

Matthew 5:27-30

Dealing with Sin

If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee...v. 29

We live in such a time and culture that leads many to view with horror and disdain certain kinds of punishments that would be considered excessive. A thief having his hand cut off – a mistaken show of disrespect leading to a public flogging. It was as recent as May of 1994 that a 17 year old American was caned in Singapore for the crime of vandalism. I can still remember the uproar in the press and how President Clinton appealed to Singapore not to carry out such a cruel punishment upon a poor, innocent and naïve American teenager who evidently never thought that his crime of spray-painting peoples' cars could lead to such treatment. In the news articles that were carried by the press some expressed sympathy for the teenager while others thought he got what he deserved.

To those who fall on the sentimental side of such a controversy – they would probably read with utter astonishment the words of Christ when He calls on His followers to inflict upon themselves a very severe punishment. *If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee* our Lord says in v. 29. It occurs to me as I read such a statement that if it was followed to the tee – then just about anyone who owned a television would soon have to gouge out his eyes.

If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee our Lord says in v. 30. Doesn't that seem extreme? Doesn't that seem as harsh as those stories you hear coming out of Muslim countries where such a form of punishment actually exists? What is Christ actually calling for here – and should we be advocates of self-mutilation? Before we even attempt to answer such questions there are a number of things that need to be borne in mind as we'll see in the course of our study.

In this section of the sermon on the mount the Lord Jesus is addressing the way the subjects of the kingdom of heaven should think. He calls on them to avoid wrong thinking and to practice right thinking when it comes to His own mission. And so we've noted in v. 17 Christ's words: *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil.*

And as we proceed through the rest of chapter 5 we see also that the Lord Jesus is calling for right thinking about the law. Our status within the kingdom, Christ clearly indicates in v 19 is in large measure determined by how high a view we have of the law of God. Those that set the laws of God aside and break them with impunity and teach others to do so are least in the kingdom of heaven if they're even true subjects of the kingdom of heaven – while those that do and teach the Lord's commandments are called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And then the Lord begins to show just how the laws of God apply. And in these illustrations the Lord endeavors to correct the kind of thinking that would reduce the laws of God to matters of mere external compliance. *You're all right*, the Pharisaical mindset

would say, *if you approach your brother with a knife or a gun or some other weapon as long as you don't actually pull the trigger.*

Or in the case of the portion we've read – *you're all right as long as you don't actually become fully engaged in physical intimacy.* And in correcting this kind of shallow thinking the Lord Jesus makes it very plain that what God expects is not mere external compliance but internal purity that in turn will lead not only to the willing obedience to the prohibitions of the law but this internal purity will also lead to what the law of God positively calls upon us to fulfill.

So in the case of the 6th commandment *Thou shalt not kill* – I will go so far as to love my brother rather than hate him. And in the case of the 7th commandment *Thou shalt not commit adultery* – I will go so far as to not only refrain from promiscuity but I'll go so far as to show respect toward others in their relationships as well as show respect to my own relationships. As our shorter catechism puts it in answer to the question of what the 7th commandment requires: *The seventh commandment requireth the preservation of our own, and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior.*

Now in our last study we considered the good effects that a right understanding of the law of God will have on us. If we're guided by Christ into thinking right about the law of God then we'll learn to abase ourselves because we'll be forced to conclude that we transgress God's laws and we fail to measure up to God's laws – that's the first effect. The second effect is that we'll learn to think more highly of Christ and we'll learn to rise in our estimation of His greatness. When we see how deeply the laws of God penetrate and how they require inward purity which leads to righteousness in outward practice then we begin to appreciate all the more Christ's statement regarding the purpose of His mission – *I am not come to destroy, the law, but to fulfil* – v. 17. And the third effect which will arise from an accurate understanding of the law of God is that we'll learn how to strive for righteousness. We'll strive to obtain much more than mere external compliance to a prohibition.

Now as we come to our Lord's treatment of the 7th commandment in vv. 27-30 I want to pay particular attention to the way the Lord calls upon His followers to deal with sin. I don't want to overlook the 7th commandment – indeed I find it interesting that it's in connection with the 7th commandment in particular that the Lord takes the occasion to teach His subjects how they should deal with sin.

He's calling for harsh measures. He's calling for something that would strike us as being excessive. *If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out...if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off.* I don't believe the Lord means for these words to be taken so literally that we actually mutilate ourselves – but on the other hand – the Lord is stressing through the use of exaggeration something that must be pressed upon the minds and hearts of his followers and that is:

We Must Practice Vehement Zeal when it comes to Dealing with Our Sins

And this is what I want to focus on this morning in the remaining minutes. In particular I want to raise and then answer the question – why does the Lord Jesus call for such harsh measures when it comes to dealing with our sins?

I. Because of Our Propensity to be Easy on Ourselves

This is demonstrated most plainly by the Pharisees themselves. *Ye have heard* our Lord says 7 times in this section which indicates that the Jews were hearing the law expounded. The Pharisees would make much of the law and obedience to the law.

They appeared to be great sticklers when it came to following God's commandments. They might tithe their mint and anise and cumin or they might be seen in the market place making long prayers. It seems that much of their zeal and devotion was aimed at making a good appearance in the flesh but in fact they were but white-washed sepulchres according to Christ.

They nullified God's law by their tradition. So even though they appeared as those that held the bar high – our Lord makes it plain in this section of the sermon on the mount by His corrective *but I say unto you* that they had in fact lowered the bar of God's law and made it much easier to accommodate their own hypocrisy.

Sadly – this was the case with the Jews throughout much of Old Testament history. At the times they appeared at their worst, morally speaking, they were nevertheless still very much engaged in their religious practices. They would still offer their sacrifices. They would still observe their feasts. And for that reason they became offended when the prophets preached against their sin. Jeremiah's patriotism would be questioned when he warned of impending judgment. On one occasion they rationalized that Jeremiah, like his predecessor, Isaiah, must be referring to a future generation of Jews. He couldn't possibly be preaching to them and pronouncing judgment upon them.

And during the ministry of Ezekiel when many of the Jews were taken into captivity but a remnant remained in Jerusalem – it was the mindset of that remnant that the dross had been purged and they were the righteous ones that remained in the city. They were easy on themselves, when it came to weighing themselves by the law of God.

And so has it ever been the propensity of the flesh. We're easy on ourselves. Oh we may not follow the same method as the Pharisees in lowering the bar of God's law but we nevertheless arrive at the same result. In this current dispensation of grace we've learned to turn grace into lasciviousness. This was the case with the church at Corinth. They evidently believed that the truth of God's grace meant they could excuse the most grotesque forms of immorality. *It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles* – Paul writes in 1Cor. 5:1. *And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you* (v. 2).

You see how easy they were being on themselves? You see how easily they could play down the effects of sin that were even heinous by pagan standards? Oh how easy we tend to be on ourselves when it comes to dealing with sin.

And nowhere is this more readily apparent than when it comes to the sin of adultery or fornication. Our culture is immersed with this sin. We flaunt it so freely that we've lost the respect of other parts of the world. It's impossible to altogether escape the bombardment or promiscuity that's upon us. It comes to us through every possible media – whether it be over the airwaves or through the printed page or whether it be plastered on billboards or readily available on the internet. You don't have to search for it – it will find you.

This sin is so common that it's become acceptable. Oh I know that in our Christian circles we don't accept the spewing of such sin the way it comes to us Hollywood style. But on the other hand – how strenuously do we guard ourselves from it? How seriously are we about dealing with it? Certainly the words of Heb. 12:4 could apply with regard to the sin of adultery – *Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.*

I can remember hearing a recorded sermon some time ago in which Al Martin was addressing a minister's conference. He passionately pleaded with those ministers to pass over the simple click of a mouse that could bring them into the realm of promiscuity through the internet. The church is not exempt from this sin – and indeed the church has become very easy on itself by and large with regard to this sin.

How many ministers have been guilty of such sin but still continue to occupy their pulpits? You hear of the most sordid tales of ministers who fall prey to intimate affairs and so they divorce their wives and continue in their office. And the ones they fall into sin with may be on the church staff and they divorce their husbands and marry the minister who has put away his wife and everything is fine and rosy they'll say. This was all done with the good of the church in mind. And this is not some distant and remote illustration. This is the kind of thing that has happened probably more often than we think right here in Indianapolis.

It's not unusual in our day for couples that are living together in sin to attend Bible studies that are sponsored by churches. And their sin is never addressed. When you take these things into account, then, you begin to appreciate why our Lord uses such harsh language to describe how the sin of adultery in particular should be dealt with. It should not be treated lightly – it should not be simply overlooked – it should not be treated as something that is not really any big deal. It needs to be dealt with and it needs to be dealt with using vehement zeal.

And if you want to argue that we shouldn't really go so far as to literally gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands we should, nevertheless, at the very least, apply great zeal in mortifying the flesh and making sure we give no occasion to the flesh to fall prey to such sin. May we come to see it as Christ Himself sees it. He views it as defiling sin. Indeed He views it as damnable sin – something that calls for drastic measures to avoid if that's what it takes.

So the Lord uses such harsh language, I believe, to awaken his people from their propensity toward apathy regarding this sin. Don't yield to it. Don't harbor it in your heart. Don't merely gloss over it, but deal with it – deal with in such a way that you'll fortify yourself against it. Indeed – gouge out your eye and cast it away if that's what it takes or cut off your hand and cast it away if that's what it takes. At the very least we can surmise that our Lord means for us to apply vehement zeal in confronting such sin and overcoming it. But there's another reason the Lord uses such harsh language when it comes to dealing with sin. You could argue that the Lord does so:

II. Because of the Damaging Effects of Such Sin

On a practical level, I dare say, we are much aware of the damage that such sin creates. It destroys a young man or a young lady's reputation. It costs you the respect of your peers and leaves you with a sense of your own defilement and a conscience that aligns itself with the 7th commandment and tells you you're guilty. It costs you your own self respect and brings to bear on your heart a heavy burden.

Add to that the damage that it brings to others. We're very often so selfish in our sinning that we don't take any account of what we do to others. We're willing to bear the risk of what we might do to ourselves but we take little or no account of the effects that go beyond us.

And the sin of adultery ruins families. It ruins marriages. It ruins children. It ruins relationships between parents and their children. It ruins relationships between brothers and sisters. On a larger scale you could argue that it ruins whole societies. You see the person that indulges in this kind of sin is sending a message by his or her life that they can't really be trusted in anything. They can't be trusted in a marriage relationship. They can't be trusted in an employer/employee relationship. They can't be trusted in a business relationship as a buyer or a seller. You see their lives say – indeed their lives shout that they will serve their own selfish interests first and foremost.

This is why the issue of personal integrity is so important in the realm of those who represent us in high office. It seems, doesn't it, that any time a politician is caught in adultery he's so quick to try to draw a distinction between his personal life and his professional life. And he would convince you that even though he's proven himself to be unfaithful in his personal life that doesn't mean that he'll be unfaithful in his professional life. The fact is he's telling you by his sin that he can't be trusted in any realm of life. He will first and foremost serve himself. And your interests will be served only in so far as your interests align with his own selfish interests. Oh if your interests align with his selfish interests then you can be sure that he'll serve you well.

So the sin of adultery is damaging on a personal level – it's damaging on a family level – it's damaging on a societal level. I believe history readily demonstrates that whole nations or empires collapse and are destroyed when the sin of adultery is rampant. It's not hard to see why – underlying the sin of adultery is a breach of trust and societies cannot survive politically or economically where there is no trust.

Now all of what I've said so far with regard to the damaging effect of sin is on the temporal level. The Lord in these verses sets before us a much worse effect of this sin. Look again at what He says in v. 29 *and if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

And He adds emphasis to this solemn declaration in the next verse also. *It is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body, should be cast into hell.*

Do you begin to understand what the Lord is saying? He's saying that adulterers go to hell. He's saying that adulterers are damned forever. He's saying that their portion will be everlasting fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell, you know, is a place of isolation and darkness. The only company that's known in hell will be the distant screams of others that are weeping and gnashing their teeth as well.

The same can be said of fornicators. They are called a number of times in the New Testament *whoremongers*. Listen to the testimony of the New Testament with regard to whoremongers:

- Eph 5:5 *For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*
- Re 21:8 *But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*

You begin to see why the Lord Jesus uses such harsh words when it comes to dealing with this sin? Unless this sin is repented of and overcome then something much worse than being dismembered awaits the sinner. Hell, you see, is forever. Hell is a place from which there is no escape. Hell is a place from which there's no release. The loss of an eye or an arm peels into insignificance when you consider the eternal punishment that awaits adulterers.

Here is a sin, then, that must be taken seriously – we dare not treat it lightly for this is not only a damaging and defiling sin – it's a damnable sin. May we be so moved to see it for what it is and to deal with accordingly by putting it far from us. *If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

The Lord uses harsh words to describe our dealing with such sin – because this sin brings upon itself a very harsh penalty. There's one more reason why the Lord uses such words to describe the vehement zeal we should exercise in dealing with sin.

III. Because Christ Would Utilize Harsh Means to Acquire the Forgiveness of Such Sin

I've been saying in the course of this study that I don't believe that the Lord Jesus means for us to literally mutilate ourselves. I don't believe He is calling upon us to literally gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands. I believe that He's using the literary device of exaggeration to emphasize the truth that we must deal with sin – we must take sin seriously and we must apply vehement zeal in dealing with our sin.

There is something we should bear in mind, however, when we read these words of Christ. While He may not literally call for us to pluck out our eyes – we should bear in mind that it is no literary exaggeration that we read of Him in Isa 52:14 *As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.* He was beaten beyond recognition. He went to the literal extreme in order to deal with our sins and procure our forgiveness.

And while the Lord Jesus may not mean for us to literally cut off our right hands – it is nevertheless no exaggeration to say that nails were driven into His hands and feet. He was literally flogged. A crown of thorns was literally pressed upon His head. He was very literally suspended between heaven and earth on a cross – being crucified in order for our sins to be washed away.

If He was to literally call upon us to gouge out our eyes or to cut off our hands that would amount to far less than the measures He took in dealing with our sins. And because He was willing to go to such harsh extremes in His dealings with our sins, our sins can be washed away – we can be forgiven of our sins – we can be set free from the defilement and damnation of our sins.

I wonder, then, this morning – how seriously do you take sin? Do you treat it casually as if it were really nothing at all? Do you so abuse the notion of grace as if to think that grace excuses you from confronting sin? Do you go so far as to adhere to the blasphemous notion that grace means you can be free to sin? If that's your frame of mind then you are obviously yet outside the kingdom of heaven. And you should know that you're exposed to great danger, for sin carries severe consequences both temporal and eternal.

May God help you to see sin for what it is – in all it's destructive power. May God help you to get beyond the immediate carnal pleasure of sin so you can see that in the end it bites like a serpent and leaves you infected with poison of defilement and guilt. And may God impress upon you the great lengths to which Christ went in order to deal with sin. He had no sin of His own to deal with – He dealt with our sin. He atoned for our sins. He took the wrath that was our portion that we might be saved from everlasting damnation.

And as you learn to appreciate how Christ dealt with your sins – may you find the zeal within to confront sin yourself in whatever way it manifests itself so that you might put it behind you and go forward as a true subject of the kingdom of heaven.