

**“Just Say No”**  
**Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount**  
**Matt. 5:27-37**  
**July 5, 2009**

Very soon after I was called to be your pastor, almost 12 years ago now, I received a letter from a member of the church arguing that I should not be a pastor because I had been divorced. To support his position, he quoted from the SOM, Matt. 5:19a: “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...” He assumed, I guess, that because I had been divorced, I thought divorce was okay, and that I would teach others that divorce was okay. To his credit, he had the integrity to sign his name [one of my mentors taught me never to read anonymous letters], so I called him immediately. I explained to him what I believe the Scripture teaches not only about the sin of divorce but also about the promise of grace. Both of those teachings will be important for us today.

In our sex-saturated, self-seeking culture, the Bible’s teaching about sexual expression, marriage, and divorce may seem quaint but impractical, and ridiculously outdated. As we saw with the ‘No murder’ commandment last week, Jesus does not erase or relax the ‘No adultery’ rule for those who wish to live in His Kingdom, but rather, He affirms and broadens it. Matt. 5:27-28. In view of the patriarchal nature of the culture of His time, Jesus’ statement is stunning. Because the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment – the ‘No adultery’ rule – was interpreted by the rabbis to specifically prohibit a married *woman* from having sexual relations with a man other than her husband. It was meant to protect the man’s exclusive right to his wife and to assure that any children she bore were his and not somebody else’s. It was interpreted to protect *the man*. A married *man* who had extramarital relations with an unmarried woman was considered immoral, but he was not guilty of adultery under the Law, as the rabbis interpreted it. Now, that may sound exceedingly picky, but adultery was a capital offense, usually resulting in death by stoning. So one had to be clear on these things.

But Jesus raises the bar on the ‘no adultery’ commandment when He says, “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Just as ‘anger in the heart’ is as life-destroying as murder, Jesus says that ‘adultery in the heart’ is as commitment-breaking as the actual physical act of adultery.

Now, if you are of a certain age, it will be almost impossible for you to hear these verses without thinking of President Jimmy Carter. In an interview with *Playboy* magazine, then-candidate Carter admitted that, while he had never actually committed the physical act of adultery, he had by Jesus’ standards, as he had looked lustfully at women other than his wife. Jesus is not talking here about merely noticing an attractive woman or man as they pass by. He is talking about the glance that lingers too long, the thoughts that are held onto in one’s mind and played over and over again. To think about what it would be like to have sex with someone in your office or your class or your neighborhood, that’s the same as actually doing it, Jesus says.

Does that seem harsh? Remember what we said last week: What you think about you will eventually act upon. If you intentionally hold thoughts of sexual activity with someone in your

mind long enough, you are likely to eventually act upon them. That's one reason why internet pornography and online affairs are so dangerous. And according to Jesus' interpretation of the Law, they are adultery, whether or not physical contact ever results. I'm not talking about the random thought that happens through your mind. I'm talking about intentionally focusing your mind on it. Intentionally thinking about it, playing the encounter out in your head. "I'll say this and then he'll say that..." That's adultery, Jesus says, as much as if you climb into bed. So don't do it. In fact, He says, do whatever you need to do to avoid it. Matt. 5:29-30.

It's better, Jesus says, to go through life one-eyed and one-handed than to be led into the sin of adultery. Jesus is not advocating literal self-maiming here. But He is saying this: "Be careful – be very careful – what you look at and be careful what you touch, handle, or reach out for. "Make yourself blind to things which might cause you to sin. Intentionally limit yourself so that you cannot reach out and touch that which is forbidden and immoral." Maybe you know the song our preschool kids sing, "O be careful little eyes what you see..." King David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba began when he *saw* her bathing. "O be careful little eyes what you see, what you watch, what you look at and linger over."

The sexual ethics of the Bible are very different from what our culture teaches. In fact, I get this weekly email from TIME Magazine with the top 10 most popular stories of the week. Last week's list included this title: *Cheating 2.0: New Mobile Apps Make Adultery Easier*. Evidently there is a website [which I'm not going to give you] with this motto: *Life is short. Have an affair*. It's a personals site for facilitating extramarital affairs. I kid you not. And – let the politicians among us take note – now you can download that app – or application – to your Blackberry or iPhone. So your spouse cannot track your adulterous activity on your home computer. Isn't that handy?

Unfortunately, I'm not making this up. But I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. Hardly a week goes by that we don't hear about another sex scandal among our politicians. Recently it has been the governor of South Carolina. Next week, maybe somebody else. Hardly a week goes by that we don't hear about another celebrity getting divorced. Recently it's been Jon and Kate. How sad for their eight children, not only that their parents are apparently divorcing but that it's so very public.

We just received the new TIME Magazine Friday, and the cover story this week is this: *Unfaithfully Yours*. It's about how infidelity is eroding our most sacred institution, marriage. This is what our culture believes in the area of sexual ethics: "What happens in my bedroom is nobody else's business. As long as nobody gets hurt, I can do what I want." But this is what Jesus says: Matt. 5:31-32.

Here, Jesus is not dealing with one of the Big Ten. But Jewish Law allowed a man to divorce his wife [not the other way around, by the way] and if he did, he had to give her the proper legal documentation so she could marry again. There is no prohibition in the Torah against divorce. But again, Jesus proclaimed the prohibition of divorce as against the will of God, declaring that the one who divorces and remarries commits adultery and therefore breaks God's Law. In forbidding divorce, Jesus actually appeals not to Jewish law at all, nor to the commandments, but to the very order and structure of creation itself. Marriage and family, Jesus says, are not merely

contractual arrangements to be entered into and dissolved at the will or whim of men and women, but rather good gifts of God and the way God intends human beings to live.

Jesus speaks again about divorce in Matt. 19:3-9. Okay, let me be clear: God created this great thing call ‘sex,’ and He put this fence around it called ‘marriage.’ Human sexual expression is a gift of God, and it is good, like everything else God created. There is nothing dirty or bad about sex. Sex was God’s idea! *As long as* it is expressed within the lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. “Till death do us part.” You see, our sexual expression is not a private matter, something we can choose to do with as we will. It was designed and ordered by God from the beginning: “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” Jesus is quoting from Genesis here.

And so Paul writes to the church at Corinth, and the church at Wilmington: 1 Cor. 6:18-20. [Prep].

You see, right and wrong are never a matter of personal, individual decision. “You are not your own.” God has revealed His will in these matters. Not because He’s the great cosmic killjoy. Because He knows what is best for us. There are certain structures for human life that were created and established by God in the very beginning, and that includes sexual expression and the structure of the family. “I hate divorce,” God says according to the prophet Malachi. Listen: God does not hate divorce because it breaks one of His rules. God hates divorce because it breaks the hearts and lives of His children and *their* children so much. Even the author of the TIME Magazine article knows this: “There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage.”

Listen, I’ve been there so I can say this with certainty: No matter what the reason for it, divorce is bad for children. Period, end of story. Now, I also know that there are some situations in our fallen world when unfortunately divorce is the best option we have. But it is *never* God’s plan for His people. It is *never* what God desires. It is *always* contrary to what God intends. I don’t know how I can be clearer than that.

And I say that, remember, as a divorced person. The man who wrote me that letter was wrong. I was deeply ashamed that I was divorced. I regretted it immensely. Not only because I had broken my marriage vows. But especially because it hurt my children so much. Let me tell you: If you are considering an affair, if you feel like divorce is the only option for you – *please: Just say no*. “Flee from sexual immorality,” Paul wrote to the church. “Gouge out your right eye, cut off your right hand.” Before you make that decision or take that step, *please* come and speak with Paul and me. God has done a miracle in our marriage, and I know there are others of you who could testify to the same thing. Or see Pastor Doug or allow us to refer you to another counselor.

We need to help each other stand against the overwhelming tide of our culture that says any kind of sexual expression between two consenting adults is acceptable and good and that divorce is a reasonable option for almost any reason. It goes beyond just what’s good and right for us as God’s people. Faithfulness and commitment in marriage is meant to give the world a picture of God’s faithfulness and commitment to the world.

But let me also say this today: While sexual expression outside the covenant of marriage and divorce *are* sin, they are not unforgivable sins. There is still grace. You see, as bad as we are – There is still more love in God than sin in us. The Scripture says that God removes our sin from us, as far as the east is from the west. That He forgives us and remembers our sin *no more*. That there is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ. When we acknowledge and confess our sin, ask God to forgive us, and promise to change our ways, God *does* forgive us.

“You are not your own. You were bought with a price.” The price God paid so that you could receive His forgiveness and grace to erase your sin was high. And we remember the price He paid at this Table. The Hebrew Scriptures say that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. And so blood had to be shed and it should have been mine and it should be yours. But God has already provided for your forgiveness and mine by the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross. That is what we celebrate at this Table: Jesus' death in our place so that we can be forgiven and cleansed of *any and all* sin. Adultery, divorce, even murder. *Any and all*.