

A distinctive sexual morality. Matt. 5:27-32

An attractive teaching

Michael Kruger, an American historian of the early church, tells us that in the second century, when Christianity was still a despised and persecuted religion, you would have found more women than men in Christian churches – he estimates that women would have been up to two thirds of the membership of congregations. This is all the more impressive when you realise the ratio of men to women in the empire was the reverse – two thirds male and one third female because of high rates of death in childbirth, but also practices like female infanticide. [Michael Kruger, 'The Dynamic Ministry of Women' TGC Podcast Sept 7 2018]

Why? Why was the Christian faith, to which it was costly to belong, so attractive to women? Amongst the reasons given in contemporary documents there are two that have their origin in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 – Christianity's different sexual ethic that insisted on sexual purity for both men and women, and Christianity's rejection of divorce, teaching which put limits on male lust and male power.

This morning we will look ourselves at what Jesus says in Matthew 5 on desire and divorce

I hope you will see, like many women in churches in the second century, that though challenging this teaching is good, bringing security and stability to women and men in what is and has been the bedrock of most societies – the relationship of women and men in marriage and families.

But two starting considerations

Firstly, Jesus is not starting out to give an exhaustive account of Christian sexual morality. He is continuing what He started to do in last week's passage where He said to His followers "*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven*" [Matt. 5:20]. He is exposing as false the claim of the law keeping scribes and pharisees to be righteous, by revealing the righteousness God expects of those who will live under His reign, live in His presence.

Secondly, men, if you think we are being targeted in these verses, we are. Jesus is talking primarily to men – speaking v. 28 of a man who looks at a woman with lustful intent, and then in v. 32 of a man who divorces his wife. That is because in that society Jewish men were allowed more latitude in sexual behaviour – not as much as in the pagan Greco-Roman society of the surrounding empire, and in Jewish society it was men, and basically men alone, who had the right to divorce unilaterally when they chose.

So men, you are being addressed directly, but we will see that in a society like ours where more initiative in sexual matters and in divorce is given to women these verses speak to all, women and men.

The seventh commandment [Proverbs 4:23-27, 5:15-23]

Matthew 5: ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Jesus starts by quoting the seventh commandment. The purpose of that commandment was to promote faithfulness and the security of family life, to prevent the fracturing of close communities by jealousy and provide a stable context for the nurture of children. It found positive expression in Proverbs where the husband is encouraged to always delight in the wife of his youth.

Here Jesus is saying that this commandment was looking, not just for abstaining from actual physical adultery, but faithfulness of heart. The action he is condemning is not just noticing that someone is attractive. The word translated 'with lustful intent' is the word taken from the 10th commandment – to desire, to covet, and it is not a glance, but a continuous looking. This is a deliberate desire to possess another woman, making her the settled object of your lust. Entertaining this desire in your heart, says Jesus, is committing adultery – that is wronging her, her present or future husband, and your wife if you have one.

Righteousness is not just obeying the law externally and feeling free to do and think everything else right up to the point where there is actual adultery, sex with another man's wife. Righteousness is a matter of the heart, a heart given to what God values – faithfulness, loyalty to one's spouse, and respect for the relationships of others, wanting to promote the security and stability of those relationships for the good of your neighbour.

It is only two verses but what Jesus says was shocking for his first, male, hearers.

Craig Keener, a commentator who has focused on first century society, says "Many men in the ancient world thought lust a healthy and a normal practice." That is, they thought a bloke should be lusting after women who were not their wives, that this was healthy and there was something wrong with you if you weren't doing that. Not so different from some macho groups today. But Jesus is telling them that is wrong. Your desire, if you are married, is to be focused on your wife alone.

And Jesus is here making the man entirely responsible for his heart, for his desire. Some rabbis also talked about lust in the heart, but then went on to talk about how women should dress, how they needed to wear veils, how they should not talk to men. Like some today they made women responsible for the man's desires.

Not Jesus. There are no extenuating circumstances. The man is entirely and solely responsible for what he is thinking, what he lets his mind dwell on, what he desires.

That is still confronting for us

The desire to blame others for our own disobedience has been there since Adam – but men, you and I are solely responsible for what we give ourselves to think about, for what we let our heart's desire.

And what Jesus says confronts us in other ways

Firstly, You will hear, especially in relation to sexual behaviour, that anything is ok as long as 'it doesn't harm others'.

Now we could debate whether allowing yourself to think about possessing someone for the satisfaction of your sexual desire harms anyone – I think it harms you, your wife – present or future, and the desired woman whom you are objectifying, treating not as a person but some thing to possess for pleasure. In this way it diminishes the woman and will eventually debase society.

But many will say – it is just thoughts, I haven't hurt anyone

Well, if you think like that – you ought to know God says it is wrong. Such thinking, and then basing your behaviour on that, is not consistent with following Jesus, for Jesus says love of God and neighbour extends to what we let ourselves think about.

And let's face it – the line "it's ok as long as it doesn't harm anyone" is a lie usually spoken by someone who is trying to persuade another to overcome their scruples and join them in or approve something they want to do.

It is not ok, never ok, to base your behaviour on what you want to think is the outcome of your behaviour – no one will be hurt, ignoring what God says is wrong. I am sure Adam and Eve were certain no one would be hurt by eating a piece of fruit.

Secondly, Jesus says here clearly that you can't be righteous and indulge in porn. Some people speak of porn as a healthy outlet, or something that helps them live in a marriage where there is a mismatch between the husband's and the wife's desires. They can speak of it as something that in a sense helps them keep the letter of the law, and so they think they are righteous.

But porn is all about letting you possess and use women's bodies in your mind, about 'looking with lustful intent' – and I say women's body because it is very much a mainly male activity, designed for male visual arousal. Porn is sin in itself, and it gives rise to all sorts of terrible consequences, setting, for example, unreal and harmful expectations in young men of their sexual engagement with young women, or defeating intimacy in marriage. And it is addictive.

We will think about this a bit more, but before we do – note that Jesus expects us to take what He says with the utmost seriousness.

Matthew 5: ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Now this is plainly exaggerated language. Jesus is not telling you that physically plucking out an eye or sawing off your hand will stop you sinning. He has just talked about lust in your heart, and you can keep doing that with one eye and one hand.

But he is using this exaggerated language to make a point for He knows how much we love our sins. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes to break with sin. In the end, while porn is addictive for some, people keep going back to it because at some level they want to, it works for them. But Jesus says you ought to give up even what you think is precious and valuable to break with sin, because persisting in sin, unrighteousness, will land you in hell.

Jesus, you know, speaks more about hell than anyone else in Scripture. He speaks of it as grief and pain, the outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth – conscious regret, a place whose fire never goes out.

And he speaks of it mainly in the context of speaking to religious people. Perhaps that is because religious people – people like us who get familiar with talking about God and the idea of judgment – think they will get a special pass, let familiarity undermine the seriousness of the choices we make.

Jesus is serious. Adultery, lust in the heart, will land you in hell. IF you think it is ok you need to change your heart – to believe Jesus, and then you need to do whatever it takes to break from it.

Switching off the TV when those sex scenes come on, not straying to unknown websites, putting guards on your devices, keeping your devices in a public place, avoiding certain conversations, being thought weird because you won't have anything to do with those things

Men – young or old, single, widowed, divorced, married – Jesus is talking to us.

It is said that we live in a sexualised culture, even a pornified one – where people can download sexualised images of women on their phone – at work, or in the school playground.

Jesus is saying we must not be part of that culture, and we are responsible – responsible for what we let ourselves see, responsible for what we let ourselves think about, responsible for what we let ourselves desire.

If we are to be salt and light as Jesus' followers – we have to be the people in our relationships with women Jesus calls us to be.

If married we are to be faithful in our hearts to our wives, to have them alone as the one we desire. If we are not yet married, – you may be one day someone's husband, and the person you marry should have the right to expect that they, the real person that they are, are alone in your affections, not be a pale comparison to some unreal image of the feminine derived from the internet

The world needs not powerless men, but good men, who take responsibility for their own hearts.

And women, young and old, single, widowed, divorced, married – this is no longer first century Palestine. Women have more freedom and more agency in initiating relationships, and you have been taught by your society that equality involves sexual liberation, being free like men to take your sexual pleasure wherever you find it, entitled to lust after whomever you want.

Many of you, I suspect, have already realised that that vision of liberation has not worked for many women, but has just removed one more barrier to male lust achieving its goal – sexual gratification without commitment.

But Jesus' words spoken to men apply to you also – He expects His followers to be faithful in marriage, faithful to their own husbands and to not look around and covet other women's husbands. And he expects you to accept responsibility for your own desires.

God's instruction that we keep sex for marriage, and be faithful in marriage, is better. It is the path to satisfying, secure intimacy in which you can flourish even as you grow older and your bodies change, and in which your children can enjoy stability and security.

At least it should be if Jesus' followers listen to Jesus as He continues to address the men with power on the same theme

Divorce [Matthew 19:3-12]

*Matthew 5:*³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The features of Jewish divorce

In Jewish society, unlike the surrounding pagan society, divorce was a male privilege. Men could divorce their wives unilaterally on their own initiative, without any legal hearing, without any external process or scrutiny. They simply had to send them away after writing a certificate of divorce the certificate provided for by Moses in Deuteronomy 24, which stated specifically “You are free to marry any man”.

While there was debate amongst the Rabbis on the grounds of divorce – some saying only serious offence would be a grounds, others saying the husband was free to divorce because he found someone else he preferred – in practice it seems divorce happened whenever the husband wanted it, and this plainly left women in a very vulnerable position, very dependent on keeping her husband happy, for divorce could mean destitution if she could not return to her family.

In this context Jesus is saying to men – you should not divorce your wives. But notice what Jesus is and is not doing here.

In these two verses he is not giving a comprehensive new set of laws on divorce, stricter rules.

He is exposing the scribes and Pharisees claim to be righteous. He is saying don’t think you are righteous if you use legality as a mask for selfishness. Don’t think using the right process for using your power to betray the trust your wife has put in you, to cruelly expose your wife to poverty if you decide she has stopped pleasing you, preserves your righteousness.

In fact, again using graphic exaggerated language, he tells them what he thinks their righteousness is like where they hide their selfishness behind legal process

³² *But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

There are lots of people who try and explain that by saying the first marriage is still in force, that in her destitution she may have to remarry while still being married in the eyes of God.

I think that misses the rhetorical point. What do you call someone who makes his wife commit adultery?

A pimp – that’s ugly, and ugly to hear.

But it is powerful. Divorcing your wife – that’s what your righteousness is like

And he says – you cannot stop the contagion of your sin by relying on legality, think that participating in the system where men can divorce and remarry as they please will keep you righteous – he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

You should not divorce your wife, and if you do, don’t still think you are righteous.

But Jesus makes one ‘exception’ - *except on the ground of sexual immorality,*

This is not mentioned in Mark and Luke’s version of this teaching, but that was probably because they took it for granted. In the Old Testament law sexual immorality – and the term is a wide term to include any kind of illegitimate sexual intercourse – ended the marriage because the penalty for such activity was death.

In both Jewish and Roman law in the first century a husband who discovered his wife’s adultery had to divorce her – that was Joseph’s dilemma with Mary’s pregnancy in chapter 1. He had to divorce

her – it was just a question of how. Jesus with this ‘exception’ is making explicit what all assumed, that sexual immorality ended the marriage, and where the marriage was ended remarriage was certainly permissible.

Jesus will teach more fully on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19, as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 7..

But notice that neither here nor in chapter 19 is He answering questions like “My husband divorced me three years ago, and now I have met a kind man who wants to marry me? Is that ok?”, or “My husband is abusing me, what shall I do?” Jesus is addressing the powerful and the perpetrators, not the injured and the innocent. You cannot read the answers to those questions straight off this passage – it needs a lot more thought, although I think the answer to the first question is

‘Wonderful, but let’s talk together so that any issues from the first marriage are ironed out.’

And to the second is ‘Are you safe? Do you need to leave? Let’s talk.’

But we have to hear what He is saying here to men - you should not use the power you have to divorce your wives, and where you do, don’t think that observing the legal process makes it ok and is consistent with living the life God expects from His people.

The better righteousness is committed to faithfulness in marriage, and you should enter marriage knowing it is for life, or as He says in Matthew 19 – those whom God has joined together people should not separate [19:6]. God expects His people to be faithful and true to their promises, as He is.

That in itself is a big call as those who have known periods of unhappiness in marriage, or are even now experiencing the loneliness of a loveless marriage realise.

But it is one that creates security for the vulnerable, whether it is wives and children, or men.

And it is a call that still needs to be heard

For you hear of blokes who divorce their wife of twenty years for someone younger and think they have been decent, righteous – because they gave her what they have decided is a good settlement and have made provision for their kids,

Or women who leave their husband because they have found someone with whom it is so much easier to relate, to share their hearts with, and think that is being authentic and so ok

In a world where the goal is maximising individual happiness, living for self, being true to yourself – it is thought by some to be almost a duty to move on when you cease to be happy, when the relationship is not fulfilling you. It is talked about as a step in personal growth

So we need to hear that we must be different. We need to hear that amongst Jesus’ followers marriage is for life where one partner has not destroyed that union by sexual immorality or abandoning the other.

And know that faithfulness is good – especially for women who still disproportionately bear the economic cost of divorce, and for children who are spared the confusion and grief.

Knowing that, if our hearts are set to do the Father’s will, to live the righteous life He calls for, we need to be wise.

Wise if we are yet unmarried, in whom we choose to marry. You should only choose to marry someone who shares your commitment to living Jesus’ way, who is signing up for life. Someone with

whom you can nurture each other's faith and godliness, and who will keep you involved in the community of God's people who will support your lifelong commitment to each other.

Wise if you are finding marriage hard going by seeking help, and seeking it early.

Wise however you are going by continuing to invest in your marriage – keeping date nights, going to marriage tune-ups – Clinton is running one this year, having a relationship that is real and not just being held together by the kids and routine

Lots more could be said, for relationship between men and women are the substance of our lives, and much more could be said because these few verses are just the tip of the iceberg, representative of a much bigger body of teaching on sex and marriage, a much bigger understanding of reality.

The bigger picture that informs this righteousness

When it comes to sex and marriage that bigger picture is informed by three pillars - just mention

Marriage [Genesis 2:18-25, Matthew 19:3-12, Ephesians 5:22-33]

Firstly, an understanding of marriage based on Genesis 2, where marriage between a man and a woman is God's gift, and is revealed as an exclusive lifelong union, given, Paul tells us, to be a sign of the union between Christ and His church.

The Character of God [Exodus 34:6-7, Hosea 1-3, Malachi 2:13-16]

Secondly, the character of God, who is faithful to His promises, faithful to the promises He makes to His wayward bride, whose love is generous and steadfast. He says in Malachi that He expects His people to be faithful like Him and warns against faithlessness.

Malachi 2: ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

A Conviction about the future

Thirdly, a conviction about the future. That this life is not all there is, and happiness in this life is not our controlling ambition, for what is at stake in living God's way in our marriages is eternity. That there is a judgment for those who engage in sexual immorality,

and that for those who persevere in following Jesus, embracing His righteousness by living a life of self-denying love, whether they are married now or single, there is the joy of being caught up in the consummation of the relationship between the Lord Jesus and His bride, the church; the joy of sharing in the great marriage feast of the Lamb.

More could be said, but it should be enough to see that Jesus' instruction about sex and marriage are not isolated rules, but an expression of a deeper more embracing vision of reality, an expression of what we believe about God, of our experience of God's steadfast love and faithfulness in Christ, of what we believe about God's provision in creation, and of what we believe about our end.

But for now, don't lose sight of the primary purpose of this teaching here in Matthew, to expose as hopeless and far from God a righteousness based on outward conformity but having no heart commitment to God's ways

To bring home to us that the Kingdom is for the poor in Spirit, for those who know only their need before God, whose only hope is in His mercy, in His gift to them of the Kingdom in His Son Jesus

A different sexual morality

One that convicts us - Poverty of Spirit

Surely Jesus' teaching here brings a conviction of our need

Who hasn't desired someone who is not ours to desire, let their mind stray – or worse

Used porn, and excused it.

Engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage

Treated a member of the opposite sex as someone there merely to satisfy our desire

Used power selfishly to get our own way, and hid our selfishness and cruelty behind some process or legal manoeuvre

We are sadly a society that is very compromised and wounded in terms of sexual conduct

Jesus who teaches is one who came to seek and save sinners, who says He has not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance [Luke 5:32].

That includes sexual sinners.

There is forgiveness for the selfish abuse of power, forgiveness for the defiling of yourself and others by sexual immorality, forgiveness for faithless abandonment

Forgiveness for those who will repent and believe the gospel – that Christ has died for our sins and is now the risen Lord with authority to forgive

Who cry out to Jesus to be spared from the hell He speaks of

Doubt that? Remember there was forgiveness even for David, forgiveness for Him through Christ's death

This teaching convicts us of our sin

One we are to be wholeheartedly committed to.

Yet it is teaching that forgiven sinners like us must be wholly committed to

This is what God our Father expects of us – to love what He loves

Faithfulness to our promises

Steadfast, generous love to our husband or wife with whom we have entered the marriage covenant

Integrity, where we are in ourselves what we show to the world

One that is good

Teaching to which we should unashamedly be committed for it is good.

It is still good for the weak, the less powerful in relationships, the vulnerable – to be protected from the lust of the powerful and to find security in lifelong exclusive faithfulness because believers are committed from the heart to faithfulness, accept responsibility for their desire

This teaching brings stability to families, and can

Overcome loneliness and make our marriages the place for intimacy to flourish

God commands us for our good, and His people should show that in the way they live together

We should not be ashamed by wholeheartedly committed to living out and commending by living out the distinctive sexual morality that our Lord Jesus teaches

One to teach

And we should be teaching this to our children

That is urgent, for we do live in a sexualised society where they are exposed to sexual images and conversation from an early age, can have access to sexual imagery, porn, from their ipad.

As well as protecting them from inappropriate behaviour we need to be teaching them about God's good gift of sex and its place in marriage, equipping them to resist a very powerful culture that tells them lies about sex, that models misuse, that breeds grief and hurt and loneliness – as we have witnessed this past two weeks in the sad stories emerging from Canberra

I have put at the end of the transcript a link to a podcast called Consent, Rape Culture, and the Problems our Teens Face

It doesn't matter how old your child is – it is helpful to listen to it, and it has a series of helpful resources on the web page

Come and talk

We've covered Lots of issues, ones that affect us deeply in these view verses

If you have questions – come and ask

If some of these topics have touched you personally – whether it is the grief of your divorce or the loneliness you are experiencing – come and talk, or talk and pray with a good Christian friend

If you are wrestling with guilt, come and talk

Or needing encouragement and a strategy in breaking with sin, come and talk

God has given us each other to encourage and teach each other

But be serious about living God's way, from the heart.

Hear your kind Saviours words and act on them

Matthew 5:²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if

your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

The Pastors Heart, March 2nd: Consent, Rape Culture, and the Problems our Teens Face

<https://www.thepastorsheart.net/podcast/sexual-assault-at-school>

On breaking free from porn

Tim Chester [Captured by a better vision.](#)