

Love without an Exit Strategy: Be Still, O Wandering Eye

Matthew 5:27-32 | Rev. Dr. Jason Carter

Sermon Series: The Sermon on the Mount

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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.

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.

Brittany was a young woman, with beautiful purple hair. She had been invited by Matt, a guy in our youth group in Beverly, MA. Like many young people in the New England area, Brittany was totally un-churched. This was the very first time in her life that she had *ever* stepped inside a church. A couple of months after Brittany started attending the church, these verses from Matthew 5 came up:

"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28).

Brittany, almost immediately after hearing these words of Jesus, came unglued, viscerally responding with the kind of 15-year beautiful candor that I wish some adults possessed:

"This is impossible," Brittany said, "this is what we do every single day. We lust. In the hallways, in the classroom, guys lust after girls and girls lust after guys. This is what we do."

We in the church have a long habit of muting the words of Jesus. This is the same sermon where Jesus says:

- "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20).
- "Blessed are those who mourn" (Mt. 5:4).
- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteous sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:10).

If we have stopped being shocked at the teachings of Jesus, we have never fully understood them.

If I was a cultural anthropologist, I might have gone home that night:

- "Date Log: March 2001 – unchurched teenager reacts violently to the words of Jesus. Her natural reaction – disbelief. Possibility of *understanding* the words of Jesus – fully understood. Possibility of *obeying* the words of Jesus – there is no question she has no desire to obey them."

But you know what? I really liked Brittany. She was a breath of fresh air. Brittany reminded me how *radical* purity is in our culture today.

Brittany was a lot like St. Augustine. Augustine, early in his life, traveled to Carthage at 19 years of age and remembers this: “I found myself in a hissing cauldron of lust. My real need was for you, my God who is the food of the soul. [Yet] I was not aware of this hunger.”

Yet eventually Augustine fought against this hissing cauldron of the flesh, with the biblical principle:

You fight pleasure with greater pleasure.

- “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them [lusts] from me **and took their place**, you who are sweeter than all pleasure (Augustine, *Confessions*, 181).

What happened to Augustine is what I *hope* happened to Brittany later on in life. Augustine replaced his sin of passion with a *greater* passion, one *meaningless* pleasure with a *supremely meaningful* pleasure. Augustine increased his capacity to experience the pleasures of God *to which all other pleasures pale in comparison*.

You fight pleasure with greater pleasure. You fight trifling, monotonous, fruitless happiness with eternal, fruitful, Christ-saturated joy.

Lust says, “What can you do for me?” Love says, “What can I do for you?”, (Tim Keller tweet)

As John Piper says (though I’ve tweaked his definition a bit): “Lust is a consumeristic sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God.” (Piper/Carter)

Just as Jesus raises the bar for obedience to the 6th command: “You shall not kill” by expanding obedience to include the warning against anger (in vs. 21-26), Jesus now raises the bar for Kingdom obedience with respect to the 7th commandment: “You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery” by moving the place of adultery from the bedroom to the sinful heart.

Jesus’ instructions underline the seriousness of the offense. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away....And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away....for it is better to lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” (Mt. 5:29-31)

No surgeon decides to amputate unless the disease is life-threatening. No surgeon decides to remove an eye or cut off a hand – unless the case is serious and deadly and urgent. Jesus is saying: “This is an ‘emergency amputation’ because lust has the power to kill you and ruin your life”.

The point of these verses is that Jesus is urging and cajoling his followers to take decisive, war-like action against unfaithful lust. Jesus is not telling you to use a small band-aid and take a few Flintstone vitamins when you get around to it. Jesus is counseling amputations. Jesus is saying: “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” Under normal circumstances, Jesus’ counsel might seem extreme, but that’s only because you don’t recognize that life and death, heaven and hell hang in the balance.

As one commentator put it, “Better to go limping into heaven than to go leaping into hell.” (Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, 224).

The truth of the matter is that Jesus’ commands only strike us as “over the top” and “extreme” because the church has relaxed one of the central New Testament characteristics of the Kingdom of God: ***that the Christian is called to a continual, all-out war against what the Bible calls “the flesh”***:

Romans 8:13: For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you **put to death** [*thanatoute*, present tense, meaning **repeatedly putting to death**] the deeds of the body, you will live.

Colossians 3:5: **Put to death** [*nekrōsate*, a verb meaning **mortify, deprive of life, decisively cut off, sever everything that energizes**] what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

The Christian life is war. Joseph made a decisive, wartime decision to run away from Mrs. Potipher whereas King David was laxidascal against the flesh and committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Martin Luther put it like this: “It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows (Eph. 6:16) stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counselled long ago: ‘I cannot’, he said, ‘keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair.’”

Jesus is commanding decisive, warlike effort against the flesh in the pursuit of a God-satisfying purity.

I dare say that if these verses are among the most difficult commands for many men in our congregation and in our culture, then the one of the most difficult commandments for many women may come from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Both men and women have their unique battles to fight in the Christian life.

If the shadow side of a man is to over-indulge desire (an egoistical view of sex), then the shadow side of a woman, is (sometimes? often?) to practice self-protection emotionally, spiritually, and physically (which, like men, leads rather naturally to an egotistical view of sex but from a different angle and a different vantage point). Paul writes this in 1 Cor. 7 to both husband and wife:

“For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourself to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Cor. 7:4-5)

So women and men, you can get mad at the messenger but the message is clear: Paul is laying down a principle of radical mutuality in marriage and stressing **how important an other-centered sexual ethic is in the context of marriage.**

Both men and women would be wise to follow scripture’s counsel in this area: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2).

So Jesus begins with anger, proceeds to lust, and now, in vs. 31-32 begins to talk about divorce.

Some surveys now indicate that 8 of 10 people are either directly or indirectly affected by divorce in our culture (Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, 118).

What is a preacher to do with vs. 31-32 in the Sermon on the Mount, recognizing that Jesus addresses divorce in all the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)? This is hardly the only time that Jesus addresses the issue of divorce from a Kingdom perspective! To begin with, we recognize that divorced Christians here at Trinity Wellsprings Church are *not excluded* but *fully embraced and empowered* to serve on our church’s staff, as elders, as deacons, and in every place of leadership in our church family. So how do I

preach to folks who may *already* have been hurt because of their divorce *by the church*? At the very same time, I recognize that there are people in our church family even during this week (some that I know about and some of that I do not know about) who may be contemplating divorce, tempted to divorce, or simply wondering if they can make it through a difficult season in their marriage? How do you preach to very different people in the very same sermon?

- I could make the sermon a **truth-filled** reminder: “**Remember the sacred union that is marriage.** Remember your vows. Remember that it is not the love that keeps together the covenant of marriage but the covenant of marriage that keeps together the love. Remember that marriage is not meant to make you happy but to make you holy in conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ.” I could land squarely on the truth that the biblical evidence lands *enthusiastically* and *whole-heartedly* on the affirmation that marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman designed to last a lifetime. That is clearly the weight of the New Testament evidence.
- Yet, I could also choose to emphasize that the **grace of God** is bigger than our past failures, our moral betrayals, our hidden hurts, and our divorces. I could point to Jesus dealing **gently** and **compassionately** and being **rich in mercy** for absolutely everyone who came to him in need in the gospels. I could stand on the truth that divorce is not the unpardonable sin nor is *any* circumstance, failure, or disappointment. No matter how much regret or bitterness or how many tears have been shed because of the issue, **absolutely nothing can ever fall outside the all-encompassing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.** It is wide, not shallow, the grace of God that Jesus brings to bear on the moments of our lives that shame us and pain us the most!

So I could remind you of truth or I could remind you of grace. And both would be absolutely true. So today, I want us to allow Jesus to be our model who was full of both grace and truth (John 1:14) and at the same time actually ask: *what does the Bible actually have to say about the topic?* So like any good preacher, let me provide you with three biblical points.

Biblical Point #1: Marriage is a sacred union, rooted in creation, between one man and one woman designed to last a lifetime.

Turn with me to Mark 10:1-12:

And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.

² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³ He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” ⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” ⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,^[a] ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:1-12)

Because you don't live in first-century Palestine, you are probably unaware of a raging and controversial debate that had developed by the time of Jesus. The Pharisees are wanting Jesus to weigh in on this great debate, perhaps hoping that if Jesus takes a strict position against divorce – as John the Baptist did in objecting to King Herod's divorce – that Jesus might get himself killed like his cousin John.

Initially Jesus answers their question with a question: “What did Moses command you?” And the Pharisees say: “Moses allowed for a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” (Mt. 10:3-4)

First, it must be understood that a certificate of divorce, under the Law of Moses, was for the protection of the woman. By comparison, the Code of Hammurabi, one of the most forward-looking and progressive law codes in the ancient world, actually provides no protection under the law for women. A man could leave his wife and consider himself divorced; the woman then moves on relationally and economically; but since the woman was not granted a “certificate of divorce” it was impossible for this abandoned and separated woman to move on with her life. This man could come back at any time to claim his “wife” back and claim all her property and economic assets. So a certificate of divorce in Moses' day was for the protection of a single woman during an era where hardly any justice or protections were granted for abandoned and divorced single women.

Second – and here we get into this raging and controversial first-century debate – when the Pharisees say, “Moses allowed for a man to write a certificate of divorce”, they are actually citing Deut. 24:1 which reads:

- Deut 24:1 - If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds **something indecent** about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house. (NIV).

The raging debate centered around the words “something indecent”. What did this somewhat imprecise phrase really mean? The more liberal Rabbinic School followed Rabbi Hillel and emphasized the “something” part of the phrase (“something indecent”), which, over time, evolved to mean “**anything indecent**”. A man could divorce his wife if she spoiled a dish for him or failed keep a clean house! Hillel was essentially advocating “no fault divorce” before the modern era had coined the phrase.

The more conservative Rabbinic School followed Rabbi Shammai who emphasized the “indecent” part of the phrase (“something indecent”) to mean **unchastity** or **sexual unfaithfulness** in marriage. In the Shammai School, a certificate of divorce was allowed (indeed required) only for an act of adultery.

So in Matthew 19 and in Matthew 5, Jesus enters into his raging debate by siding unmistakably with the more conservative Shammai school of thought.

The same incident in Mark 10 is recorded by Matthew in chapter 19, but Matthew records these added words in verse 9 (which also appear in a similar fashion in the Sermon on the Mount):

- And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality [Greek: **porneia**], and marries another, commits adultery. (Matthew 19:9)

As you may know, the Greek word for sexual immorality is **porneia** which is a broad word which referred to sexual immorality, including fornication and adultery.

However, the main point Jesus is making about divorce is: “I'm against it. Don't do it. This is not God's ideal for you.”

In fact, here is a truth that must not escape us: even as Jesus is asked about **divorce** he prefers to talk about the sanctity of **marriage**.

- And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷ 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ **What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.**" (Mark 5:5-9)

For me, these words represent the highpoint in every marriage ceremony. "*Therefore, what **God** has joined together*" signifies that this is *more* than simply two people signing a contract to live together! Friends and family rightly celebrate because they are witnessing an **ACT OF GOD** who has **sanctified** – and **himself joined together in a sacred lifelong union** -- this man and this woman in **holy matrimony**.

- So the Pharisees focus on how you can break up a marriage. Jesus' focus is on keeping your marriage together.
- The Pharisees focus on Deut. 24. Jesus focuses on Gen. 1-2: hold fast to your spouse; the two of you have become one flesh.

Jesus is essentially saying: Deut. 24 was a concession to your sin and to your hardness of heart. God's **original** intent and God's **original** heart for marriage is found in Genesis 1-2, in the creation story, where God designed marriage between one man and one woman to last a lifetime.

Biblical Point #2: Divorce is permitted -- but not required -- in the Bible for sexual immorality and for desertion/abandonment.

After reminding us of God's original intent of marriage stemming from Genesis, Jesus sides against Hillel's "for any reason" causes of divorce and sides with the Shammai School of thought, giving the so-called "exception clause" in both Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. Here's how Jesus puts it in the Sermon on the Mount:

- 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** [the exception clause] (Matthew 5:31-32a)
- And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality** [the exception clause] (Matthew 19:9a)

When a spouse is cheated on, Jesus says, there is a legitimate grounds for divorce. Divorce is permitted, but not required. There is the possibility of forgiveness. There is the possibility of reconciliation. Many amazing sweet-filled marriages stand as a testament to the power of forgiveness and the long, hard struggle for love and reconciliation after moral failures in many, many churches around the world. Yet Jesus is clear: divorce, though not required, is permitted on the grounds of sexual unfaithfulness.

So we understand from scripture that not every divorce is inherently sinful for every person involved in the divorce. Here's how one theologian (Kevin DeYoung) puts it: "Is every divorce the product of sin? Yes. Is every divorce therefore sinful? No." God himself issues Israel a "certificate of divorce" for her spiritual adultery in Jeremiah 3:8:

- I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. (Jer. 3:8)

If God himself, the sinless one, uses the exception clause because of Israel's spiritual adultery, then it stands to reason that divorces based on the exception clause are not sinful for the one who was faithful.

Of course, God does not ultimately abandon Israel. Yahweh continues his love relationship with his bride: wooing, calling, and loving Israel and calling her to repentance. God is a like scorned lover who welcomes back his wayward bride, like the prophet Hosea who welcomes back Gomer though Gomer has broken the bond of their covenantal love.

The second grounds for divorce, according to the Bible, is found in 1 Cor. 7:12-16:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) **[note: this is not a commandment that comes directly from the Lord Jesus but nevertheless it is a command based on Paul's apostolic authority]** that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor. 7:12-16)

The second grounds for divorce is desertion or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, and many, if not most, evangelicals include physical abuse as covered by the umbrella of abandonment, as an active breaking of the covenant to love, honor, and cherish your spouse. Yet Paul's main point in this passage focuses on reconciliation. Do everything you can do to live with an unbelieving spouse. Yet, if an unbelieving spouse refuses to live with you, the believer is free to divorce a spouse that abandons and deserts the marriage relationship.

Biblical Principle #3: Jesus teaching on marriage was radical.

Even in the first century, Jesus' teaching on marriage in the Sermon on the Mount was radical. Shammai and Hillel and everyone else in the first century believed sexual unfaithfulness *required* divorce; Jesus insisted that, through the exception clause, that divorce is permitted but not required for marital unfaithfulness.

With every twist and turn of phrase that Jesus utters about marriage in the Sermon on the Mount, he is moving this controversial dialogue to a place where the permanence and sanctity of marriage is extraordinarily emphasized and highlighted.

Listen to Matthew 19 again: "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." The disciples said to him, "**If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry**" (Matthew 19:9-10).

If disciples in the first century were incredulous, how much more so disciples in the 21st century where divorce is far more prevalent! This is completely out of sync with our culture. Jesus' teaching serves to highlight the radical ethic and Kingdom righteousness that Jesus is advocating for in the Sermon on the Mount.

Let me conclude today with five bits of counsel for our church family:

First: **Remember: God's grace is always bigger.** Jesus actually addresses in the Gospel of Matthew, of all places, the unforgiveable sin (Matthew 12:31-32) and guess what -- lust, adultery, and divorce are never mentioned as unforgiveable sins. All sins, exempting blasphemy of the Holy Spirit – **all sins, all failures, all lust, all adultery, all divorce can be forgiven at the cross of Jesus Christ.** A broken and contrite heart, *no matter the circumstances*, David prays, God will not despise (Ps. 51:17): the shame of lust, the consequences of adultery, the failure of a marriage: **the grace of God is always bigger than our sins.**

Second: **Remember, there is no place for self-righteousness. Neither in our hearts nor in the church.** Remember what the apostle Paul declared: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Rom 3:23). We recognize that, in this fallen world, every human person is not only sinful but, I dare say, all are sexually broken people in one way or another. All fall under the judgment: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:28) **At the cross of Christ, all are sinners. At the cross of Christ, all can be forgiven.**

Third: If you are married today: **Remember your wedding vows.** Remember that God has not designed marriage to make you happy but to make you holy. Take walks together. Nurture your friendship. Pray together. Practice forgiveness. Fight for your marriage like your life depended on it. Hope for sweetness in your marriage but **expect and embrace yourself for seasons of hardship and long-suffering.** Don't give up! If you are going through a hard time in marriage or contemplating divorce, see pastor, see a Christian counselor – on the *front-end of problems* rather than on the backend. Do the spiritual work necessary to honor God in your marriage. Remember your wedding vows!

Fourth: let me talk briefly and directly to children, students, and parents. To parents who long for their grandchildren to have two married parents and who long for their children to realize that marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman designed to last a lifetime. I say this to parents (with children and students listening in): **Christian parents, teach your children to marry in the Lord.** Read 1 Cor. 7:39 which says, “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, **only in the Lord.**” It's a simple biblical command (see also 2 Cor. 6:14) that many parents neglect to teach and many Christian kids never embrace because they never hear it. **But kids, you've heard it today: Marry only in the Lord. Marry only another believer.** At the top of your list should not be: “how hot” or “how smart” or “how funny” this person is but rather “does this person love Christ with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength”? And, Christian young person, be sure that **you** are that person whom a Christian would also love to marry because of **your** love of Jesus.

Finally, **Remember: the gospel of Jesus touches on all aspects of our lives.** It's not for any of us, preachers included, to pick and choose, which parts of Scripture to embrace and which parts to ignore. Therefore, at Trinity, we preach systematically through the Scriptures as a way of being faithful to the *entire counsel of scripture*...even those parts some in our culture would rather that the church forget. But the Gospel is too big! The Gospel is too central for our lives! The Gospel is too all-encompassing for us to do anything else.