

Plucking and Cutting: An Examination of Matthew 5:27-32

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While sex happens in private, it has public implications and so biblical law has quite a bit to say about it. We cannot keep God's law out of our bedrooms. But neither can we keep God's law out of our hearts. And so the Scripture also has quite a bit to say about sexual desire, most famously in Matthew 5:27-32.

Jesus says any man who looks at a woman with "lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." It is important to understand what lust is and what it is not. Lust is not noticing someone of the opposite sex is attractive; that is simply an objective fact about the world, and sadly many Christians feel unnecessary shame and guilt for making observations that are not sinful in themselves. Neither is lust sexual desire as such, since sexual desires are given to us by God and pre-date the fall. Rather, lust is sexual desire that is unrestrained by God's law; it is the desire for sexual satisfaction outside God's design and boundaries. Scripture is clear that sexual desire is to be channeled in a very specific way (see Proverbs 5:15-21). When our sexual desire is detached from God's design, when it overflows the banks of God's law, we begin to seek pleasure rather than a person, contact rather than a covenant. Sex and sexual desire are good, provided we are guided by God's Word. God's Word is very clear that sex is reserved for a man and woman who are married to one another. Think of sexual desire as a fire. If the fire stays in the fireplace, it is a blessing. But outside the fire place, it burns the whole house down.

Jesus then says that "if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out," and "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." What is this plucking and cutting? Are these verses to be read literally or figuratively? Supposedly the early church theologian Origen castrated himself to end sexual temptation — though it is doubtful doing so would actually end a man's struggle with lust. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that asking whether these verses are literal figurative is a wicked exercise in missing the point. The point is to *not lust* — and if you simply obey, you don't have to answer whether the words are literal or figurative! We can turn a hermeneutical puzzle into an excuse for sinning.

I think Bonhoeffer is on to something, but there is more we can say about these verses. Note the statement is conditional — "if your right eye causes you to sin...if your right hand causes you to sin..." But is the eye or hand the *real* cause of sin? No, sin actually proceeds from the heart, as Jesus makes clear elsewhere. What we really need to cut out is our heart. We need a new heart. We need a heart transplant. And, of course, the promise of the new covenant is that God will give us a new heart. This does not mean we no longer struggle with lust, or other sins, but it does mean we now have the power, by God's grace, to overcome sin, to triumph over temptation, to practice righteousness. The promise of the gospel is not only that your sexual sin is forgiven; it includes the assurance that we can overcome sinful patterns and habits in this area of life. No matter how stubborn the sins of the flesh may be, the power of the Spirit can vanquish them.

The words of Jesus in the rest of the text help us here as well. The threat of failing to deal with our sin — failing to pluck and cut — is hellfire. "For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." The battle against lust, and indeed any sin, is the fight of our lives. It is a fight *for* our lives. Sin is seeking to kill us; we must seek to kill sin. In the war with sin, it's "kill or be killed." Jesus wants us to deal ruthlessly with our sin. Show your sin no mercy. Give no quarter in this battle. Cut sin out of your life, even if it is as painful as cutting off a body part. Do what you have to do to guard yourself against sexual sin. Scripture gives us several practical strategies that can help us. For example, Paul told Timothy to "flee youthful lusts." This is what Joseph did when Potiphar's wife threw herself at him — he ran! Sometimes the best way to deal with temptation is to flee. In Romans 13, Paul says, "Make no provision for the flesh." In

other words, know your weakness and do not put yourself in a position when the enemy can exploit them. This may mean limiting access to technology or ending a potentially unhealthy relationship — whatever it takes to make sure you do not stumble into a trap.

Perhaps the best weapon we have in this battle is the Word of God. God promises true happiness and joy are found in living in accord with his design. When we practice self-control and embrace the sexual wisdom God offers us in his Word, we find fulfillment beyond anything sin can give us. The pleasures of sin are fleeting; the pleasure of obedience are never ending. This is not to say that it will always be easy -- doing what is right never is in this fallen world -- but there is a deep satisfaction that comes from knowing you have obeyed your Creator and Redeemer. Sometimes we hear things like, "Marriage is not for happiness, it's for holiness." There is some truth in that -- especially in hard times, it is good to remember that God aims at making you holy, and trials are part of that process. But in the end, happiness and holiness converge -- the only way to truly be happy to to pursue holiness. This is as true when it comes to sex and marriage as in any other area of life. God wants us happy. He wants us to enjoy his gifts. But this happiness and enjoyment are hindered by sin; only as we obey do we get to experience all that God has in store for us.