

Jesus and Sexual Sin

M. W. Bassford, 12-20-09

Introduction.

In the springtime, before planting day comes around, I'm one of those gardeners who buys little seed packets from Wal-Mart and raises my plants from seed. Some seeds I recognize by now, but others are utterly mysterious. I put them in the little starter pellets, water them, and care for them, but I have no idea what I've got until they sprout.

In much the same way, the human race is generally not very good at predicting the consequences of its actions. Especially on a national and cultural level, we come up with all of these grand schemes that sound good to us at the time, but we don't really know what we've done until the seeds we've sown start sprouting. We see a marvelous example of this in the so-called Sexual Revolution of the 1960's. During that time, an entire generation decided that it was going to reject the notions of conventional morality. They began to view the old taboos against pre-marital sex, divorce, and homosexuality as the product of a stuffy Victorian worldview that just didn't know how to have any fun.

That was when the seeds were sown, and now, 40 years after the close of that decade, we're beginning to see what kind of plants we've gotten. Fornication is so commonplace and casual that it's known to today's teenagers as "hooking up." Divorce continues its steadily upward trend. Ten years ago, 40 percent of first-time marriages ended in divorce. Today, the number is up to 50 percent. Homosexuality is increasingly common and increasingly accepted. If we think things are bad now, just wait until all of those plants mature and start producing seed of their own.

When the world around us is so obviously headed toward disaster, that's when Christians most need to return to the word. The Bible clearly teaches that things like sexual purity and lifelong marriages are not artifacts from an earlier time. They are God's expectations for our lives, both now and forever. The words of the New Testament authors unanimously condemn immorality. Let's turn, then, to what Jesus has to say about sexual sin.

Lust.

Jesus opens His examination of this deadly subject by discussing lust. His thoughts on it appear in Matthew 5:27-28. Notice that just as Jesus often does during this section of the Sermon on the Mount, He begins with a restatement of the Law of Moses. Under that law, adultery was what was prohibited, not lust, so if you really wanted to sin with your neighbor's wife, but you were too ugly or too cowardly to follow through, you didn't violate the Law here. The flaw with this outward standard for righteousness is obvious. Even if it worked, it produced people who may have been obedient, but who truly desired to do evil. Clearly, that wasn't what God wanted to see from His chosen people.

Jesus ups the ante, though, by condemning not merely adultery, but the desire to commit adultery or some other sexual sin. Under the law of Christ, our heart is just as important as our actions, and if that heart longs after immorality, it cannot be pleasing to God. In the modern era, mankind has become quite ingenious about devising new ways to lust. It says something about us as a race, I suppose, that we invent a communication tool as amazing as the Internet, but then fill it with billions of instances of pornography. Whatever lies we may tell ourselves to the contrary, the Christian who gets involved with porn is no more spiritually pure than the one who becomes infatuated with his neighbor's wife. All of these things are equally evil, and we have to hate them and wage war in our minds against them if we wish to be righteous.

To many outsiders and even many Christians, this prohibition on lust may seem a little bit harsh. If a man likes to look at dirty pictures online, or he starts fantasizing about a co-worker, really, what's the harm? James answers that question in James 1:14-15. The problem with lust is that it doesn't stop with lust. Like all other sins, lust cannot truly satisfy, and once it has us in its grip, it just leads us deeper and deeper into sin. If we make a habit of lusting after others in our lives, sooner or later, that won't be enough anymore, and we'll start looking not just to lust, but to do. And believe me, brethren, once we are determined to cheat on our spouses, Satan will gladly provide us with a partner for our adultery.

Likewise, an obsession with pornography will only lead us into deeper and deeper levels of sin. The kind of porn we seek will get harder- and harder-core as we try to recapture that initial thrill, and soon, what we see on the computer won't be enough anymore. I know of a former gospel preacher whose porn addiction led him first to strip clubs and then to assignments with prostitutes. We must avoid the first steps of that path at all costs, or our lust will end up taking us to places we never dreamed we would go. Lust will give birth to sin, and then sin will bring forth death—just as James said.

Discipline.

From there, Jesus tells us that the only cure for lust is discipline. Consider His words in Matthew 5:29-30. The first thing that we need to notice about this passage is that Jesus is not speaking literally. He does not mean that we need to go around poking our own eyes out if we struggle with lust. For one thing, that wouldn't solve the problem. If my

heart is evil and I allow myself to lust, I could completely blind myself and not affect my lusting one little bit because of all the wickedness I have stored up in my head already. There can be no physical remedy to a spiritual problem.

What Jesus is urging us toward, then, is surgery that is not external, but internal. Paul describes his own internal surgery in 1 Corinthians 9:27. The truth is that, just as with any sin, if we continually struggle with lust, it is because there is some part of ourselves that wants to lust, that enjoys the sin and doesn't want to give it up. That part of ourselves is a spiritual cancer that we must cut out. If we don't, it will consume us. It may also be that in our struggle against lust, we have to cut some activities out of our lives as well. There may be some man at work who is a great guy and really fun to talk to, but if he leads our desires to forbidden places, we simply cannot afford to be around him. Likewise, if the computer is a temptation, we should never use it unless our spouse or our parent or somebody else who will deter us is in the room with us. That may be inconvenient. That may be unpleasant. However, if it's necessary to keep us from sinning, it's something that must be done. We cannot compromise in our war against sin.

We see why this is so important from 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. When we become Christians, we consecrate our bodies, and indeed our spirits, to God. They are to be a place where the Holy Spirit dwells and God is glorified. That purity, that holiness, is something we must defend. Just like kings did with castles in the Middle Ages, we must fortify ourselves against sin. That's not something easy to do, any more than it was easy for those kings to drag stone from miles around using nothing more than muscle power and to raise that stone into walls and towers. They did it anyway, though, because protecting themselves from the enemy was worth the trouble and expense, because the consequences of being overwhelmed were disastrous. The consequences of failure are no less severe for us. Let's prepare accordingly.

Divorce.

From there, Jesus shifts topics slightly to divorce. His commandment on the matter appears in Matthew 5:31-32. Though divorce was tolerated under the Law of Moses, Jesus sets a stricter standard. According to Him, it leads to two kinds of sin: first, it causes the divorced spouse to commit adultery. Second, any remarriage is adulterous. The only divorce that avoids these pitfalls is one in which a spouse is put away for having committed adultery himself.

This divorce teaching was not popular in the first century, and it is not popular today. Even among so-called evangelicals, people who profess to be committed to obeying God's word, divorce is rampant, and few churches will take a stand against it. We cannot allow ourselves to be tempted into hypocrisy. A couple of weeks ago, I read an article about a gay-rights supporter in California who started a petition drive for an amendment to ban divorce. His point was that if conservative Christians were going to take a Biblical stand against gay marriage, they needed to take the same Biblical stand against divorce, and you know what? He's right. The Bible is an all-or-nothing book. Either we submit to every one of God's commands, or we might as well submit to none of them. We don't get to pound our chests and raise a fuss about sin that doesn't tempt us, and then ignore the word when it hits close to home. If we're going to promote God's vision of marriage, we have to promote all of God's vision of marriage, and divorce is not a part of that.

Divorce is undeniably a great evil, a sickness of our society, but the cure for the disease cannot be found at the ballot box. We cannot force others to be righteous, for true obedience to God can only come from the heart. Nor can we focus only on teaching what we must not do. Instead, the solution to the divorce problem is a return to God's positive plan for marriage. We see the first part of that plan, God's commandment to wives, given in Ephesians 5:22-23. This tells us that the woman must submit. In our country in recent decades, there's been a lot of noise about feminism and fighting back against patriarchal oppression, but the truth is that a family in which both husband and wife claim leadership cannot function. Nature teaches us that two heads cannot control the same body. Neither can two leaders control the same family, and I can't help but wonder how many modern divorces are the result of precisely that leadership struggle. Women are in no way unequal to men or inferior to men, any more than I am inferior to our elders. However, just as God has placed me under the leadership of the elders in the church, so He has placed the woman under the leadership of the man in the family. It's not his place to force her down. It's her place to submit.

That sounds pretty good from the man's perspective, until we get to Ephesians 5:25-26. Here, we learn that God's will for the husband is equally demanding. The wife is to submit her will to the husband, but the husband is to submit his desires to the wife. Men, once we say, "I do", we don't get to live for ourselves anymore. Instead, from that point on, our lives have to revolve around our wives. What's good for us suddenly becomes of secondary importance to what's good for her. Just as Christ came to earth and sacrificed everything He had for the church, in marriage, we must sacrifice everything we have for our wives. Obviously, this cannot become a contradiction of the verses we just finished looking at. Self-sacrificing love for the wife does not mean giving her everything she wants and letting her make all the decisions. Such a passive course of action may seem to promise happiness for her, but in reality, what women truly need is the strong leadership of a godly man. Unless they get that leadership, they will always be dissatisfied. However, we can't use leadership as an excuse to lord it over our wives, either. It must be the leadership of a servant, where our every action makes clear that she is our highest priority. Only then can we fulfill God's plan for our marriages.