you believe the church in Britain in 2019 is getting the balance right with regard to how much it addresses the issue of sexual purity?
2. As noted above, Jesus seems, in this passage, to imply that lust is the fault of the person harbouring a desire and not the responsibility of the one being lusted after. But does this mean that we can all wear whatever we like? What do you consider to be the right balance between dressing appropriately or inappropriately?
3. In spite of the temptations they might cause us, we probably don't know of any Christians who have gouged out an eye or cut off their hand. Most of us have decided not to take these words of Jesus literally, but there are other commands in the Sermon, like those about judgement, which most of us will try to follow. What criteria might we use to work out which commands of Jesus should be followed literally and which ones offer us some room for interpretation?
4. During Sunday's sermon it was suggested that we can extend this teaching of Jesus beyond the subject of sexual purity. Can you think of other things which may 'seduce' us and distract us from the best God has for us?
5. How would you respond to someone who said that they consider the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:31-32 to be too inflexible?

⁴ Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto*, 2001, 30