

Congregation, I don't need to remind you that the subject matter before us, adultery and divorce, can be highly emotive and upsetting. Today, there are very few families that remain unaffected by this subject. When the sin of lust is allowed to flower, it does great damage, not only to ourselves, but especially to those we love. Last week, Jesus raised the bar concerning the command, "Do not murder" today he does the same thing with adultery. The contemporaries of Jesus had also heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery' but they and our society have moved a long way from this explicit prohibition.

As is usually the case, sinful people quickly justify sinful actions. One lady justified her adultery and subsequent divorce by telling me that since men in the OT could divorce their wives, why couldn't she divorce her husband or another? Another, justified his actions by telling me that since the gospel is about love that made it ok. Both completely distorted the biblical perspective of love and marriage. But what else can we expect. TV comedies and soaps treat adultery and sex before marriage as the norm. Yet, the sad reality is, when adultery and sex before marriage occurs, people are hurt. As a result, our society now deals with the consequences of depression, brokenness, mistrust, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. And the solution offered is not fidelity within marriage and abstinence outside of marriage, but "safe sex" and contraception and in extreme cases, murder by abortion. There are no winners when adultery and divorce occurs, only damaged lives that need to be lovingly repaired.

Jesus by quoting the seventh commandment, probes the heart and motives that lead to adultery and divorce. "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Lust is the problem Jesus addresses in Matthew 5:28 and if not checked, can lead to adultery and divorce. I keep saying to young couples planning marriage that God's design for marriage is best! "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." That means exclusive loyalty. Husband, wife, and the dearest friends take second place. Lewis Smedes, a renowned Christian author, ethicist and theologian in the Reformed tradition says, "When two bodies are united, two persons are united. Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside. The soul is in the act." Intimacy of body and intimacy of soul go together in marriage. Hence, committing adultery and 'sleeping around' clashes with God's good design. And since men are more persuaded by seeing something Jesus warns men against lustful eyes. Doesn't mean that women are excluded. Jesus' warning applies to them as well.

This doesn't mean we cannot appreciate God's good design. One pious young man said to me that when he looks at a woman, he only looks from the neck up! Rubbish. It is harmless and natural to notice that a woman is beautiful or that a man is handsome. That's the way God made us and it's very good. Sure, it's in the eye of the beholder, but it is part of God's good design. But it is one thing to admire what God has made, it is quite another to entertain lustful fantasies that can lead to adultery and divorce. My dad said, "John you can admire a rose, but don't touch." Adultery doesn't just happen. Jesus says it begins in both the heart and the eye. The heart moves the eye, and the eye inflames the sinful heart. Men be careful! Women, be careful! Righteous Job said, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl." We could take a leaf out of his book (Job 31:1). Jesus faced the temptation to entertain lustful thoughts, but he resisted and refused to envision or plan or taste sin, even with his mind (Heb 4:15).

We understand that it is not sinful to be tempted. We cannot prevent certain thoughts from entering our minds. Martin Luther said that we cannot stop birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair. Likewise, we cannot keep impure thoughts from flashing into our minds, but we can refuse to let them roost and find a home there. Having said that, let's remember, like all of God's creations, sexuality is good. Sexual desire is proper and natural. Yet, like all good things, it must be used the right way, in the right place and time. The right place is the commitment and safety of marriage. God blesses sexuality when it is surrounded by loving faithfulness between a man and a woman (Prov. 5:15-19). God wants to bless our use of his gifts, so long as we use them in the right way. Even a vivid imagination is a gift from God. But if we turn the imagination toward taking what does not belong to us, it corrupts the mind and can lead to actual misdeeds. That's why Jesus warns against lust.

Jesus shows how serious lust is when he says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away" (5:29). This is an exaggeration, for a one-eyed man can still lust, and even the removal of both eyes would not suffice, for the memory can still "see." The root of sin lies in the heart, not in sense organs or limbs. Jesus point here is that sin is terrible in his sight. "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (5:29-30). If Jesus says it is better to go through life maimed than to enter hell whole, then we should shudder at the thought of sin as much as we shudder at the thought of losing a limb. So, when we come across something that causes us to be lustful, we should strive to live as if we have no eyes. So, avoid books, magazines, movies, websites that can cause you to lust and be tempted. If a hand or foot tempts us to sin, we should act as if we had none, by refusing to walk toward that which tempts us and by refusing to touch the source of temptation. And if you feel the sin is getting a hold on you, tell someone and give him the right to ask you about your progress against this sin. And if such a sin gains a grip on you, seek a Christian counsellor. At the end of v30, Jesus again connects sexual sins with the place of

punishment. That does not mean that everyone who commits sexual sins goes to hell. By God's grace, every sin is forgivable. But if we love the thought of sin, and indulge it instead of resisting it, we are rejecting God's ways. But if we take our struggles to the Lord, seeking mercy, he will forgive us and renew us.

Now I put it to you that contentment is the antidote to lust. Paul says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6), not material gain, but spiritual gain. The general command to be content means we should be content with our singleness, if that is God's gift. If we are married, it means that we should be content with the spouse that God has given us. Oh, it is so opposite to our culture. Our culture encourages us to be discontent with many things, including our spouses. Of course, every husband or wife has failings. We have selected hearing, fail to pick up our clothes, spill the coffee, and sometimes hog the covers and leave bad smells. It is no sin to notice these flaws, but it is a sin to become discontent with the spouse that God has given us. Discontentment with a spouse drives out love and respect for her. Discontentment with what the Lord has given you is distrust in God's providence, for it accuses God of providing the wrong spouse.

The culture says, "Get the best partner you can" but as Christians should say, "God has given me this man or this woman" and then we should be asking, how can we love them more honourably. What can we do for them? How can we together become more Christ like? Contentment breeds faithfulness, and stops the roving eye. I put it to you that most marital problems begin with discontentment and a lustful heart. The cause of lust is not the attractive opposite sex, but an improper response to attractive opposite sex. The cause of marital discontentment has less to do with our spouse's flaws than it is with our own hard-hearted response to those flaws. I like the Mary Poppins movie. Early in the movie she pulls out a measuring tape and measures the two little children highlighting their faults. Then she measures herself and it says, "Mary Poppins, practically perfect in every way. There is no ideal man or woman, leave alone practically perfect.

Every one of us is flawed from head to heart to hands. Every potential partner is a sinner, and no two sinners are perfectly compatible. People love to ask questions like "What are the two biggest causes of trouble in marriage?" There are many potential answers, money, sex, children, in-laws, lack of communication. But the two biggest causes of marital strife are the husband and the wife. I remember when I was at college, my pastoral care lecturer asked me, "John, do you still love Trudy?" Inwardly I thought, "What a strange question to ask me? Has he seen something in me that I don't know about myself?" Well, before I could offer an answer, he withdrew the question and made it a statement. Husbands, you must love your wives, wives, you must love your husbands. I used it always when I do pre-marital counselling. It's never about whether we still love our spouse, but we must love, that is God's command. Don't focus on the things that are wrong with your spouse, but on the things you love, and if you can't think of anything, think a bit harder and tell him or her and give God thanks for those things.

In Jesus' day, women had few rights, but men could get a divorce anytime. In our passage, Jesus prohibits divorce except for unfaithfulness (5:31-32). Jesus says that divorce can drive the divorced woman into adultery. Moses permitted men to divorce their wives if they gave their wives a certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). This legislation protected divorced women by giving them a clear right to remarry and it slowed men down, for if a man divorced his wife and she remarried, he could never regain her. Thus, Moses' law permitted divorce, but also restricted it. Jesus effectively says that such laws had their purposes, but that the bar has now been raised - lifelong faithfulness is the goal. In Matthew 19, Jesus says that our standard should be God's plan for marriage. God has blessed marriage from the beginning, when he created one man and one woman and married them (Gen 1:27-28; 2:18-25). Adam and Eve were married before they were parents and stayed married after their children matured. In marriage, a man and woman become one flesh, which certainly includes physical intimacy, but it also means listening to each other, dreaming great dreams together, and cleaning up the kitchen together.

Let me close. Adultery is not necessarily worse than other sins, but physical adultery usually occurs after much mental adultery. To commit adultery, one must think it, plan it, and persuade oneself that it is justified. The greatest source of healing in a marriage is the grace of God poured into our hearts. God is patient and faithful toward us, despite our sins and flaws. If that were not so, who could stand? God also graciously forgives our sins and flaws when we truly repent and that includes divorce. Can God heal a broken trust? Can he heal when adultery has been committed? He sure can. I have seen it happen on occasions. It can happen when the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of both husband and wife, and points them to Jesus and persuades them to forgive just as they have been forgiven. By the way, that is why we do Christian weddings. Sadly, we live in a broken world and sometimes love for Jesus has grown cold in one's heart, and when that happens it becomes extremely difficult to repair any relationship. Is lust knocking at the door of your heart? Remember God's grace and providence and pray for His Spirit to help you resist it quickly! With this grace, he can build a strong marriage, with all the faithfulness and contentment that two sinners can know. Are you struggling with the brokenness adultery and divorce has caused? If you haven't already, get on your knees and ask for forgiveness, if not for yourself than for your X and pray that the Lord's healing hand would be upon you both. And keep praying!

For our God is faithful and just. He loves to forgive and loves to bring healing to this broken world. If it were not so, he would not have sent his Son. "Nearer, still nearer, Lord to be Thine, sin with its follies I gladly resign, all of its pleasures, pomp and its pride; give me but Jesus, my Lord crucified, give me but Jesus, my Lord crucified. Amen.