

The Law & Jesus: The Power of Desire

Matthew 5:27-37

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Randy Lovelace

We've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount and what it looks like to be a part of living the kingdom as Jesus was demonstrating what it looks like to follow Him in His kingdom that He was coming to establish. And in the Sermon on the Mount, what He is doing is He's taking the law of God, the ten commandments, and He's unpacking them. But He's taking them in directions and in ways that those who heard Him, His disciples, but also others who would've heard these reports would've found this to be very difficult to hear. He's taking us to the heart of the law which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. He's not letting us off with this easy idea that so long as I'm nice to someone yet in private I tear them down with my words, that somehow, I'm good. Or that I refuse to take someone's life, but when I'm with others, I seek to take their character and their life by my words. It's the same thing.

Jesus is calling us to a deeper ethic. In fact, He's taking us to the depth and the height of God's law. But understand He is giving it to us because He expects us to receive it and to live it. But we recognize and know that we are sinners. Perhaps many of you would acknowledge that you are sinners. Not everyone here would acknowledge that. But for those of you who would acknowledge that you are sinners, we can say, well, I can't do this so I'm not going to try, thus making God's grace into a workless doctrine, or we can try to go the opposite and try really hard to obey and show God that we're being very good. Both miss Jesus. Jesus is calling us to a deeper ethic here of obeying these things, but He does so by leading us and giving us the grace and empowerment to walk with Him in new obedience. But He's wanting to save our very souls. He's looking deep into us. He sees us to our core.

In perhaps no other place does He see us to our core than the area of desire and of lust and all of its outside actions. So, we look at this together, the power of desire. Matthew 5:27-37,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray to the Lord.

Lord, this is a serious and sober word which you give to us. And so, we would ask for your Holy Spirit. We would ask that your Holy Spirit help us. We would ask that you would help us to walk with you depending on your grace and on your Spirit. Help us, we ask, that we might be a people who loves

you and adores you, and who finds our deepest needs fulfilled in the work of Christ. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

As we look at this passage together this morning, we're going to do so by looking at the role of desire, the battle of desire, the consequences of desire, and the commitment of desire.

First, together I want to look at the role of desire as Jesus is talking about this in this passage which is underneath the teaching regarding adultery. Ultimately, He's telling us essentially that we are first and foremost not thinking things, as James K. A. Smith has said in his many books, but we are loving things. We first and foremost are lovers. And that which we desire, we also do. And so, He's going to the heart.

And He's going to the heart by going back to where the problem of adultery really begins. It's at the heart. Much like we've looked at in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, they felt that as long as they had not slept with someone who was not their wife that, therefore, they were not guilty of adultery. But Jesus says very clearly that adultery never begins in action. If you go all the way back to the most famous act of adultery in the scriptures with King David, it did not begin with the act. It began with the desire. And that desire when it came to full fruit, he sent someone and took her to himself, essentially kidnapping her, committing rape, and then having her husband plotted to be killed.

It begins with desire. And Jesus says, you are not off the hook if what you believe is that so long as you've kept from the action that you are pure. He's pointing out that the problem is in the nature of what the heart desires. And He says, even if you have looked at a woman in a lustful intent, you have committed adultery in your heart.

Now, I want to be clear that even though He is addressing men here, it is not merely a male issue. It is a problem for both men and women. It is a problem for boys and for girls. It might express itself in different ways. But the reality is the desire from our hearts say something about what we want.

In our day, there is a growing solution to the problem of these kinds of desires. It's not only the Bible that recognizes that this kind of desire can wreak havoc in one's life. The culture also realizes that, although it is eating on itself. At the same time, it's talking about that which can cure these problems of desire, it is also the same culture that produces endless supply to try to feed the desire. But one of the growing things in our culture today is the re-emergence of the philosophy of stoicism, the idea that what we need to recognize is that we are desiring things, but the way to understand it is to have self-reflection, know what's going on, try to figure it out, and then try to control it. But it doesn't take long to understand that it is not easy to control.

You see, the Bible understands much like stoicism that we are beings of desire. We are in fleshed souls. Those souls produce all kinds of things, and then we act it out in our flesh. The Bible understands this. What the issue is, however, that the Bible says that you are desiring things, but the problem is not that you want to be with another human being. The problem is that your desire is you want to fulfill it in how you want to fulfill it, and you will find that it will never satisfy. It is a powerful drug. The Bible understands that. Jesus understands that. And He says, well, good for you if you haven't committed adultery by sleeping with someone who is not your wife or your husband. But know this, that those actions begin in a place that you need to understand.

And so, He says in understanding the role of desire that it is the seat of all action. Do you believe that? It's not our minds. It's not our reason. It's not our logic. It's our hearts.

Have I told you the French fry story? I love French fries. But I know in my head what French fries do to my body. I know, as I've read, what it causes. It's good stuff, though, I have to say. But I know this in my head. But when I'm sitting at a restaurant and they ask me, do you want fries with that? I must tell you, I'm having an existential problem in that moment. It is a deep thing. And I know I've looked at the server and said, I know what they do to my body, but yeah, I'll take the fries. Why? Because I love them.

You see, we are desiring things. And so, Jesus, understanding this, understanding that we plot our actions in our desires, He says that we must battle them. We must understand and we must battle them. So, He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away." Is Jesus calling for self-mutilation? Of course not. He's using absurdity to prove a point. And here's the point. The dealing with desire is that our desires, our hearts are like a scared cat in a corner that when we try to go after them, they will claw and fight and hiss and bite. But it is a battle, nonetheless.

And in this battle, there is a decision to be made. That's ultimately what Jesus is giving to us with this absurd example. You have to make a decision. What are you going to do about the restlessness in your heart? Do you even know that your actions are coming from a restless heart? Are you even doing battle with the desires that are in you? Do you even know them? Or are you like Tantalus, the famous Greek myth?

Tantalus, as he was punished by Zeus, was sent to eternity to be punished. And every time Tantalus reached up for the fruit, the tree would grow taller, or as he reached down into the water to take some water, the water would recede. And he would spend eternity always reaching up or reaching down, which is where we get the word "tantalizing."

But the moral of the story is not that Tantalus kept doing the same thing and it wasn't working out. It's that Tantalus didn't realize he didn't need the water or the fruit. Do you see? If we don't know our desires and what's going on in our hearts, we become convinced that what we desire is what we need. And if it's what we need, then it's okay. But we need to know ourselves and need to know what's going on in our hearts.

And so, we must make a decision. The decision is that we are going to do is take a real deep look at our desires and know that what's going on in our hearts is that we are longing for something. And it's expressed here that I'm longing for someone else other than my or someone that is not my spouse if I am single is that I'm wanting something. Yes, I'm wanting that person, so I think. But what I really want is connection. What I want is to be loved. What I want is to love. But if we don't know that, then our desires will lead us into all kinds of places that will bring hurt and harm not only to us, but also to those around us. Do you believe this?

Now, if you are not a Christian or even if you are, because increasingly, I believe this is not only true of those who do not know Christ and are not Christians as well as it is true of those who are, I mean what Dr. Ron Highfield said a number of years ago in his book *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, he says,

"Many of our contemporaries exhibit a viscerally negative reaction to assertions of authority, pretense of objectivity, or arguments to truth in the moral sphere. They intrinsically suspect that all claims to authority are just masked claims of power and that Christianity calls for obedience to divine law or for repentance or moral transformation really just sounds like a recipe for oppression."

Many Christians believe this, too, that Jesus teaching us how to live with our hearts and with our bodies is just a form of power and it feels like oppression, and He's robbing me of my autonomy. Highfield says, "Modern culture denies that one can become an authentic person or experience fulfillment in life by conforming to natural or socially given relationships and roles. Instead, we are taught that our self-worth and happiness depend on reconstructing ourselves according to our desires." Our culture says, find what you desire and take it.

That's what it says. But do you know what? I believe that the Bible and I believe the culture is now leaking out that that simply is not true. That our desires, when we give into them, will not satisfy when we seek to have them satiated.

Let me give you two examples, one man and one woman. The man is that great contemporary philosopher Chris Rock. A number of years ago, Chris Rock said that "You have a choice in life. You can

either be single and alone or married and bored.” Chris Rock got married. And in a 2017 special – and I’ve cleaned it up for the present company – he said the following.

“Dude, I was not like a good husband. I was addicted to porn. I was addicted to porn, you know. And you know, I was 15 minutes late everywhere. When you watch too much porn, you know what happens? You know what happens to you? You become sexually dysfunctional. You have a hard time making eye contact. You have a hard time with verbal cues. You want everything to be routine. And the reality is that when you start watching porn, nothing is never enough. What begins with a naked body is like, woohoo. But later on, you realize you need a porn cocktail that will never find an answer.”

He said, “I was a horrible husband.”

Now, let me be clear. This isn’t just a male problem. Men and women, if you find yourself going after porn or going after someone in your physical sphere in your heart or in your mind, what you’re looking for, you will never find satisfied. It will form a cocktail that will be sweet to the taste but poisonous to your life. It will bring divorce, it will bring separation, it will bring alienation and loneliness because it cannot satisfy our deepest and greatest ache to be fully known, to be fully loved unconditionally, and satisfied by the one who has created us for Himself.

Sexual desire is a beautiful thing, thanks be to God. Sexuality is an absolute gift from our heavenly Father. But like all good things that God gives, sin steals it and turns it into a journey of self-discovery that will land us in places we never thought we would go and will never find satisfaction. And we’ll find ourselves longing for more connection. We must do battle with our desires if our sexual desires are finding us going to places in our mind or with our eyes or with our bodies that the Lord has not given to us. And so, I say to you if you are a Christian, find someone with whom you can be accountable. Find someone who you can talk to so that you might rescue and understand that the Lord is giving to you an invitation to be renewed in your heart with your desires to find not only a place where you now need to turn from sin and repent of trying to satisfy it in ways the Lord has not given to you, and find a place of renewal and trusting that He will provide for you. You see, the same culture that says, God, you cannot tell me what to do with my desires, has someone who says, look what happened to me when I gave into them. But not just a man.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge won many Emmys this year for her two seasons of a show called *Fleabag*. And in this, she gives a monologue. She has been giving herself to every man she could find because she was longing for connection. Although she never really admits it, you sense that it’s there. She’s hungry and she’s longing. And in a beautiful monologue, this is what she says about the desire of her heart, coming to the end of herself, longing to be connected to someone and to be known and loved unconditionally, she says,

“I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat, what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what tickets to buy, what joke to laugh about or not to laugh about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love, and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life because so far I think I’m getting it wrong. I know that’s why people want people like you in their lives, father, because you tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they’ll get out of it in the end. Even though I don’t believe you and what you teach, I know that scientifically, nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway. I’m still scared. Why am I still scared?”

It's because in the writing, she's beginning to taste that all of the pursuit in giving into our desires still leaves us alone and afraid.

Jesus is saying precisely that. If you give into these desires, you are not giving into me. If you run after these desires, you are not running after me. If you're running after these desires, you're depending on them and not upon me. And if that is what you want, go ahead, but know what's at the end. You will be alone. And you will be alone, and your body will be thrown into hell. That is the word. And what we may experience there is knowing that God exists, desiring to know Him, and yet never able to because we rejected it our entire lives. And yet, Jesus is calling us to Himself recognizing our desires lead us into sinful paths, and he wants us to do battle with it. Are you doing battle with your desires? Do you even know them? Let us seek the renewal of His grace today.

And church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ, I say to you, the problem is never out there. It is always in here. And may the Lord enable us to come to terms with our desires that lead us into sinful paths that we may never look at the world as those who profess Christ and say, see, it's out there! But the reality is it's from in here. Let us begin here in humble repentance. Whether you are a male or female, young or old, this touches every one of us. Who of us has not desired someone who is not our spouse? Who of us has never looked at someone without a lustful intent? We are all sinners desperately in need of His grace.

He goes further as He suggests and looks at this audiences of His, and He deals with this next issue which is intricately connected. He's talking about this battle that was going on among the Pharisees as they were debating, well, when can you divorce your spouse? You see, it was believed by the Pharisees and taught through the oral tradition that you could just divorce and sort of get around the law and come up with easy divorce and give your wife a certificate of divorce. And they began to sort of expand the ways in which they could use the certificates of divorce but also narrow what it meant to commit adultery.

But Jesus says that you have heard it said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." He's recalling it as if they've been taught that it was a command. But Jesus says here in and His fuller explanation of it later in Matthew that it's never a command. It was only God's concession. And actually, it was never about divorce anyway. It was about whether your spouse was unfaithful to you that if you divorced them and they did not get remarried could you remarry them. That's what it was about.

And so, they've taken all of these loopholes and come up with just easy ways to say, you know what? I'm done with you. But Jesus says when you do that, not only are you committing a sin, you're causing your spouse to commit sin because if they get remarried, the person who marries them is committing adultery and they're committing adultery. In other words, what we're beginning to see of our sexuality, our desires, is not just a me, myself, and I. It has root systems that affect an entire people group.

And here's the incredible truth about these kinds of decisions and our sexual ethics. If you're sitting here this morning and you are a husband or a wife or you're a single person, and if you think that your sexual desires are only yours and nobody else knows about them, you've successfully walled them off and nobody sees and nobody knows and you think it's all going to stay there quietly in the dark, I hate to tell you, but the reality is that this stuff rolls downhill. And it will begin to affect your relationships, like Chris Rock and *Fleabag*. And it will impact your children, it will impact your friendships, whether any of them know it or not because it impacts us, and we are a connected people. And when we sin, we cause others to sin.

And Jesus is calling them to greater fidelity, to be in His kingdom is to not look for the wide plain of permissibility but to understand that the Lord has given us a calling to be married. And when we're called to be married to a particular person, we see that person as the one in whom we invest ourselves not that we look for a reason to divorce or even run to a lawyer if we see grounds for divorce, but rather we look to Him who can renew.

I'm not suggesting if you are sitting here this morning and you have been divorced in your life and even remarried, this is not all that needs to be taught regarding this. So, I'm not trying to cover every possible question, although I know there may be many. Here, I want to only speak of specific instances.

But He's calling us to a greater fidelity, a greater faithfulness to our word and to the one to whom we've committed our self. And so, Jesus is showing that He is not lax as the Pharisees, but really rigorous in that He is concerned about the institution of marriage, not its dissolution and trying to find ways out of it, because it is a picture, as we learn from Paul that marriage is a picture of Christ's love for His church. Isn't that what Paul says?

So, I'm running out of time. But I want to finish here with the commitment of desire. And I want to do that this morning and connect it to the Lord's table. In this final section the commitment of desire, Jesus is talking about how we deal with oaths and vows.

Much like the easy certificate of divorce, they had also treated vows in specific ways and these kinds of oaths. They understood that if they took an oath, if they were found guilty of breaking them that they would be in a great deal of trouble. Depending on the oath, it could mean the death penalty. And so, what they did was they found unique ways of creating fancy oaths and vows that are tantamount to what we do now, like, yeah, I promise I'll do that; but inside, you've created little ways that in case you don't, you can get out from under it. That's how they were doing their vows and oaths. They were swearing by all kinds of fancy things and all kinds of fancy formulas in the hopes that if they did in fact break it, they're good.

But Jesus is saying to be careful what you give a vow and an oath to. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. Why? Because the reality is the fact that we need to take oaths and vows is a demonstration that we are sinners and our desires are unpredictable. And so, we take them just in case we know that our future faithfulness may come into question. But Jesus is saying that if you are to follow me, if you are to be part of my kingdom, let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. You don't need any more than that. Let your desire be for me. And if your desire is for me because you recognize and have received the fact that my love is for you, that then enables you to live honestly with transparency and faithfulness and fidelity with those around you. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no.

So, what is the ground for all of this? What is the ground for desire and the battle of desire? The commitment. I want to tell you that it has a lot to do with what we're about to celebrate with this bread and this juice. You see, Paul teaches that marriage is a picture of Christ's love for His church. Here is the reality. The reality is that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. But He did so by what? Giving His body. He gave His body on a tree. He gave of His flesh and blood as a visible commitment of His love and care for us, His divine desire for us that we might be reconciled to Him. And so, only when we begin to find that the God who has created us as beings of desire desires to be in relationship with us and went to the degree to let His "yes" be yes and His "no" be no and gave of His body that you might receive it, that it might be yours and that by His body and blood, you might be redeemed, forgiven, and renewed, that is a God who is marrying His church. You are the bride of Christ.

And when you take of this bread and you drink of this cup, do you know what we're doing? We're at a wedding feast. We're at a wedding feast where your heavenly Father says, I love you. And only when we begin to find that the God who created our hearts created our desires for Him do we begin to find a home that finds a home for our desires and absolute unconditional love and grace and power for renewal that no one and no thing can ever satisfy. And only when we begin to find that in this bread and in this cup and the one to whom it points do we find a grace that satisfies, only then will we be able to walk with Him depending on His grace and His divine love to be at rest.

This is God's commitment to us. He's calling us into His kingdom as a commitment to Him. At the deepest place at what it means to be a human, at our sexual desires and our desires to be in relationship with others and our commitment to one another, it is all bound up in all that God has done in Jesus Christ.

So, as you come to the table this morning to eat of this bread and drink of this cup, know that it is a place of renewal. This is a place where you can find forgiveness and grace. But it is a place where you find the Savior who comes to you and says, I love you and I've given myself for you. Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, a home for your desires, a home for your life.

I finish with this final quote.

“Christ pioneered the way to truly human life in which human beings achieve their deepest potential for freedom. In Christ, we find an identity rooted not in others' changing thoughts about us, but in God's eternal knowledge of us. Through the spirit, God enables us to achieve the perfect freedom of life in harmony with our truest identity.”

And so, I say in the name of Jesus Christ, your hearts and your bodies, bring them home to the Lord for He has set a table for you and for me. It is a good table, and He is a gracious Father. Know that He loves you and invites you to Himself. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would enable us to understand and know our hearts, to know the seat of our desires and the ways in which, Lord, we seek to fulfill those desires in every way but in you. Lord, forgive us for when we have run after our lustful thoughts and when those lustful thoughts have become adulterous actions. Lord, forgive us for our unfaithfulness to you and to one another. Lord, where there needs to be healing and reconciliation, Lord, I ask that you would do that by the mighty power of your Spirit. Where there needs to be confession and repentance, Lord, bring it in all of us. But Lord, when we do, help us to hear the sound of the joyous glory of the gospel, of Jesus Christ who died for us, who gives us a hope that will never fade or spoil. You give us a home for who we are as human beings and for our deepest longings to be connected to another. You are the one to whom we are to be connected. And only then do we know what it looks like to love one another. Help us, O Lord. Help us. Have mercy upon us and renew us. In Jesus's name. Amen.