

Gouge It Out

Jason Abbott

When my coworkers and I began to grasp the nature of the crimes which one of our congregants had been accused of committing, we were all completely caught off guard. He was a gentle and kind man. He had a family. He was highly educated. In short, he was one of the last people we'd have expected to do the kinds of things which he was being accused of doing—and in fact, as it turns out, did do.

I remember just sitting there with all of them as the full news began to sink in. Then, suddenly, it occurred to me that, what he had done in his workplace and home, he might have also done at the church. It dawned on me that we all needed to search through our building for hidden video cameras. We needed to check all the restrooms where someone might change clothing. We had to be certain that nobody's privacy, in our congregation, had been violated. It was a horrible but totally real possibility. It was a nightmare scenario in real life.

So, we all began to search. I still recall being in one of the women's restrooms at church, standing on a toilet, and pushing up ceiling-tiles so that we could be sure that there weren't any hidden video cameras. There I was—all the years of schooling, all the time studying theology—playing at some disturbing game of hide-and-seek. I had never pictured this as part of pastoral ministry. Yet, there I was.

How did this all happen? How did a highly educated, husband and father get to this point—to the point where he would stash hidden cameras in changing-rooms and women's bathrooms?

Friends, this is what we're going to consider this morning. This is what Jesus warns us against—the pernicious, malignant growth of sin when it's left unchecked in our lives. Listen to the urgent warning advice he gives 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.

With this radical imagery, Jesus is doing 3 things. (1st) He is being descriptive. Jesus is describing how truly serious our sin trouble is. (2nd) He is being prescriptive. The Lord's telling us how to deal with our sinfulness. (There's practical advice here.) (3rd) He is being predictive. Jesus is pointing us to the only and the ultimate solution to our problem. Let's dive in and see how.

1. Jesus is being descriptive.

Jesus is the master teacher. He knew how to make his lessons memorable—how to poke imagery into his audience's mind to stay. Sometimes his descriptions soften people's hearts to the love of the Lord, like in the parable of the prodigal son and the loving, forgiving father. Yet at other times, Jesus's descriptions are designed to unsettle the audience. All of our Lord's descriptions about hell are of this variety; aren't they? He tells us it's a place of eternal flames and ravenously hungry worms. Jesus uses imagery which is horrific and difficult to forget.

Now, sometimes people read these descriptions (which the Bible gives of hell or of heaven) and insist that they have to be taken literally—that there will be flames and worms in hell or that there will be gold-paved streets in heaven. And (I suppose) this could be the case. Yet, I think it's more likely that these images are being used in order to make a strong point concerning the nature of what's unseen but very real. So, the streets of gold express the immeasurable value of our eternal state with God, and the flames and hungry worms express the horror of eternity separated from God. In other words, these are vividly *figurative* descriptions of ultimate and *real* things. They are designed to communicate an unseen reality in concrete terms or pictures which people can grasp and understand.

Now, for me, today's text is a prime example of this kind of teaching by Jesus. He's telling us how serious our sin problem is. He tells us that it infects our actions and our thinking and our desires. The Lord tells us that even our adulterous thoughts can condemn us.

What's the solution according to Jesus? Well, he explains that we have to deal with the cause. If the cause is our right eye, we should gouge it out and toss it away. If the cause is our right hand, we should cut it off and toss it away. That's the remedy.

That's what Jesus says to do. So, why do I still have my right eye and my right hand? Why does any Christian have eyes and hands at all?

Well, the answer is simply this. We still have them because we read his lesson as a *figurative description* not a *literal prescription*. We recognize Jesus is telling us about the seriousness of our sin problem. Our sin problem is so tremendously serious that if we could take care of it by gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand, we should. It would be better than the alternative. It would be better than being under the wrath of God and being cast into hell. That's Jesus's point.

What's obvious, however, is that mutilating ourselves won't fix the problem because the trouble is with our hearts. One commentator puts it this way.

Some have taken this language literally.... But that, I think, quite misses Jesus's point...for if I gouged out my right eye because it had looked and lusted, would not my left do [so] as well? And if I blinded myself, might I not lust anyway, and mentally gaze at forbidden things?¹

In short, the problem would remain. *And that's Jesus's point!* He wants each of us to consider the root of the problem—our own sinful heart.

Look friends, we use language this way all the time. If you're mad at someone, you may tell them to go jump in a lake, but you don't really expect them to do it. Rather, it's a vividly *figurative* way to communicate the *reality* of your displeasure. And, in a similar fashion, Jesus is warning us about the utter seriousness of our sin by describing such drastic measures for dealing with it. He uses this imagery to stress how serious our situation is; Jesus doesn't expect or want us to literally do it.

Yet, before we get too comfortable with the idea that we don't need to cut off or gouge out anything, we need to consider the very practical nature of this teaching about adultery because we are called to action here.

2. Jesus is being prescriptive.

It would be easy to be defeatist and think that if even these drastic measures—such as gouging out my eye or cutting off my hand—cannot eliminate the infection of sexual sin, then certainly the Lord cannot expect me to do anything about my sin. It would be easy to plead helplessness here and expect God to simply give you grace

¹ D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, 56.

whenever you sin. In fact, the apostle Paul had to deal with a false teaching like this in the early church (Romans 6:1).

And historic Christianity is clear. We're saved thru faith alone, in Christ alone, by God's grace alone. Our works do not save us. Being good people won't save us. Only faith in Christ's work on our behalf saves us. We're saved only by God's grace. Thus, Paul was able to write this to us.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works... (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the foundation of Christianity. We always stand upon this divine truth. It is the good news. It is the gospel.

However, we're called throughout Scripture to build upon this one foundation. We are told over and over again to work hard to be godly and holy representatives or ambassadors of Christ. Whenever you read through the New Testament letters, good theology always finds its fruit in good practice. So, if we go back to Ephesians, just two chapters after Paul lays his gospel foundation (which I read a moment ago), he commands us to stop living like the non-believing world around us.

That...is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:20-24).

Notice that we are called here to be holy and righteous—to be like our God. In fact, we are to be like him in our desires. We are called to be holy and righteous in the attitude of our minds. We are commanded to act. We are commanded to work. We cannot simply plead helplessness and expect grace.

And, if you are a believer, you can and should see real progress in holiness because you are not alone in your fight for righteous desires and renewed thoughts. The Spirit of God works in you to lead and to empower you in this sanctifying work. He is your advocate and your assurance in this fight. In the Spirit, "you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). He's your guarantee of victory.

Now, let's get back to this gouging out of eyes and cutting off of hands stuff. Where is the practical advice here? What work can we do in unison with the Spirit? What power do we have to root out sin? What's the prescription?

- **First**, gouge out or cut off the avenue by which you act on sinful desires. I'd never encourage someone to mutilate their body. That would be wrong. However, I would encourage them to cut off their cellphone or television. I would encourage them to gouge out all their lingering and lustful gazes. These are harmful to you—whether you know it or not. Friends, it's better to live without a cellphone than with an iPhone 11 Pro be thrown into hell. Gouge it out! Cut it off!
- **Second**, don't just get rid of the things which are harmful and evil for you. Replace those things with the things which are healthy and good and pure. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is Philippians 4:8. Paul writes this: "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Dwell on what's good and right about your spouse. Remember the dignity and beauty and glory of others. Remind yourself that they are created in the image of God, not as objects for your pleasure. Replace evil thoughts with good thoughts.
- **Third**, pray for the Holy Spirit's conviction and guidance in this battle. And, seek out a Christian friend to keep you accountable. You are not alone so don't behave as if you are. Work out your salvation in community.

3. Jesus is being predictive.

Interestingly, in this text, Jesus doesn't say gouge out any old eye. He tells us to gouge out the right eye. And, he doesn't tell us to cut off any old hand. He says for us to cut off the right hand. He's being very specific in this way. Why is that? What's special about the right eye and right hand?

Leon Morris points out that these two were both especially valued members among the ancients. He explains that the right eye was thought to be most valuable

for a soldier in battle—“a warrior would be gravely handicapped if he lost” that eye.² In a similar fashion, the right hand was considered indispensable on the battlefield as well as in most other areas of life.

Jesus’s original audience would have certainly known this. And, in the course of Jesus’s religious instruction on adultery, their minds would’ve doubtlessly gone to the most prominent instance of this sin in their history—that of their greatest king, King David, and his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. These historical associations would have been swirling in the air around Jesus’s teaching.

What would this standard have meant for David—for the great Israelite-king? What would it have meant for Israel? The head of the nation, the chief representative of them all, without his right eye or his right hand!

Most Israelites in Jesus’s day were looking for a warrior-king like King David. They were looking for a Messiah who could lead them to victory over their enemies, someone who could defeat giants as their representative. They wanted a redeemer—someone who could restore Israel to its former glory. Yet, Jesus’s lesson on adultery tells them that a king like David just won’t suffice. He wouldn’t be fit for the battle. And—even if he still had both eyes and both hands—his heart wouldn’t honor God. No, we need a far greater king than David was or ever could be.

- Instead of a king who looks at others as objects to be used for his pleasure, we need a King who looks at others as individuals created in God’s image, people worthy of respect and dignity and love and redemption.
- Rather than a king who will use his hands violently to take what’s not his, we need a King who will use his hands to bless and heal and feed all those who are in need—even and especially his enemies.
- Instead of a king who has a sinful heart, we need a King with a pure heart. We need a King whose body doesn’t need to be broken because of his sin but willingly gives his body to be broken for the atonement of our sins.

Jesus is being predictive here. We need a far greater savior than King David or any other mere human. We need the perfectly righteous Savior—Christ Jesus.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 118-119.

*Hail to the Lord's Anointed, / great David's greater Son! /...[who] comes to
break oppression, / to set the captive free; / to take away transgression, / and
rule in equity.³*

³ James Montgomery, "Hail to the Lord's Anointed", 1821.