

## The Lust of the Eyes

Matthew 5: 27–30<sup>i</sup>

### One of These Things Is Not Like the Others.

Two years ago the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, meeting at Grand Rapids, Michigan, voted to receive a report on Human Sexuality and recommend that report to the churches “as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality.” The report itself is 175 pages long and it requires a certain determination to read it all the way through, but there was a summary (a mere 12 pages), and more importantly a recommendation, also adopted, to the effect:

That synod affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment.<sup>ii</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment that it might have been better, for various reasons, to define the matter positively and just say something along the lines of, “It was God’s command from the beginning that sexual relations are to be enjoyed only between male and female, and only within the context of a life-long covenant of marriage,” it should be noted that the decision of 2022 was reaffirmed by Synod of 2023, and again just a little over a month ago in 2024, and is to be considered within the Christian Reformed Church as “settled and binding.”

But, for our purpose this morning, we might also note that of the six things named in the report—adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which are to be considered violations of the commandment that Jesus addressed in our text from The Sermon on the Mount—one of these things is not like the others. Of the six, five name very specific sins that are easily enumerated and defined, but one, specifically pornography, is a rather broad category encompassing (among a host of other things), books, magazines, movies, pictures, and an astonishingly broad swath of the internet, which is why, in my opinion, if we were going to define this matter in the negative, it might still have been better to name this sixth category by the actual sin which is connected to it—lust.

Because lust is a biblical category, one that can be defined and enumerated in terms of behavior, and one that is noted and condemned throughout Scripture. In First John 2, verses 15 and 16, for example, where the Apostle wrote:

<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world—the desires... <sup>1</sup> John 2:15–16 ESV

(ἐπιθυμία [epithemia], defined as a strong desire for something, usually with negative connotations; the lust, evil desires, or cravings)

...of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>1</sup> John 2:15–16 ESV

In our text this morning as well, Jesus said:

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matthew 5:27–28 ESV

So, lust, and specifically the lust of the eyes, because we covet what we see.

### The Lust of the Eyes.

Now, before we go on, it needs to be said that in making this statement, Jesus was not limiting his definition of this sin to a man looking lustfully at a woman, as if a woman looking lustfully at a man was somehow OK, nor was He limiting it to married men and women alone since he said, “has already committed adultery,” rather than fornication, nor was He implying by omission that it would be OK for a man to look at a man with lustful intent and we could go on and on. But those who might be inclined to read the text this way are making Jesus to engage in the very same sort of rationalization and reduction that He was teaching against in Matthew chapter 5.

See, throughout this section, Jesus was not narrowing the focus of God’s law to the letter, thus opening countless loopholes, rather, He was demonstrating that the spirit of the law was much broader than the scribes and Pharisees had ever realized. So, we’re not here to find justification for our sin, we are here to learn the exceeding sinfulness of sin, so that we can be saved from it.

Specifically, we’re here to learn that sin begins in the heart. Of course, this thought is contrary to the spirit of our age, who would have us embrace ideas like, “the heart wants what the heart wants,” and “just follow your heart” as rules for life, but, “According to Jesus,” as James Montgomery Boice wrote,

...lust is the equivalent of adultery, just as anger is the equivalent of murder. And the standard of His followers is to be, quite simply, chastity before marriage and fidelity afterward.<sup>iii</sup>

This is demonstrated for us so many times in God’s word. Just last week we were considering the story of Joseph and during the time that he was a slave in the house of Potiphar.

<sup>7</sup> And after a time his master’s wife **cast her eyes** on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” Genesis 39:7 ESV

In other words, she looked at a young man, “handsome in form and appearance,” with lustful intent, as did King David when

<sup>2</sup> It happened, late one afternoon...that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. 2 Samuel 11:2 ESV

so, he took her and committed adultery with her, but the sin began with the lust that came with the looking. And we could go on. The story of Shechem and Dinah in Genesis 34 begins in much the same way, as does the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. The history of

the world, in fact, is littered with such tawdry and tragic tales of illicit desire, and the destruction that inevitably follows in its wake.

### Desire When It Is Conceived.

This is the natural trajectory of lust, as noted by James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote about temptation, that

<sup>14</sup> ...each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup> Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. James 1:13–15 ESV

Of course, there are many situations in which desire, in itself is not evil. There is the natural desire for food and water and the necessities of life. When Jesus himself had been in the wilderness fasting for 40 days he was hungry. He had a natural desire for food, and there was nothing sinful about that desire. Paul wrote once of his heart's desire and prayer to God for his people, Israel, that they might be saved, and there can be nothing wrong with this.

Even sexual desire, when kept within the God-ordained boundaries of marriage between a man and a woman, covenanted together until death does them part, is not sinful, as we read in Hebrews 13:

<sup>4</sup> Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled... Hebrews 13:4 ESV

No doubt Adam, when first introduced to his wife, Eve, felt the stirrings of desire for her. But sometimes I think we view that story through the dirty lens of our own sin, something that Adam and Eve did not share with us at that time in their lives, and we should be careful not to do the story a disservice here. Adam's response to Eve in the moment they first met was not one of lust, or even sexual attraction (in my opinion). It was a response of true love.

<sup>23</sup> ...“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...” Genesis 2:23–25 ESV

he said, and

...she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” <sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. Genesis 2:23–25 ESV

But notice that the leaving of father and mother and holding fast to his wife (we call this marriage now) comes before the one flesh part. This is specific and it's intentional. In our sex-saturated society, sexual attraction often precedes love, but it was not so from the beginning. C.S. Lewis wrote:

Modern people are always saying, “sex is nothing to be ashamed of.” ...They may mean “There is nothing to be ashamed of in the fact that the human race reproduces itself in a certain way, nor in the fact that it gives pleasure.” If they mean that, they are right. Christianity says the same. It is not the thing, nor the pleasure, that is the trouble. The old

Christian teaches said that if man had never fallen, sexual pleasure, instead of being less than it is now, would actually have been greater.<sup>iv</sup>

And only a fallen, sinful, lust-filled heart would choose to argue. Only a fallen, sinful, lust-filled heart would maintain that what is forbidden must, by definition, be sweeter. Physical desire within marriage is holy, and the marriage bed is holy and undefiled, and when the river of desire stays between these banks, all is well, but as many people in High River can attest, when a river departs its banks, the result is wanton destruction, and when the river of desire overflows its boundaries, the result is even more devastating. As we read, “Desire”—epithemia, lust, evil desire, or craving—

...when it has conceived gives birth to sin... James 1:13–15 ESV

And this is the desire that Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 5; the desire that conceives sin when one person looks at another to gratify his craving. This is a desire disconnected from covenant love. This is a desire which is in itself sin, whether or not it proceeds to the act of adultery or fornication.

King David’s sin did not begin only at the point when he and Bathsheba fell into bed. It began when, instead of turning away, he chose to feast his eyes on the attractive woman next door. This is why the old adage, “It’s OK to look as long as you don’t touch,” should be regarded as the lie from the pit of hell that it is. It is not OK to look in that way. Stott wrote,

Deeds of shame are preceded by fantasies of shame, and the inflaming of the imagination by the indiscipline of the eyes...I doubt if ever human beings have fallen victim to immorality, who have not first opened the sluiceways of passion through their eyes.<sup>v</sup>

See, lust is a subspecies of covetousness, and covetousness is a sin that exists solely within the heart. So, lust is a sin, even if it is not allowed to grow into something more, and it is a destructive force in itself, for

...desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. James 1:13–15 ESV

### **O Be Careful, Little Eyes.**

Jesus, of course, highlighted the seriousness of all of this in verses 29 and 30 from Matthew chapter 5, where He said:

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> 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. Matthew 5:29–30 ESV

Now, as I did two weeks ago, I want to emphasize that this is hyperbole. It is the deliberate overstatement of the remedy to highlight the serious nature of the problem. So, is it true that it is better to lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell? The answer is unequivocally “Yes.” But does Jesus intend that those who struggle with sexual sin

should engage in self-mutilation? Again, unequivocally, “No. Absolutely not. Don’t do it.” Just don’t. That is not in any way the point here,

But if we are not meant to take this literally, and again, we are not—just don’t; don’t even think about it—then what are we to do with it? Well, as one commentator noted,

Sin, being a very destructive force, must not be pampered. It must be “put to death”. Temptation should be flung aside immediately and decisively. Dillydallying is deadly. Halfway measures work havoc.<sup>vi</sup>

It is the sin then, and the temptation that leads to it, that must be addressed in no uncertain terms, and the words of an old children’s song come to mind. We used to sing, “O be careful, little eyes, what you see...O be careful, little hands, what you do...O be careful, little feet, where you go.” It was good advice, and, as Hendriksen continued:

The surgery must be radical. Right at this very moment and without any vacillation the obscene book should be burned, the scandalous picture destroyed, the soul-destroying film condemned...

(and if he were writing today, he would no doubt add all those devices by which we connect to the internet with its soul destroying panoply of things to covet and lust after, but in 1973 he just went on)

...the sinister yet very intimate social tie broken, and the baneful habit discarded. In the struggle against sin the believer must fight hard. Shadow-boxing will never do.<sup>vii</sup>

So, be careful—supremely careful—little eyes what you see. Whether it is pornography in the usual sense, or Pinterest porn, it doesn’t really matter. We need to turn away from the things that we covet and fix our eyes on Jesus. We need, by the grace of God, to replace all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the arrogant pride of life—with the one desire that will never lead us into sin. We need to come to the place, like the Psalmist, where we may say of the Lord:

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? **And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.** Psalm 73:25 ESV

Will this be a simple thing? No, and it will not be achieved by human effort. It will require nothing short of a work of grace in our hearts. And along the way, we will fail, and fall, and fall again, but we will also learn, “on the one hand,” as Lewis wrote,

...that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and, on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven.<sup>viii</sup>

Because the word of God calls us to be holy as He Himself is holy—to be pure, even as He is pure—but it also proclaims to us that it is not through works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy alone that we are saved, sanctified, and glorified. This is the promise of God for those who believe, so,

<sup>26</sup> [Our] flesh and [our] heart[s] may fail...

In point of fact, they have done, and will inevitably do so again, but, thanks be to God, He

...is the strength of [our] heart[s] and [our] portion forever. <sup>Psalm 73:6 ESV</sup>

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
- ii CRCNA, *Acts of Synod 2022* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2022), 922.
- iii James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 112.
- iv C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 98.
- v John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 88.
- vi William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 303.
- vii Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 303.
- viii Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 101-2.