

The Heart of Adultery

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On most weekdays, you can see me walking along North Ravenswood going to and from work. When the weather is nice, it's a great way to start and end my day. Lately, I've been listening to audio books. I mostly don't like to mess with earbuds, so you'll see me with my phone to my ear especially when the Metra or a big truck storms past me.

One of the books I recently listened to was Sherwood Anderson's collection of short stories and poems—*The Triumph of the Egg*. In that book, Anderson reflects upon the conflicted desires of the human heart. Character after character drifts here and there wanting to know and to be known. Most of the narrative's action is driven by these inner thoughts and longings. And, a good many of the short stories revolve around the lure of adultery. Someone is bored with his or her spouse and imagines that another person will bring them the fulfillment they're longing and searching for. Consequently, in these narratives, we see how those desires grow and grow and grow until a character does something drastic (e.g. murders his wife or runs half-dressed into an Iowa cornfield during a thunderstorm).

Anderson was a Modernist, so there aren't usually happy endings in his stories, which is perhaps a good thing when it comes to the sordid desires of his protagonists. You do want them to be happy though.

Again, usually the desire to have an affair remains in the individual's thoughts in these stories. And, I've often wondered if that isn't simply a reflection of the time (the early 20th century) when these stories were written—too much physical adultery and the stories might get banned. You know, the thought of adultery is bad enough. But, too much “actual” adultery would be unpublishable.

This is how we often grade our sins; isn't it? It's one thing to think something, but it's another thing all together to do it. You may think about committing adultery. That's not good. Committing it, however, is the real sin.

Yet, what Jesus has to say about adultery today challenges this way of thinking about the gravity of sin. Unlike many of his other hard sayings, this one isn't difficult for us to understand. No, what the Lord Jesus is saying here is as clear as day to us.

What makes this lesson hard is its unwaveringly high standard—a standard so high that none of us can meet it. Jesus’s is a holy standard.

Let’s read this text together and see what Jesus expects from us.

Matthew 5:27-30

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, 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. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, 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.

Well, there are actually two difficult sayings in this text. There is the saying about what constitutes adultery. We’ll look at that one today. But, there’s also one which emerges from what Jesus says about dealing with sin—that we should gouge out our eye if it causes us to sin. We’re going to look at that one next week.

For now we’re going to focus on this line—“I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (v. 28). This is a truly radical statement. What is this all about? Why this sweeping standard when it comes to adultery? Well, for us to get at the answers to questions like these, we have to recognize three old truths. (1st) This is nothing new. Jesus simply tells us what the standard has always been. (2nd) The Lord demands all of us. He won’t settle for less than everything. (3rd) We are all under the law. And, we have all broken it. Let’s look at these ancient truths to see what Jesus is teaching.

1. This standard is nothing new.

One misconception which I commonly hear people say about Jesus’s ministry is that it represents a complete break with what came before it—with all that we find in the Old Testament. You hear it in all kinds of forms, but the most clichéd one is that the God of Jesus is a God of love while the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and judgment. The idea is that there are really two gods being represented—

one in the Old Testament who is a “most unpleasant” character¹ and one in the New who is something like Atticus Finch from *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

I wonder if you’ve ever run across this line of thinking. It’s common I believe. But is it true? Is Jesus doing a completely new thing—totally breaking with the past? Maybe the better question is, *Would Jesus have described his own ministry this way?* And, the answer to that question is certainly, *No*.

Let me layout some evidence for this, then we’ll see how it also emerges here in this teaching about adultery. Over and over again throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus aligned himself with and affirmed Old Testament Scripture.

- Jesus believed that the Old Testament was the word of God, and he referred to it as such many times (e.g. Matthew 15:3-4; John 10:35). Go take a look for yourself. According to Jesus, God speaks in the Old Testament.
- Jesus trusted the historicity of the Old Testament as the accurate revelation of God’s creative and redemptive work (e.g. Matthew 19:4-6; 22:29-32). The people in Scripture were real people. And, the events were real events. Yet, most importantly, Yahweh is the one true and very real God.
- Jesus saw his own life and work as aligned with and even as the fulfillment of the Old Testament—“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” ...And [therefore] beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained ...what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25, 27).

You see, Jesus saw a real continuity between his work and the Old Testament. And, I believe that that emerges here as he reclaims and reteaches the original intent behind God’s laws. Here Jesus is getting at what has always been the heart-character of the commandments of God. *This isn’t a new lesson but an old one.*

While Jesus is teaching the crowds, he calls to attention the 7th commandment: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Everyone who listened that day would have known the commandment well. They would have known all ten of them. They would’ve recalled their history, and how Moses brought these commandments

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

as the revelation of God’s will for Israel. These commands express the very character of God to his people. In that sense, they reveal his person—*who God is*.²

Consequently, we must not see them as merely individual laws or commands. We must see them as an expression of the divine being whom these laws represent. They must be understood as a whole—as a unity. And that’s how Jesus teaches them. He anchors them in the very character of the one true God. He reads them together, which makes them pregnant with *holy* meaning.

So, here with adultery, Jesus doesn’t read it as a simple physical prohibition. Rather, he reads it in light of the other commands, especially the 10th commandment. There, we find that God is equally concerned with our desires—with the positioning of our hearts. “You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:17). You must not desire or want what isn’t yours. In fact, there God expressly refers back to the 7th commandment; doesn’t he?³ You shall not covet his house or his donkey or his servants or *his wife*. In effect, your heart shall not lust after her.

Friends, Jesus isn’t teaching them some new commandment here but bringing out the original, full meaning of the old. He’s helping people to see the law’s heart. Jesus is helping us to see the full measure of the holiness of the Lord God—who is, of course, our holy and our ultimate standard. Isn’t that the standard God himself set for his people? Didn’t he set himself up as the measure?

Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2).

This is a wakeup call from Jesus to his original audience and to each of us too. We are all prone to think merely of our actions and neglect the call which God makes upon our thoughts and desires. Yet, from the beginning, God has demanded it all. And, this brings us to our next ancient truth.

2. The Lord wants all of us.

Often times people like to trivialize different things as if it would be ridiculous for God to care about them. Typically this is the way we craft God in our own image. It’s usually a way for us to justify our behaviors or desires. Thus, we like to pretend God doesn’t care how we spend our money, so that we can buy all the toys we want.

² R. C. Sproul, *The Goodness of the Law*, [read here](#).

³ See F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 52.

Or, we like to imagine God doesn't care too much about what we eat, so that we can (without any guilt) eat gluttonously.

Yet, perhaps, this is most prevalent today when it comes to our sexuality.

When I was in college, I visited a high school friend and her family one night. We played *Scrabble*. (I recall this because I got absolutely whooped by her stepfather who continuously reminded me that I was an English major—as if I'd forgotten it—and that he hadn't even finished college. It was a good joke, at least for a little while.) Anyway, as we played the game, our talk turned to a controversy which was brewing at their church. A prominent member had been caught having an affair on his wife. And now, people were taking sides. I remember that my friend's mom was annoyed with the whole thing. She just wanted it all too end. And, I can still vividly remember what she said dismissively about the controversy. She said—*Like Jesus even cares who somebody sleeps with.*

I remember thinking—*How exactly do you know Jesus doesn't care about it?* I didn't challenge her. That would have been super awkward and disrespectful too. I just recall as a young adult thinking that.

Friends, we don't get to decide what God cares about or doesn't care about. We don't have that kind of authority. And, if we think we do, what makes our view of God better than anyone else's view? Nothing at all! We would just have a bunch of competing views with equal levels of authority. You see, either God really exists and has spoken, or we are all our own gods. And if that's the case, fidelity in marriage is simply a personal preference to infidelity. It's not ultimately better.

Yet, God *is* there and he *has* spoken. This is the glorious, Christian conviction. In the 66 books of the Bible, we have the genuine word of God. What he cares about! And, let me assure you, without a doubt, that the Lord cares about how we behave and how we think and how we feel in every single detail. The Lord wants all of you. Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper expresses it well when he writes this.

*There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: "Mine!"*⁴

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, from "Sphere Sovereignty" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*.

Friends, your sex life is the Lord's. The way you think about sex is the Lord's. It was created by him and for his glory. He determines what's right and what's wrong when it comes to this area, as well as every other area in life. This is a central part of Jesus's teaching here. God doesn't just want your actions but your thoughts also. The Lord demands all of us—every square inch of us.

Finally, we come to the last ancient truth and the massive weight of this saying from the Lord Jesus.

3. We're all under the law.

Again, listen to Jesus's heavy and difficult lesson here.

...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (v. 28).

Have you thought lustfully about someone who's not your wife? If you have, then you're an adulterer. Have you ever wished you were married to another man—someone who's kinder and gentler and more attentive than your husband usually is? If you have, then you're an adulterer. Jesus says even your thoughts condemn you. Back in 1981, Pope John Paul II stirred things up, when it comes to this little verse, by saying that a man might commit adultery against his own wife by thinking of her in the fashion which Jesus describes here—by viewing his wife as merely an object of lust.⁵ I tend to agree with John Paul at this point.

The way we think matters. It's important to God. Our thoughts make us guilty. Even our thinking comes under the judgment of the law. And, since this is the case, we must admit that we are all guilty and worthy of God's judgment.

Yet, it's precisely at this point, it's precisely with this hard lesson from Jesus, that we are made ready for good news. Jesus is preparing our hearts for his coming. Jesus is opening our eyes so that we can see and embrace his mission on our behalf. The apostle Paul, many years later, would describe Christ's mission in this way.

...we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 53.

to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:3-6).

Friends, this is the gospel. Jesus doesn't merely atone for your sinful actions; he also atones for your sinful thoughts. When we trust in him, he removes everything that condemns us. We're cleansed once and for all by trusting in Jesus.