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Matthew 5:27 - 5:30



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," from Matthew chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount. Gregg argues that looking at a woman with lustful intent is already committing adultery in the heart, and that this violation of someone's rights is an injustice. He explains that just as there are property and possession rights, there are also exclusive possession rights to a spouse's body. Gregg warns that adultery can destroy marriages, families, and reputations.

Transcript

Let's return now to Matthew chapter 5 and continue our studies in the Sermon on the Mount. We have been for some time, and we will be yet for some time more, exploring the meaning of Jesus' teaching here at the end of Matthew chapter 5, where he repeatedly said to his disciples, you have heard that it was said to those of old. And at that point Jesus quotes something from the Old Testament that they'd heard taught by the rabbis.

And then he follows it with, but I say to you, and then he gives his own comments on the same subject. Now I have suggested to you that the six examples he gives that all follow this same paradigm, you have heard that it was said, but I say unto you, those six examples are intended to illustrate three big issues. The big issues that Jesus called the weightier matters of the law in Matthew 23, 23.

Those weightier matters are justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Now I believe there are two examples Jesus gives about justice, two about mercy, and two about faithfulness. Now I believe that the first two examples he gives, which are the only two examples of the six that are taken from the Ten Commandments, are issues related to justice.

And I already talked last time about the command, you shall not murder. And how God's great objection to murder is that it's an act of justice. His objection to it is not that it is the taking of a human life, because God himself commands the taking of human life in many instances in Scripture.

But he never commands murder, because murder is the unjust taking of human life.

There is such a thing as justice in the taking of human life, it's called capital punishment. But there's also injustice in taking human life, and that's called murder.

When somebody who's done nothing worthy of execution is executed, whether by the government or by an individual, that is murder. And that is an injustice. And so Jesus gave other examples after he talked about how murder is wrong.

He said, and yet there are these other ways in which God is concerned about the matter of justice. Now I believe when we come to verses 27 through 30, which is the second illustration Jesus gives, I believe he's still concerned about justice. I think he's giving another illustration on the subject of justice.

Let me read it. He says, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you, for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you, for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Now this teaching about adultery and about lust, one might say, well, the concern here is not justice.

The concern here is moral purity. But I'm going to disagree with that. I'm sure that moral purity is certainly an issue.

But it is also a matter of justice. And I'd like to suggest to you that he is here again illustrating the need to be just. Now let me tell you why.

I should defend my proposition, and I'm always willing to do that. As I said, of the six illustrations Jesus gives in Matthew 5, only two of them, the first two, are taken from the Ten Commandments. You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery. The other four are also taken from the law, but from other parts of the law that are not in the Ten Commandments. So these first two illustrations stand out as Jesus' amplification on the Ten Commandments, or at least a couple of the commandments from that Decalogue, from those Ten Laws.

Now, if you look at the Ten Commandments, you'll find that four of them, the first four, seem to be directly related to your reverence for God. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall make no graven image to bow down to it.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, and you shall remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Those have to do with your reverence for God. The remaining six commandments have to do with justice.

Now let me define justice for you so that you'll know what I mean. Justice is the upholding of some other person's rights. If you violate somebody's rights, that is an injustice.

If you do not violate anyone's rights, then you've done no injustice. Let me give you an illustration from Jesus' own teaching elsewhere. In Matthew 20, Jesus tells the story of a man who had a vineyard and he needed workers.

So he went out in the morning, found some unemployed men, said, listen, go work at my vineyard and I'll give you a day's wage. And he figured a certain amount, which was a normal day's wage, and offered it to them. They went to work.

Later in the day, he hired more people. He didn't specify what he would pay them, but he says, I'll give you what's just. And later still in the day, and two other times in the day, he went out and he hired people.

Each of these groups worked a different length of time before the end of the day. Some worked only one hour. Some worked all day, and some worked some period in between.

Now when it came time to pay, he had not told anyone how much they'd be paid except the first group. He told them he'd give them a denarius, which was a typical day's wage in those days. He had not said what he would pay those who worked shorter time.

Now he paid first those who'd worked only one hour. And to everybody's surprise, he gave them a denarius. He gave them a wage as if they'd worked all day.

Well, those who had worked all day fully expected to get more than. When they saw that these men who worked only one hour got paid a day's wage, they figured they'd get more, although they'd only been promised a denarius. Well, when they got up to their position, to the paymaster, and they received their pay, to their chagrin, they received only a denarius, the same amount that those had been given who worked only one hour.

And they complained about it. And it says they murmured against the landowner, saying, These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the heat of the day. But here's what the landowner answered.

He says, But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. In other words, I'm doing no injustice. I'm not violating any rights that you have.

Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I'm good? Now, notice, these people thought they should have more than they were promised, because someone else got more than they expected to get.

But he says, Listen, there's no injustice here. I promised you a denarius. I gave you a denarius.

You had a right to expect a denarius. I did not violate your right. There's no injustice in my dealings.

If I am more generous to this other person than I am to you, that's my business. It is my right to do with my things what I wish. I give you what I owe you, and therefore I do you no injustice.

Now, there are rights. Sometimes Christians say we have no rights. Well, what they should say, to be more accurate, is that Christians are often called upon to lay down their rights.

But people do have rights. If a person has done nothing worthy of death, then he has the right to be unmolested by those who would kill him. We do have a right to life.

We do have a right to our possessions. There are such things as property rights. How do I know this? Well, simply this.

If the Bible says you shall not steal, that means that you don't have the right to take somebody else's property. Why? Because it is theirs. They have the right to the property.

Now, God might ask them to give it to you, but that would be an act of generosity on their part, or mercy, not justice. You see, if there was no such thing as rights, then you could just hotwire my car and drive off with it without my permission. And I couldn't complain because I don't have any right to it.

But, of course, I do. Now, as a Christian, I may be called upon to be merciful and to lay down my rights, but that's a different issue. People do have a right to life.

They have a right to their possessions, and so forth. Now, six of the commandments in the Decalogue, in the Ten Commandments, have to do with rights. They have to do with observing people's rights and not violating them.

And this, of course, is an issue of justice. The first of those is you shall honor your father and your mother. Well, why would you do that? Because you owe it to them.

Because they brought you into this world. They supported you when you were young. You have an unpaid debt to them, and honoring them is what you owe them.

That's why Paul told Timothy, in 1 Timothy chapter 5, that an older widow who has living adult children should not have to be supported by the church. He says, if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents. For this is good and acceptable before God.

1 Timothy 5.4 Notice he said that if they support their parents in their old age, they are repaying a debt they owe to their parents. Something is owed to your parents. And to not honor them is to violate their right to be honored.

You owe something to them. If you don't give them what you owe, that is an injustice. The commands that follow that in the Decalogue are, Thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not covet.

Now, all of those have to do with certain rights. You shall not murder means you shall not violate somebody's right to life. You shall not commit adultery means you shall not violate a man's right to his wife.

To the exclusive possession of his wife. Now you might say, wait, do you mean to say that a wife is a possession of her husband? Absolutely. But before you get all upset, the Bible also says the husband is a possession of his wife.

This is taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. He said a man does not have a right over his own body, but his wife does. And a wife doesn't have rights over her own body, but her husband does. So, yes, a man has rights to the exclusive possession of his wife's body, and he has the right to expect other men to keep their hands off.

The woman has equal rights. She has the rights to her husband's body, says Paul, and she has the right to expect other women to keep off. When someone commits adultery, they are violating the rights of that person's spouse.

That's an injustice. The command you shall not steal suggests that there are property rights that should not be violated. The command that you shall not bear false witness suggests that people who have done nothing to soil their reputation have a right to a good reputation, and you are wrong to sully it, without truth behind your remarks.

To bear false witness against them means that you hurt their reputation when they don't deserve it. That's violating their right to a good reputation, which they earn by being innocent. And coveting what is theirs is also an unjust thing, because, of course, you have no right to their possessions, and therefore, you have no right to be craving them and to wish that you had them instead of them.

So, the Ten Commandments, at least the six commandments at the end there, are all about justice. They're all about people's rights. Now, Jesus, in order to illustrate justice, and God's concern for justice, picks two of those commandments, just as samples.

He could talk about each one, just like I just did briefly, but he picks two of them that should be enough to make the point. The first one is, you shall not murder, and we already saw what he had to say about that. The second one is, the command, you shall not commit adultery.

Now, as I say, the command, you shall not commit adultery, can be based on a great number of concerns. For example, adultery is an act of unfaithfulness, as well as an act of injustice. It is also an act of moral impurity.

There are a number of things all wrapped up in that one sin that would be worthy of consideration here. But what I'm suggesting is that Jesus, in these two illustrations, both taken from the Ten Commandments, is trying to give a couple of illustrations of how injustice is something that God is offended by. The injustice of murder and the injustice of adultery.

Both of these violate the rights of your neighbor. Murder violates the right to his life, and adultery violates his rights to his wife. Now, of course, just as when he talked about murder, he indicated that it's not just the act of murder that is wrong, it is the desire to murder or those emotions that lead up to murder when it is being angry without a cause that is bad.

Because although it isn't quite as severe as murder, it is nonetheless an act of injustice, just like murder is. Now, on the matter of adultery, you see, the Pharisees, I'm sure, I trust, that most of them did not physically commit adultery. Now, some of them probably did, because they were not really better than other men.

And Paul brings that out in Romans chapter 2, when he says to them, You who say that a man should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? He's writing to the Jews, the pious Jews. And even when the Pharisees brought the woman who was taken in adultery to Jesus, in John chapter 8, Jesus said to them, Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone at her. Many commentators have said that his words actually could be rendered, Let him among you who has not committed this sin be the first to cast stone at her, suggesting that they, too, committed adultery.

And, of course, he wouldn't mean in their hearts, because they wouldn't be aware of that, they weren't sensitive about that. It would mean physically. But I would suggest that there were probably some Pharisees who committed physical adultery, and then they'd probably go off for their sacrifice and figure that they'd done all that God cared about.

But I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt and suggest that most of them probably did not physically commit adultery, and therefore they thought themselves to be well within the bounds defined by that command of God. But Jesus says, But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Now, you may have a translation that is less adequate than this.

The NIV, for example, which I have many objections to, it is very poorly translated here, because it says, If you look at a woman lustfully. That's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, If you look at a woman to lust after her.

Now, there's a difference between those two wordings, and it's important for us to note it, because the way it reads in the NIV, and the way many people have understood it, if you look at a woman lustfully, you've committed adultery. Well, what does it mean to look lustfully? Is it not extremely common for a man to look at a woman, or a picture of a woman, with no intention to lust, and yet the sight of the woman arouses thoughts of lust, thoughts of desire? The word lust just means desire. I mean, is it not the case that when we see certain food, the sight of it creates desire? When we see certain things attractive to us, the sight of them create a desire for those things? Whether it's a woman, or food, or a car, or whatever.

The sight of some things arouses desire for those things. That desire is not sin. James says, Every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires, and is enticed.

And he says, Desire, or lust, when it conceives, brings forth sin. And sin, when it is finished, brings forth death. Notice, lust is there first, before sin is.

Lust is temptation. When you look at anything, including a woman, and there arises, unbidden and unwanted, a desire for that thing that you see, you have not committed adultery, just because lust arises at the sight of a woman. That is temptation.

Now, of course, you may yet commit adultery in your heart beyond that point, but simply the arising of desire is not itself sin. Desire comes whether you want it or not. Sin is something that you choose to do.

There is a difference between temptation and sin. Jesus was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin. So there must be a place where you are tempted, but not sinning.

And when the desire to do a wrong act enters your mind, that is temptation. What you do with that desire will determine whether you also sin, as well as being tempted. Now, that's why I object to the wrong translation in some Bibles, like the NIV, whoever looks at a woman lustfully.

Because, you see, you might look at a woman without any intention of lusting, and the result may be desire or lust. That is temptation. That is not adultery.

And yet many men I know have hearts after God. They have no desire to cheat on their wives. They have desire to be morally pure, but they are continually confronted with visual stimuli where they work or where they go, and that stimuli causes desire or lust or temptation to arise.

And because they misunderstand what Jesus said here, they condemn themselves that they have committed adultery in their heart, and they think, oh, they're a hopeless case. No, being tempted is not being a bad Christian. Jesus was tempted.

He was not a bad Christian. Sinning, of course, is another issue. Now, Jesus, what he

actually said was not, whoever looks at a woman and lusts, or whoever looks at a woman lustfully, he says, whoever looks at a woman to lust for her.

That tells the reason that the man is looking at the woman. He knows that woman is there and attractive, and he looks at her for the very purpose of arousing illicit desire. He looks at her to lust after her.

Now, this is different than temptation. This is actually submitting to temptation. If I know that there's an attractive woman sitting, you know, in the room somewhere, and I know that if I look at her, it will stimulate in me lust, then my choice to look at her is a desire to fantasize.

It is a desire to encourage lust of a wrong kind. This is adultery in the heart. If I am simply sitting in a room, look up, and see a woman that's attractive to me, and some desire of some kind is created, that is a temptation.

That's not adultery yet. It can become that. Depends on what I do with it.

But that's not yet adultery in the heart. We need to be able to make sure we know the difference between temptation and sin, and some translations don't adequately make that difference. The King James and the New King James are pretty good about it.

They both say, whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. Now, what he's saying is this. Just as it is an injustice for a man to violate another man's marriage by sleeping with his wife, it is also an injustice to satisfy your sexual cravings by fantasies of another man's wife.

Why? Because that man's wife doesn't belong to you, belongs to him. Most men would not be very pleased to think that men were fantasizing of sexual relationships with their wife, and therefore you are using another man's wife's body for your own gratification, even if you never touch her. Remember what Paul said.

The wife doesn't have the right over her own body, but her husband does. And the husband doesn't have the right to his own body, but his wife does. That is, the husband and wife have exclusive rights to each other's sexual, physical attractiveness.

That's true not only in terms of actual sexual relationship. It's true also in terms of visual stimulation. And, I mean, Job put it this way in Job chapter 31.

He says, I've made a covenant with my eyes. Why then should I look upon a maid? That is, why should I look at a young woman? I shouldn't, unless she's my wife. You see, I have the right to be stimulated by my wife.

And I not only have the right to be stimulated, but to consummate a relationship. But I don't have the right to do either with my neighbor's wife. That's his property.

That's his territory. And let's put it on the other gender foot, since feminists may dislike this way of talking. A woman has no right to fantasize about another woman's husband.

Because that is her property. That is the wife's property, her husband's body. It is not yours, either to sleep with or to use as an object of sexual stimulation, even in your mind.

It is using somebody else's stuff, somebody else's spouse, for your gratification, which is a violation of the rights of that spouse. That is, I believe, what Jesus is saying. Now, let me also clarify something here.

Many people make a really wrong application when they think, well, Jesus said, if I look with lust, I've already committed adultery, so I might as well just go ahead and commit adultery outright. Well, this is not so, because it is one sin to look with lust, or to look to lust, I should say. We need to make that clear.

It is another sin to commit the act. To say that committing two sins is no worse than committing one sin is to misunderstand morality altogether. Furthermore, the sin of committing adultery outwardly is greater than lusting.

One is adultery in the heart. The other is adultery in the body. And the physical adultery can destroy marriages, destroy families, destroy reputations.

That which goes on in the mind doesn't have those ramifications. But God objects to both. But don't think that because you've done the one, the other one should just follow.

We'll have to talk more about this next time, because once again, we've run out of time today. Stay tuned tomorrow, and we'll continue this.