

## Epiphany VI: Matthew 5:27-37: Do not Lust; do not Swear

1. This pericope is really only two sections: vss. 27-32, concerning adultery, and vss. 33-37 concerning frivolous swearing. In both cases Jesus is getting at sins of the heart; lust and untruthfulness. We are reminded of the truth stated by Jesus at Mt. 15:19. False righteousness deals only with externals; true righteousness with the heart of man.
2. Vs. 27: literally "you will not commit adultery", as in 21: "you will not murder". The ten commandments give us no choice. It's like when a parent says to a little child: "you will not play on the street." A total prohibition, for one's good.
3. Vs. 28: "But I (emphatic pronoun) say to you," divinity is attributed to the humanity of Jesus. He is the Author and true Interpreter of what God said. πᾶς ὁ βλέπων "everyone who is gazing". To look at (ὁρᾶω) a woman is certainly not wrong. The gazing is defined by the purpose clause: "for the purpose of desiring her." ἤδη ἐμοίχησεν "already has committed adultery with her." Thus correctly all our translations except TEV: "is guilty of committing adultery". The lust "in his heart" precedes the gazing. That is where the sin begins. Sinners that they are, all men quickly understand what Jesus means. Ylvisaker: "It is the desire that is purposely nurtured in the heart." And then in a fnt. "Jesus speaks in this passage of the concupiscence that is sanctioned by the will. The will has rested, as it were, in the evil desire and has yielded to it, has sanctioned it. The deed is already accomplished inwardly." At this point Luther made the now-famous observation: "I cannot prevent a bird from flying over by head, but I can hinder it from building a nest in my hair or from biting off my nose." To be tempted is not wrong, otherwise Jesus would have sinned. But to yield to the temptation is sin. The sin in the heart is already a deed. Lenski: "What is thus said of man is equally true of a woman. Likewise, 'every man' is general and cannot be restricted to married men; and γυναικα cannot refer only to a married woman who belongs to another man. . . . Jesus uses ἐμοίχησεν to match the ἐμοίχησεν of the commandment, and both are to be understood in the broad sense, adultery including the more specific fornication."
4. Vs. 29: First and foremost, in this and the following vs. Jesus is not speaking of literal mutilation of the body. Fahling: "The eye must be closely guarded, . . . also the hand and foot. Figuratively speaking, these members and all other members of the body must be controlled, if necessary, by an absolute and painful severance, or amputation, as it were, lest the whole body be condemned." Bengel: "Make all things hard to thyself, until it cease to be a stumbling-block to thee. Not the organ itself, but the concupiscence which animates the eye or hand is meant. Col. 3:5." Ylvisaker: "A life of strict abnegation is absolutely necessary. . . . The right eye and the right hand are symbols of that which dearest and most precious. We must be willing to surrender our most valued possession." Lenski thinks that here Jesus counters an excuse: the man who blames the sin on eye or hand. He adds: "The fallacy lying in the excuse is thus exposed. The seat of the sin is not in the eye, but, as Jesus had already indicated in vs. 28, in the heart." Hendriksen: "Sin, being a very destructive force, must not be pampered. It must be 'put to death' (Col. 3:5)." By the way, most divorces begin with lust and sin in the heart for another man's wife (or husband). σκονδαλίζει means "to entrap". Note the peremptory aorist imperatives ἔξελε and βάλε. It is truly a painful thing to nip lust immediately, but the regenerate man has that power. Cf. Gal. 2:20. γὰρ is explanatory. συμφέρει is an impersonal verb meaning "it is profitable". σοι is dative of advantage. The ἵνα clause, substantival, is subject of the impersonal verb. Note contrast between ἐν and ὅλον. One willful lust can lead to loss of everything in hell. Continued repentance, which involves fighting the flesh, is a constant must for us. βληθῆ, recalls βάλε above, from the same verb stem. The rejection of lust must be decisive. If not, God's decisive rejection follows. γέεννα, in N.T., always means "hell".

5. Vs. 30: Note that both vss. 29 and 30 involve a fact or particular condition. The "if" clause, in each case, is for self-examination. Do I or don't I? Everyone is tempted because all have sinful hearts, even the seemingly best of people. What they do about it immediately is all-important. Note that σκονδαλίζει occurs in both. The sinful lust, unless overcome immediately, leads to gazing looks and wandering hands. Note the peremptory aorist imperatives again. By the way, if the body goes away to hell so does the soul. The two cannot be separated. Vs. 30, in a sense, is a restatement of vs. 29 for the sake of emphasis. The Romans said: principiis obsta which means "resist the beginnings".
6. Vs. 31: Vss. 31 and 32 are an extension of vss. 27-30. Jesus is still talking about committing adultery. The Scribes and Pharisees rightly quote Deut. 24:1, but wrongly interpret it. Read Deut. 24:1-4 and note the following:
- This passage is found in a section dealing with civil, not moral, law for the Covenant people;
  - Read Mt. 19:3-9. Moses did not command, but allowed, to give a certificate of divorce; δότω in Mt. 5:31 denotes permission, not a command;
  - Moses allowed because of their σκληροκαρδία (Mt. 19:8) which means "the unregenerate state" not "the regenerate state".
  - Deut. 24:1-4 was written to protect the woman, not as a way to get out of marriage;
  - Jesus unequivocally states in Mt. 19:4-6 and 8b that man is not allowed to break a marriage; this applies to women too;
  - Mk. 10:4-12 clearly states that Mt. 5:32 applies not only to a man divorcing his wife but also to a wife divorcing her husband.
- Ylvisaker remarks at this point: "This concession (Deut. 24:1) was not, however, sanctioned as morally justifiable. . . . This ruling (of the Scribes and Pharisees) had given rise to a practice in matters of divorce so lax, particularly in the school of Hillel, that a person was considered justified in obtaining a divorce from his wife, simply because he found something in her that displeased him. . . . Through the practice that prevailed, the principle of marriage was disintegrated." Lenski: "Here Jesus refers to Deut. 24 only as the false Jewish justification for their evil practice in order to place over against this practice the true intent of God's commandment." Hendriksen: "Moses had not at all encouraged divorce. Deut. 24:1-4, taken as a unit, most definitely discouraged divorce. . . . They greatly exaggerated the importance of the EXCEPTION, that which made divorce possible. Jesus, on the other hand, stresses the PRINCIPLE, namely, that husband and wife are and must remain ONE." Mt. 5:31, in its context, is getting at the sin of the heart, lust, with which illicit divorce begins. Stoeckhardt remarks: "The sixth commandment is not satisfied by avoiding coarse fornication and adultery. It also requires chaste thoughts, words, and appearances." No one has said it better than Luther: "We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed, and each love and honor his spouse."
7. Vs. 32: Again the emphatic ἐγὼ and the authoritative λέγω ὑμῖν. δὲ means "but" in opposition to the surface interpretation of the Scribes and Pharisees. Recall Mt. 19:6. Married people are united for life. God alone severs this bond by death. Rom. 7:2.3. Lenski aptly remarks: "Jesus is not expounding Deut. 24:1, but Ex. 20:14 as quoted in vs. 27. He is not setting up ONE cause for divorce over against the idea of MANY causes, but is forbidding ALL divorce and ALL CAUSES for divorce as being against God's intent as expressed in Ex. 20:14." It applies equally to wives divorcing their husbands. παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας "except for the reason of fornication." Fornication and malicious desertion (I Cor. 7:2.3.15) are sins which rupture the union. In neither case is the innocent party guilty. Jesus makes plain that He is not talking about the exception. Kretzmann: "If any other reason is alleged and the divorce brought about, adultery is committed, both by the complainant, in severing the marriage-tie, and by the accused that permits the frivolous dissolution." Jesus is speaking about what Scribes and Pharisees were allowing: One spouse seeking divorce (for reasons other than

fornication) and the other agreeing to it. Stoeckhardt aptly remarks: "It is understood here that the wife agreed to the unscriptural divorce and married another man, and he who marries a woman, who was divorced contrary to divine right, is also an adulterer before God." These notes do not agree with Lenski's interpretation: "In every case (other than fornication) the party not seeking the divorce is 'stigmatized as adulterer'." With Hendriksen we reject this: "It must be read proleptically: she is called an adulteress because she may easily become one." The text does not say that, though it may happen in individual cases. Stating that adultery amounts to dissolution of the nuptial bond and assuming that the divorced person concurs willingly in the divorce, Ylvisaker states: "'Caused her to commit adultery' that is, by giving her the right to wed another. If she makes use of this privilege, she commits adultery, because the first marriage was not dissolved before God, even if it were set aside before a human tribunal. . . . Morally, she was still bound to him. Therefore the person also commits adultery who weds the one who has been divorced for arbitrary reasons. He lives with a person who is regarded by God as the wife of another man. . . . A condition may be sufferable from a CIVIL point of view, but at the same time be MORALLY sinful."

8. For vss. 27-30 we recall the lust and sin of David, II Sam. 11:1-4, but also the wondrous repentance of David, Ps. 51. For vss. 31-32 we think of the massive divorce by common consent, and for reasons other than fornication and malicious desertion, among movie stars. For many people, even some pastors, this has become the standard practice and is truly frightening. The pastor ought warn his hearers concerning the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21) and encourage the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Sin begins in the heart and easily conquers the regenerate. Righteousness begins in the heart of the penitent sinner and is the best safeguard against causing ourselves and others to sin and suffer.
  
9. Vss. 33-37: These vss. distinguish a heart of utter truthfulness from the heart which falls victim to lies. There lies the true distinction. The repentant person who believes in Him Who is The Truth (Jn. 14:6) is truthful. The impenitent person who rejects Him Who is Truth (Jn. 8:42-44) is of the devil and has a lying heart. To the believer the name of God is precious and therefore he speaks truth. To the unbeliever the name of God is meaningless and therefore he speaks lies. Luther rightly involves this matter under the second commandment. Jesus is not condemning the oath per se, but the abuse thereof. Hebr. 6:16 is an axiom in all cultures. It is not adversely criticized. God Himself swore. Cf. Gen. 22:16; Lk. 1:73; Hebr. 6:17, not for His own sake but because of the weakness and sin of man who is prone not to believe Him. The patriarchs swore. Cf. Abraham, Gen. 14:22-23; Isaac, Gen. 26:31; Jacob, Gen. 31:53; and Joseph, Gen. 47:31. Jesus allowed Himself to be put under oath, Mt. 26:63-64. With reference to these vss. Bengel aptly says: "There is clearly, however, a prohibition because the prevalent abuse (among the Jews) is forbidden, and their true use restored."
  
10. Vs. 33: The Pharisees and Scribes were quoting correctly but applying falsely. Kretzmann: "They placed no emphasis upon the inner truthfulness of the heart. If that is missing, what object have all oaths?" The translations are interesting at this point: LB: "You shall not break your vows to God, but must fulfill them all." TEV: "Do not break your promise, but do what you have sworn to the Lord to do." AAT clearly breaks these into two (δὲ): "Don't make false promises" and "Give the Lord what you swear to give Him." NASB: "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." Jesus is stressing two things (which proceed from an impenitent heart): falsehood and ruling God out of the picture. Hendriksen puts it this way: The intended sense of Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:21 and Num. 30:2 emphasizes the truthfulness of the heart: "You shall not break your oath but shall keep the oaths you have sworn to the Lord." But the traditionalists had shifted the emphasis so that an oath in which the name of the Lord was not expressly mentioned was of lesser significance.

11. Vs. 34: Again the emphatic ἐγὼ, the God-man, and the authoritative λέγω ὑμῖν, stating the intended sense of the passage which they quoted. He says: "Don't swear at all." He explains what sort of oath He is condemning. They swore "by heaven" "by earth" "by Jerusalem" "by my head" thus avoiding God's name, ownership, power and Lordship.
12. Vss. 35-36: But heaven is God's throne; the earth is the footstool for His feet; Jerusalem is the city of the Great King. If the heart excludes God's name, power, providence and rightful ownership, it is a clear indication that hypocrisy has taken over, that falsehood reigns, and that the swearer merely wants to give the appearance of great truthfulness whereas the opposite is true. It is delusion. Fahling: "As Christ points out, it all amounts to the same. In the end all such oaths involve reference to God. . . . Develop such a love of, and reputation for, truthfulness that there will be no need for oaths." Ylvisaker: "And even if the oath made mention of terms other than the name of God, the vow is still in His name; for it is all His as His creation, heaven is His throne, etc." Lenski: "For though God is not directly mentioned in each oath He is most certainly involved." Note Gal. 5:7. God does not allow Himself to be mocked. The impenitent merely mocks himself.
13. Vs. 36: Bengel: "Not merely is a single hair, but even the color of a single hair, beyond the power of man." Lenski: "Here the reference to God is by way of an oath that he is unable to make one hair of his head white or black."
14. Vs. 37: The truly righteous heart does not resort to oaths. Oaths don't make a person more truthful. An emphatic "yes" or "no" is sufficient. λόγος means your daily, ordinary speech. Christians are of the truth; further assurance is not necessary. Truth needs no help. Lenski: "The man whose heart is true to God utters every statement he makes as though it were made in the very presence of God before whom even his heart with its inmost thought lies bare." Hendriksen: "The real solution of the problem is in the heart. Hence, in daily conversation with his fellowmen a person should avoid oaths altogether." And now comes the final sentence of vs. 37 which stresses that man keep himself free from evil. That is the point. Does τοῦ πονηροῦ mean "the evil" or "the evil one" i.e. the devil. AV, RSV and NASB have the former. NKJV, NIV, JB, NEB, AAT and TEV have the latter. It makes little difference. Explicitly Jesus is saying that if, under ordinary circumstances, a person goes beyond the simple truth, he is caught up in evil and the work of the devil. Implicitly Jesus in saying that, in this world of sin, the child of God may on occasion be required to take an oath, not for his own sake but for the sake of those around him who are prone to be suspicious. Kretzmann quotes Expositor's: "In civil life the most truthful man has to take an oath because of the untruth and consequent distrust prevailing in the world, and in so doing he does not sin against Christ's teaching." Kretzmann adds: "Anything that goes beyond this simple definition is of evil, even savors of the influence of the evil one, the devil, the father of lies." Lenski: "Because in a lying world even God's people become doubtful and inclined to mistrust, God, too, uses the oath, swearing by himself. Hebr. 6:17. . . . It is the necessity for the oath, a necessity due to the world full of lies, that is produced by Satan and his influence upon men. The church has no room for oaths because everything said and done in the church is done in God's presence. This leaves the oath to the state alone, and also state penalties for perjury." Zech. 8:16: "Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbor." Cf. Eph. 4:25. And, with reference to oaths, our Catechism reads thus, question #40: "When are we permitted, and even required, to swear by God's name?" Answer: "We are permitted, and even required, to swear by God's name---A. When we are called upon by the government; for example, when the court demands that witnesses tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. B. When an oath is necessary for the glory of God or the welfare of our neighbor."